With Cravings as Your Companions

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As the Buddha said, people who are not fully awakened are never really alone. Even when you’re sitting by yourself, you have a companion inside, which is your craving. Of course, it’s not just one craving. There are lots of cravings. You’ve got a whole passel of friends in there. Companions, at least. Friends, sometimes. Even when you die, your craving goes with you. In fact, it’s what enables you to be reborn. It’ll drop you off someplace else, and other cravings will come thronging around. But the question is, who are you going with? Who are you hanging out with? The Buddha talks about admirable friendship as an important external factor for the path. But you have to think about your internal friendships, too. Who are your friends inside? Because after all, not all craving is bad. You can choose to hang out with a craving that wants to get awakening, that wants to follow the path. Or you can hang out with craving for sensuality. That’s the big enemy. Craving for becoming and non-becoming can actually have their uses on the path, up to a point. But craving for sensuality has no use at all. It’s not that we’re going to deprive ourselves entirely of sensual pleasures, but simply the mind’s tendency to be fascinated by thinking about sensual pleasures. That’s automatically off the path. In terms of the Buddha’s analogy of the ancestral territory, that’s the territory where the hawk can get you. Or if you’re a monkey, that’s the territory where the hunter can get you. When you stay in your territory, you’re safe. You’re safe with the breath in and of itself. You’re putting yourself to the practice of trying to be in contact with how the body feels from within and trying to create a sense of pleasure here. After all, the reason we go for sensual pleasures is because we see the only other alternative is pain. But here’s a third alternative, a pleasure that has no drawbacks, a pleasure that has no harm. So the craving that wants to get into concentration is a good craving. All too often you hear people saying, “Well, if you’re going to practice trying to get into concentration, isn’t that a form of desire? Isn’t that a form of craving? Can’t you just let things be as they are?” That’s the wrong view. As the Buddha said, the desire to get into there to be awakened is something you want to encourage. In Ananda’s analogies, the only way you’re going to get to the park is to have the desire to go there. But once you’ve arrived, then you’re done with it. Then there’s the craving that will put an end to craving, i.e., the craving to master the path. Those are good cravings. Those are good people to hang around with inside. So as long as you’re going to have an accompaniment, make those your accompaniment. Take the mind’s habit of talking to itself and use it in a way that’s really helpful. Because this is all you have to depend on as you go off on your own. So those of you who are visiting the monastery when you go back home, you’ve got to learn how to talk to yourselves inside in a way that keeps you on the path. Because we’re bombarded by so many messages from the media that would pull us in all kinds of different directions. Their values are all skewed. What they want out of you is all skewed. They want you to adopt as an attitude is all skewed. So you really have to have a protection. You have to be able to stand back, stand outside of the way the culture is going. Of course, it’s lonely when you do that, so you need good companions to cultivate the craving that would like to master, say, all the factors of the path. I would like to really give the Buddha’s teachings a try. Is it possible to find a deathless happiness inside? I always hold to that as one of the possibilities of a human life. The Buddha devoted his whole life to answering that question, “Is such a happiness possible?” He felt that if he hadn’t at least tried, his life would have been wasted. But he tried. Not only tried, he also found that the deathless happiness is true. So I always think of that as one of the options of human life. And ask yourself if you find it interesting. Do you find it compelling? Do you feel like you’re ready for the challenge? And if you do, do what you can to resist the other voices inside that would pull you in other directions. The cravings are what I would settle for something less. At the very least, have the craving to be on the path. Because it’s the only safe path there is around here in the human realm. The Buddha’s image is of different paths going to different places. It’s not the case that every path goes to the same place. The Buddha once posed a question to Ananda. He said, “Is every path of spiritual practice of essential worth really fruitful?” In other words, do all roads lead to the top of the mountain? Ananda said, “You can’t give a categorical answer to that. You have to give an analytical answer.” And the answer is, if they actually get rid of greed, aversion, and delusion, or passion, aversion, and delusion, then they’re fruitful. But it’s not the case that every path can do that. Even within the Buddhist teachings, there are some practices that are only partial, like the Brahma-viharas. There was one time when the Buddha said in a previous lifetime he’d been a king and then abandoned his kingdom and went off to practice the Brahma-viharas. He said, “But that didn’t lead to total dispassion. That practice can’t do that on its own. You have to supplement it with virtue and you have to supplement it with discernment.” So not every path is a good path. I was reading recently a Dhamma teacher saying that one of the things that he finds is almost as miserable as the idea of passing a kidney stone is hearing somebody say there is a right and there’s a wrong Dhamma. We wonder why he finds it so irritating. The people who say that all paths lead to the top of the mountain, do they know? Have they tried all the paths and seen where they go? That’s usually the position of someone who doesn’t know, if someone hasn’t been to the top of the mountain. They say, “Well, we don’t know, so for the sake of getting along, let’s say that everybody’s path is just fine.” But the Buddha himself said that there are not that many paths that get to the top. The eightfold path gets there. The other paths that lead, he said, to pits of burning embers, there are paths that lead to cesspools, there are paths that lead to all kinds of horrible places. So if you make up your mind you want to stay on the path, nourish that craving. That can be your companion, a companion you can trust. Just as you have to be careful about your outside friends, you have to be careful about your inside friends, who you talk to, who you listen to. So make sure you choose your inside friends well. (crickets chirping)

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