With Craving as Your Companion

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Everywhere we go, we go with craving as our companion. That’s the Buddhist description of an enlightened mind. Even when you’re sitting with your eyes closed, you’re talking with your cravings. Your cravings are talking to you. As we all know, the people you hang around with become the model for the kind of person you become. This is one of the reasons why admirable friendship is such an important part of the practice. Because otherwise you’re listening to your cravings all the time. They tell you what’s important. They have their ways of making you think and see things. The different stories we tell ourselves. The different perceptions we have. Our values. All of these we’ve learned from our cravings. We’ve learned from other people’s cravings as well. The society you live in, pretty much determines the kinds of things you see as important and unimportant. One of the major revelations of going to another society where values are different is that things that you thought were important for them are not, and vice versa. And so we want to become friends with someone who’s better than we are if we want to. We want to get out of this companionship with our cravings. As the Buddha said, that’s the companionship that leads to suffering. What you want to find is companionship that leads you away from suffering. That’s one of the reasons why Ajaan Mun was so adamant about following the customs of the noble ones, taking their values, adopting their values, training his desires. So they would lead, not in the typical direction to suffering, but away from suffering. It’s not that we just drop our desires. We have to train them. Fortunately, they can be trained right at that spot where they all aim, which is in happiness. The problem being that they have different conceptions, different perceptions, different stories about happiness from the ones that the Buddha would tell. So we’re basically retraining our friends inside. When it comes down to values, it’s that whole question of, “Is something worth doing or saying or thinking about?” And we have our ways of calculating it based on our perceptions. Just images we hold in mind. All sorts of perceptions of what’s possible. All too often we box ourselves in by saying, “Well, if I don’t do x, then it’s going to have to be y.” Or, “Is there going to be many other, more skillful alternatives that we simply haven’t been exposed to, that we haven’t been able to think about or imagine?” This is where admirable friends come in. Take, for example, what we read about the Buddha. He gives us new ways of perceiving things, new ways of looking at the way we calculate what’s worth doing and what’s worth not doing, and what’s not worth doing and what’s not worth not doing. He gives you a different set of perceptions, a different set of stories. That way you can see that the way you’ve run your mind is not the only way, the way you’ve been calculating things is not the only way, and there are better ways. So it’s important that you be willing to listen to new perceptions. There’s a passage where the devas and the asuras have been fighting, and they finally decide that instead of continuing to fight, with arms, they’re going to have a debate. And the debate is over whether to strike back at somebody else. And the asura king says, “If you don’t strike back, people will think that you’re weak.” Or, as the deva king says, “Forbearance is your real strength, and the people who look at you and think that you’re weak, they know nothing of the Dhamma. So why take them as your guide?” So if you can see forbearance as a strength rather than a weakness, you’re going to be able to act in ways that are a lot more skillful. This doesn’t mean you just simply let things go. You look for the right opportunity if it presents itself. If the right opportunity doesn’t present itself, then you have to say, “Well, I can’t break my precepts. I don’t want to act in an unskillful way. This is an area where I might have to take a hit, but for the sake of long-term happiness.” So that’s a different way of looking at things from what we normally do. There are some rules for monks. If you have an issue with somebody else, you want to make sure that your attitude is right, that you have goodwill for the other person, and that when you speak, you want to speak in a way that will be for the benefit of both. That’s how you’re able to overcome your anger. I know the story of one monk who said he had to wait for three years before he could talk about an issue with another monk. Because he looked at his mind, he realized his mind wasn’t ready. But when it was ready, they were able to resolve the issue. Three years can seem like a long time. But it’s a lot shorter than if they’d just been sniping back and forth at each other. Because that can go on for a long time. So it’s good that your desires get retrained with different sets of possibilities, different sets of values. That way, your more skillful desires can look at your less skillful desires and realize that they’re not worth it. Ultimately, of course, we try to go beyond desire. That’s the goal. But as Ananda pointed out, you have to have some desire. It’s one of the bases for success. So you train your desires. Teach them new ways of perceiving, new ways of talking to you. You talk to them in new ways. They’ll talk to you in new ways. Listen to skillful people outside, how they talk. Try to bring that into the conversation. That way, your companions actually become companions on the path, rather than companions in ruinous fun. Because otherwise you recognize one of the companions as being a desire or a kind of craving. And that’s not enough to get past it. Maybe temporarily enough you realize, “Oops, this is going to lead to suffering if I give in to it right now.” Then you try to replace it with another desire. But you won’t really understand it. You won’t be able to get past it until you see the calculation that the mind does as to what’s worth it and what’s not, where the allure is. And the allure will be a type of perception. Either it’ll be something very positive that you’ve managed to associate with that, or it may be simply a kind of calculation that says, “Well, this is the best I can do. There’s no other alternative.” In that case, it’s more of a poverty of your imagination. But when you see the allure, then you see the drawbacks. And the allure is really what sparks it. Sometimes the mind will make up some fake allures to pull you off track. You see the fake allures and say, “Well, it’s not worth it,” and you see the drawbacks. But it doesn’t really get rid of the problem because there’s something deeper going on. You have to keep looking. And finally, in a moment of unexpected honesty, the mind will open up about why it likes this particular thing. It’s like one of those false friends who’s been hiding something from you for a long time, but finally fesses up. That’s when you can get past it. Because in every case, it’s going to be a value judgment, it’s going to be a kind of calculation as to what kind of activities are worth it and which ones are not. This is one of the reasons why it’s good to adopt the Buddha’s teachings on karma and rebirth as your working hypotheses. These are some things that don’t make sense simply in the framework of a single lifetime. But they will make sense when you think of the long term. So the Buddha’s here giving us different ways of looking at things. I mean, the four noble truths. We’re suffering not because of what other people do or what other people say. We’re suffering from our own craving. And the suffering is our clinging. It’s an activity that we’re doing. This is a very different way of looking at suffering from what we normally do. It may be one of the reasons why secular Buddhists have such problems with the four noble truths. They’re all for the three characteristics, but when it comes to the four noble truths, they pull back. Because they are based on the teachings on karma and rebirth, they make sense in the context of the idea that we have just this one lifetime and that’s it. And if you find that you can’t accept the idea of rebirth, a lot of the Buddha’s other teachings will not make sense. And they’ll be part of the mind that resists them. So it’s good to have this larger perspective. This is one of the things we get from an admirable friend. That quality of conviction that the Buddha really did know what he was talking about. And then once we have that larger framework, then the perceptions he gives us and the ways of calculating what’s worth doing, what’s not worth doing, make a lot more sense. And as a result, it will create a lot less trouble for us. So look at your cravings and ask them, “What world are they living in?” A world where the Buddha gained awakening or a world where he didn’t really? It’s good to investigate these friends that you’ve been traveling around with so much. Don’t just take them for granted. They’ve been with you for a long time. They must be your friends. You want to know, “Well, how does that calculation work? What are the assumptions?” When you pry into them, probe into them like this, that’s when you can really get a handle on them. You’ll have some hope of retraining them, focusing your desire. You’ll focus your desires on the path rather than off the path. Learn who really are your true friends inside.

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