

Craving & Clinging

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Luang Puu Dune had an interesting way of explaining the four noble truths. Sending the mind outside, he said, was the cause of suffering. Suffering was the result of sending the mind outside. The mind seeing the mind is the path, and the result of the mind seeing itself was the cessation of suffering. His explanation fits in with a theme that you see again and again in the teachings of the forest ajaans: that the mind is not simply sitting there on the receiving end. It's sending things out, flowing out. Or, as Ajaan Lee used to say, "We go leaking out through our eyes and ears, our nose, our tongue, our body, our mind," because we don't see the mind. We don't see what it's doing. We're focusing on other things.

That's basically what craving is—the mind going out after something else and not being very aware of itself. That's why there's ignorance in the craving. Then it lands on something. When it lands on something, the relationship is very complex. To stay, it has to cling. In other words, it has to keep going back, back, back there. And there's going to be suffering in going back. So there's going to be the desire and irritation mixed together. This is why the Buddha says that to comprehend suffering, you have to abandon not only passion for it, but also your aversion and your delusion around it. That's what it means to comprehend. You understand it to the point where there's no more passion, no more aversion, no more delusion, because you see what you're doing.

With craving, you're going after things that are going to disappoint. Even if you land on them, no matter how well you land, it's always unstable. It's like a cat jumping around the room from one piece of furniture to the next, and suddenly finding itself on a lamp, and the lamp is wobbly, and it's got to hold on tight. If it's not careful, if it tries to jump from the lamp to something else, it might fall. So we've got to learn how to watch the mind, to see both the craving as it shoots out for something, and the clinging as it lands and tries to stay there.

Remember, the word for craving can also mean thirst. The word for clinging can also mean to feed. So you thirst for something, you see something you don't have, and you want it. Then when you get it, you hold on to feed off it. Even if it's relatively stable, the fact that you have to stay tense to hold on means that there's going to be some stress and suffering. So to watch this, what do you do? Well, there are other truths in the four noble truths as well, such as the mind seeing the mind. And the best place for the mind to see the mind is when it's in concentration.

Remember, when the ajaans are talking about the mind shooting out to something or flowing out to something, they're talking from the point of view of the mind in concentration, because it's when you're in concentration that you can see that flow. Sometimes you'll see it while you're sitting. Sometimes you'll see it while you're walking. The mind is going out for something, and there's a physical sense of a flow. But you don't flow with it this time. You stay. That's when you have your first inkling, "This is what craving's like. When they're talking about the mind flowing out, this is what it's like." We ordinarily don't see this because it's flowing around all the time. That seems to be its normal state. But when you get it really still, really quiet, really concentrated, you give it a good solid place to hold on to. And that kind of clinging can act as the path.

There will be craving and clinging in the concentration itself, but for the time being, that's the path, because that kind of craving and clinging is what allows the mind to see the mind. And you're in a good position to deal with anything that would pull it away.

The first things that pull it away, of course, will be sensual desire, sensual craving, and then sensual clinging. As you think about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, there's a desire that comes up. You land on something, and then a whole state of becoming develops around that. You're in another thought world. If you catch yourself, you can remind yourself that you're not here for that. Start to develop some dispassion for it, and you'll find yourself back, back at your center. Then watch for the next time the mind's going to slip out.

I remember when I first went to practice meditation with Ajaan Fuang, I complained to him. He had said, "Watch for the mind when it's going to go." And I said, "How can you see it when it's going to go?" You're either there or you're not there in the concentration—as if there were a curtain that came down around the mind. But I was wrong. This is precisely where you want to have the mind see the mind: as it's preparing to go. It'll send out a little blip, and then pretend like it didn't do anything. And then another blip, and another one. Then the blips get more and more frequent. Then they finally flow out.

Ajaan Chah's image is of a kettle of water. You tip it a little bit and there'll be a drop, and then another drop. And then you tip it a little bit further, and then drop, drop, drop. And then you finally get to the point where you tip it at the right angle, and then the drops turn into a flow, and you're gone. You want to be able to see this, which means that as you get the mind into concentration, you've got to protect it. The more ardent you are in protecting your concentration, the more likely you are to see these little blips.

It's like a plant. I was talking to a botanist a couple of years back. He was explaining how there's a part of every plant that's in a state of what's called quiescence, where there's not much activity going on. But it's from that quiet part of the plant that the other parts of the plant will grow. The other parts of the plant then have to protect the quiescence, because otherwise if the plant loses that quiet center, the plant loses its integrity. It can't produce all the different parts it needs. So there's the quiet spot, and then there are the other parts of the plant actively protecting the quiet spot.

That's how it is with your mind in concentration, especially in the beginning. You have to keep circling around the quiet center to catch any movements that might want to head out, because if you want to see the craving, you've got to get the mind still and have a very strong sense that this is where you want to be—and that anything that would pull you away from this is something you don't want to get engaged in.

You're drawing some lines so that you can see clearly when the mind oversteps the lines. If anything starts shooting up in the mind, that's what you let go of. It may shoot out, but you don't go with it. If you ride along with it, then you land on something. That's how becoming starts: from craving to clinging to becoming. So, as I said, you draw the line.

The state of concentration is what you want, and you have to develop a sense of dispassion, disinterest in any of the other becomings the mind could develop right now. This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee, when he gives concentration instructions, especially in his early books, has long explanations about first developing a sense of samvega for anything outside of where you are right here, right now: a strong sense that any other topic that would come up in the meditation is a place you just don't want to go. You've seen through it. Now, the seeing through it may be not all that deep, but at least it's enough to remind you that it's out of bounds.

Remember the image of the quail, or the image of the monkeys. As long as the quail stays in its field, it's safe. If it leaves its field, the hawk can get it. That's the Buddha's image for mindfulness. But it's also his image for concentration, because, after all, the two go together. We're sometimes told that mindfulness is wide and accepting. Whatever comes up in the mind, you're just mindful of it. But the Buddha says, "No, when you're really mindful, you stay in your territory." If you start wandering out into nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, you're outside of your territory. You're in dangerous land, Mara's realm. So have a strong sense of what's safe and what's not safe.

The same with the monkeys: The area where monkeys go but human beings don't go—that's where you want to stay. The place where human beings and monkeys can go, that's where the human beings lay traps for the monkeys. Again, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations that are really nice, really interesting: That's outside of your territory. When you have a strong sense of your territory, that's how you get secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful states, and how you get the mind into concentration. Then, as the mind settles in, you get a clearer and clearer sense of when it's beginning to move out.

So if you really want to see these things, if you want to have the mind see the mind, you've got to get it still right here. After all, when the Buddha gained his insight into the four noble truths, where was he? He was in the fourth jhana. If you want to get a good sense of what he means by his various terms, you'll try to get your mind there, too. You want to sit where he sat, be where he was. Then as the mind begins to flow out, you can see it, "Oh, this is what the Buddha says is the cause of suffering, and this is what has to be abandoned." And you abandon it by not going with it. It'll go out for a little ways, and if you don't ride with it, then it loses its momentum. You've begun to gain some insight into what the Buddha was talking about: where the craving is, where the clinging is. You get a better and better sense of what your duties are and where you do them, how you do them, because once the mind can begin to see the mind, you've cleared up a lot of confusion right there.