

# Envy and Niggardliness: The Cause of Conflict

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 13:13

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*Namo tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato hara-hatto  
samma-sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Harahato Samma Sambuddhasa* Homage to the Buddha, the  
Blessed Noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So we are continuing with the human condition and there are two pieces here that Bhikkhu Bodhi has chosen for us. This is Saka the ruler of the devas. In the scriptures the devas, these gods coming from different realms, would often approach the Buddha. Saka is the ruler of a particular heaven, a happy one, and he asked the Buddha: "Beings wish to live without hate, harming, hostility or enmity. They wish to live in peace. Yet they live in hate, harming each other, hostile and as enemies. By what fetters are they bound, sir, that they live in such a way?"

And the Blessed One replied: "Ruler of the Devas, it is the bonds of envy and niggardliness that bind beings, so that although they wish to live without hate, hostility and enmity, and to live in peace, yet they live in hate, harming one another, hostile, and as enemies."

This was the Blessed One's reply, and Saka, delighted, exclaimed: "So it is, Blessed One, so it is, fortunate one. Through the Blessed One's answer, I have overcome my doubt and got rid of uncertainty."

Then Saka, having expressed his appreciation, asked another question: "But sir, what gives rise to envy and niggardliness? What is their origin? How are they born? How do they arise? When what is present, do they arise? And when what is absent, do they not arise?"

"Envy and niggardliness, ruler of the Devas, arise from liking and disliking. This is their origin. This is how they're born, how they arise. When they're present, they arise. And when these are absent, they do not arise."

"But, sir, what gives rise to liking and disliking?"

"They arise, O ruler of the Devas, from desire."

"And what gives rise to desire?"

"It arises, ruler of the Devas, from thinking. When the mind thinks about something, desire arises. When the mind thinks of nothing, desire does not arise."

"But what gives rise to thinking?"

"Thinking arises from elaborate perceptions and notions. When elaborate perceptions and notions are present, thinking arises. When elaborate perceptions and notions are absent, thinking does not arise."

This evening you experienced all that in your sitting.

So if we take this apart, you'll see. Saka, he's come with this problem. He's asking, well, why is it that everybody does want to live in peace and we all end up killing each other? So he says, through envy and niggardliness.

So it goes back to this original problem of greed. And greed, remember, acquisitiveness is a better word. Now remember that the fundamental problem is that believing ourselves to be human beings full stop, our desire for happiness drives us to seek happiness in the phenomenal world, in other words in what we experience. So once you're into that search you begin to accumulate. So the more money you've got in the bank the safer you feel. Now if somebody's got more, see, then you're envious.

And just to make a small distinction between envy and jealousy. So you can say to somebody, "Oh, I envy you," and they're rather proud of that. They're very happy that you should envy them. But if you say to somebody, "I'm jealous of you," that stings a bit, doesn't it? So there's something added to envy that turns it into jealousy. And it's a hatred, isn't it? You not only envy yourself, you're hating them for having what they've got.

And that niggardliness means that even when somebody wants a bit of what you have, you're not going to give it under no circumstance. So as soon as you're into acquisitiveness, as soon as you're into holding something, you're into a conflict. You can't not be in conflict once you're grasping something, once you're holding something tight. You've got to obviously defend it from enemies, because remember, just as we're envious of others, they happen also to be envious of us, which means they want what we've got.

So therefore you can see as soon as we have this wrong understanding as to where happiness is to be found, we think that it's to do with accumulation of some sort: accumulation of money, of objects, of friends. "These are my friends, my family." Then you're always immediately into some sort of conflict. Hence they live in hatred, harming one another, hostile and as enemies.

Now, when he asks, what's the cause of this? The Buddha goes right back to the fundamental position of liking and disliking. What's the cause of envy? Liking and disliking. Now liking and disliking refers to that point on the Buddhist psychology called *dependent origination* when we experience something as pleasant or unpleasant.

So we're always, as soon as we experience something, we're always shifting it to one side or the other. We always find it nice, pleasant, or we find it not nice, not pleasant. So we live in a world of that fundamental duality. There's an area in the middle that we call neutral, but if you look at that closely enough, it just shades into what's likeable or shades into what's not likeable. So that's our fundamental experience of life.

All beings have that. Even the mole, who is now again attacking our lawn, knows what is likeable and what is unlikable. And I definitely don't like the mole. But my heart goes out to it, feeling it from its position.

So this liking and disliking, now there's nothing wrong with that, because then he asks, well, what is the cause of that? So what happens after this liking and disliking? So it's desire. So that's the next thing, desire.

Now what we mean by desire, you've got to be careful here. It's a desire based on wrong understanding. It's a desire which is coming from the misunderstanding as to where happiness is to be found. So what we get from that desire, often it's translated as craving, which is a bit strong really. But it's basically wanting what's likeable and not wanting what's unlikable. So immediately you're into an internal conflict. You're either holding on to something and pushing whatever is away that's a danger to you, or you're resisting something which you don't like. So already we're beginning the process of suffering, we're beginning the process of hatred.

Once we got that he asks what gives rise to desire. So now here he talks about thinking. When the mind thinks about something. So, there you are in your posture, and suddenly you're in Acapulco. It's just arisen, the desire to get away, the desire to be on holiday. Off you go. Or you remember something, something somebody said to you today which has irritated you. So off you go. "How could you? Who do you think you were?" It's come from a thought.

Now, it says what gives rise to thinking. So now we come to a word which is difficult to translate in the Pali. It's *papañca*. Papañca just means proliferation. So it's a proliferation arising from a particular conditioning, and it's because of these elaborated perceptions and notions that all these things come.

So if we were to go back on that instead of starting with the hatred and stuff that Saka is asking about, here we have these conditionings within us and they're dormant. They're like programs in a computer, and then a button is pressed and a thought comes up. Some idea comes up. This idea is grasped by the mind and it's worked on. But what's driving it is either this desire, the desire either to get rid of what's unpleasant or to indulge what is pleasant.

So it's just another way of talking about the dependent origination, the psychology of the Buddha. So obviously the way out of that is to catch it at the moment of liking-disliking. So if we can be aware, if we can be awake and see the mind changing, determining something as likeable or dislikeable, there's not a problem because we can stay aloof from that and that's your position in meditation.

So when you're sitting here like this and say a pain comes or discomfort comes, to catch it at the point of discomfort, there's not a problem. But as soon as you relate to it as not wanting it, then you're in conflict with it.

Now I'm not saying, we're not saying that if something really hurts that you can't move, but generally speaking, as soon as we get a little discomfort, off you go. Just watch yourself watching TV. Just catch

yourself constantly shifting and moving as the body just feels slight discomfort, off you go. And it's this inability to be at peace with, equanimous with what is discomfort that is creating all this resistance in the psyche. And so whenever something taps into that off you go, hatred and all that stuff.

So this is why we live in hate, harming one another, hostile and as enemies. So it's a case of catching it right at the beginning where the liking and disliking arises and then just catching that wanting, not wanting, and then just allowing that to pass away. And that's how you remain at an even keel.

When something is wholesome, of course, that's not a problem. When something is to our benefit, coming from the heart of goodwill and all that, then we should empower it. That's not a problem. It's those things which are based on not liking, those things based on a wrong desire, seeking happiness in the sensual world. Real happiness, that is.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your careful discrimination, exit from all suffering sooner rather than later. Thank you very much.

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