When Craving Turns on You

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Years back, there was an Onion article on how in any close friendship between two teenage guys, each one thinks that he’s the star of the show and the other one is his sidekick. We have that relationship with our cravings. As the Buddha said, we go through life with craving as our friend, craving as our companion. We tend to think that our cravings are there to serve us, they’re our sidekicks. But you find out the real relationship when you decide that you’re going to leave the friendship. You begin to realize that craving is a cause of suffering and you want to learn to get beyond it. That’s when the cravings turn on you, because after all, they’ve been in charge for so long. It’s because of our cravings that we’re able to be reborn. As the Buddha said, craving is like the wind that enables a flame and a fire in one house to spread to another house. In the same way, our consciousness latches onto craving and that’s what makes the connection from one life to the next. Even before we were born, we were following our cravings around. They were leading the way. So it’s only natural that when the time comes to say, “I’m going to pull out of this relationship,” they’re going to do what they can to keep you in the relationship. So don’t be surprised when you sit down to meditate that not everybody in the mind is on board. Sometimes you make up your mind you’re going to meditate and it seems like every part of your mind is against the meditation. Thoughts come up from the past, worries about the future. Voices from who knows who in your background. Sometimes you can identify them in your mother’s voice or your father’s voice, or a teacher or a friend, or something you’ve picked up from TV or the internet. You’ve got a lot of thoughts. Learn how to step back from these things. Learn how to take them apart. The stepping back is getting with the breath, trying to find some anchor in the present moment in the body that’s not involved in all the conversations and arguments and threats and insinuations that the voices in your mind are going to use with you. The breath comes in, the breath goes out, but at the very least you can reclaim the breath as your own. Think of the breath going down and loosening up all the tightness you may feel in your stomach, the tightness you may feel in your neck, any part of the body that feels twisted or tight or unpleasant to be in. Try to breathe down into it. Give it some good breath energy. Refresh it. Nourish it. Because the more deeply you can get down in the body, the more you’re like that post that Sariputta talked about. Eight spans above the ground, eight spans below the ground. It’s a post of solid rock. No matter which direction the winds blow from, the post doesn’t shake. The more deeply you can get into the body with the breath, the more unshakable you become in the face of all the winds of your cravings. That’s when you can step back and look at them. I was going through some of the teachings of the various sajjans today, noticing the extent to which they place a lot of importance on the role of perception, sannyā. It was when they realized, “Look, it’s the sannyā in the mind that are driving you around.” And that connects also to another teaching that I call samuddhi and thai. These are the mental structures, the systems of values, and the worldviews that we put together out of our sannyā. The word “perception” here is a slippery word in English, because sometimes it means just simply registering something at your senses, and other times it’s more active, in the sense that you’re perceiving a cloud to be the shape of a giraffe or a shape of an animal or shape of whatever. It’s the second kind of perception that the Buddha is talking about here. It’s these labels that we place on things. It’s not just the bare imprint of something coming in from the senses. It’s when we actively go out and name things, give them a meaning, label them this, that, and then from that we put together our pictures of our reality. This has to be this way, that has to be that way. From this develop the conventions of society, the conventions of language. All these things get built out of sannyā. You have to learn how to take the arguments of craving that are going to say why you should not be here meditating, or why you’re a lousy meditator and you have no hope, or all these other things that could destroy you as a meditator. You’ve got to take them apart. You don’t believe everything that you’ve believed in the past, or even that you seem to be believing now. Learn how to step back and question these things. If something in the mind says that it’s true, well, to what extent is it not true? Or if you did follow it, where would it take you? Does it really have your best interests in mind? Because you learn to realize that more and more the craving is a false friend, and it’s the kind of friend that bullies you around. If you follow it nicely, okay, it’ll be nice to you. But if you start showing any kind of independence, it begins to get harsh and make you miserable. Again, part of the problem is that it gets into your breath. It squeezes the breath energy in different parts of the body. So you work with the breath in order to loosen up that squeeze. And then when you feel at ease enough with the breath, then you can turn and ask questions about these perceptions, these conventions, these supposings, things that we suppose into existence. Because the world imposes a lot of duties on us, ideas of what we should be doing, what we shouldn’t be doing, what’s natural, what’s not natural. And a lot of it is just made up. That’s what the whole idea of supposing is. It’s something that was supposed into being. Then you want to have a position where you can step out of it. This is one of the reasons why the jhans went into the forest, to get out of the supposings of Thai society and question them. Because even Thai society, which is basically a Buddhist society, has its elements that are very anti-Buddhist, even more so here in the West. There’s very little in our culture that’s conducive to the practice. We’ve grown up in a culture that’s, in many ways, anti-Dhamma. So we have to learn how to question these things. Part of us may feel disloyal, either to our family or our culture. But as John Fung always used to say, “When you came, you came alone.” You didn’t ask permission to come, you just came. And nobody hired you to come. So you’re free to question these things. It’s when you can question them and say, “Is this really true? To what extent is it not true? When is it good to pick it up? When is it good to put it down?” Because sometimes your cravings will take things that are actually useful in some circumstances and start applying them in areas that are not useful. So you have to be discerning. Take things apart. See your thoughts as tools. Not your friends, but you can use them as tools. Of course, like any friend that used to be in charge suddenly finds himself being used as a tool, he’s not going to be happy. He’ll complain. But remember, these are just voices in your mind, fragments left over from what somebody once told you and you believed, or you thought up on your own and it seemed to be working for you. But now you’ve got to realize you can’t depend on these things anymore. You’ve got to be more and more in charge. So it’s a combination of having a good solid foundation inside, as deep as possible in the breath, and learning how to be radical in the way you take apart these assumptions in the mind, these perceptions, these conventions, these supposings. Try to put a squeeze on your mind to squeeze you out of the meditation, squeeze you out of the path. You realize you’re here, not for anybody else. It was your choice that brought you here. It’s your desire for your freedom from suffering. And it’s not a selfish thing. The world will tell you it’s selfish. There’s so much domesticated dharma out there now. It’s not even the world, it’s the Buddhist circles. They tell you you shouldn’t be going for your own freedom. You’re leaving people behind, you’re abandoning the world. Well, you’re getting yourself out of the food chain, for one thing. Then you’re showing other people that it is possible. This is not a selfish path. And when you practice, it is a gift to yourself and to other people. You’ve always got to see that, keep that in mind, especially at times when the meditation doesn’t seem to be going very well. You begin to wonder about the whole thing, either about the path itself or about your ability to follow the path. Those thoughts are destructive. Those thoughts are not dharma. They’re not in your best interest. Remember, nobody hired you to be born. You’re not beholden to anybody. The best way to repay your debts to your parents is to practice well. The best way to repay your debts to someone else is to practice well. The best way to repay your debts to society as a whole is to practice well. Show them that something else is possible, something better is possible. And it’s through your ability to do this that the Buddha only asks that you have human abilities. You’ve got those. Just that you be sincere in your desire to put an end to suffering and willing to fight off any of the old friends that you used to hang around with in your mind. Learn to see to what extent they might still be kept as useful tools, but you’ve got to keep them in that role as tools, rather as the dominant part of the friendship where you’re just the sidekick for craving. Do you want to go through your life and the next lifetimes just as a sidekick of something you trust? Or would you rather be in charge for the sake of freedom, a freedom that’s harmless, a freedom that’s the best gift you can give to yourself and to everybody else?

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