The Noble Truth about Craving

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It kind of tells the story of how the universe evolves and devolves over immense periods of time. And when it devolves, all the middle levels disappear, and there are just the very highest levels of the Brahmas and the very lowest levels of hell. And then it begins to evolve again. Some of those radiant Brahmas come down into the world, and at first they’re self-luminous. In fact, they’re so bright, you can’t even see the sun or the moon or the stars. There’s no darkness at all. And they move over the earth, which at that point is all water. It sounds a little bit like Genesis. But then it changes. A film develops on the water. It has the taste of wild honey and the color of pure ghee. And one of the radiant Brahmas, out of sheer oneness, says, “What’s this?” He takes a finger, tastes it, and it tastes really good. So he falls on it and just starts gobbling it down. The other beings see it and they start gobbling it down as well. And as they gobble it down, they change and the world around them changes. They lose their luminosity. And now the sun can appear, the moon can appear, the stars, but also darkness can appear. This is a parable for what happens to the mind when it takes on a state of becoming. It starts out with a desire. At first, the desire is just a little tiny thing. And you say, “Wouldn’t it be nice if X…” And then you decide to go for it. And in the course of going for X, you change. You become a different person. The world around you becomes a different world. This is clearest in cases like where people become addicts. Their body changes as a result of addiction. They’re addicts. Their attitudes change as a result. The world in which they move is a very different world. In fact, you can see this on all levels of being. And this, the Buddha said, is what happens when we give in to our craving. It creates suffering because it creates these states of becoming. We have a desire, but it turns out that desire has implications and we’re ignorant of them. Now, the Buddha doesn’t condemn all desire. As he said, “All dhammas,” and that term, “all dhammas,” includes the path. It includes both skillful and unskillful dhammas. But it’s the desires that lead to a state of becoming. Those are the ones that are troublemakers, because they’re the ones that require that we change. And the world around us is going to change as well. You have a desire on a level of sensuality. You’re going to become a sensual being and you’re going to live in a sensual world. If you have a desire for a more formless pleasure versus a simple pleasure of form, you’re going to have to develop certain skills, learn how to get the mind in the right stages of concentration, and then be able to maintain them. But you will become a new being and the world in which you move will become a different world. Even those pleasant worlds will eventually collapse. So this, the Buddha said, is why we suffer. We go for the taste. There’s a certain wantonness in that attitude where, for the time being, we don’t really care about the consequences. It’s just, “This thing looks like it’d be really cool.” And depending on what lack we’ve felt in the past, we’ll go for certain things. It’s like that theory they had in India about how audiences can watch a play, even when people are suffering on the stage or portraying suffering, but the audience can enjoy it, not out of a sadistic pleasure. If someone is experiencing intense or portraying intense grief on the stage, the audience will taste compassion. If they hear a play has to go through a lot of struggle, they’ll taste admiration. So on down the line, the taste is what pulls us in. We tend to forget about what the consequences of our choices are going to be, choosing which desires we’re going to go with. That comes down to what the Buddha calls a lack of compunction. We don’t stop to think about, “What’s this going to lead to? What am I going to become? What is the world around me going to become if I follow through with this desire?” So in the very beginning, this is why we have the precepts as part of the path. Right action, right speech, right livelihood. So we can start thinking about the consequences of our actions. And when we start thinking about the consequences of our actions, and we’re clear about that, this is why we develop concentration. When the mind is in concentration, a desire comes up, and you’re not so hungry for it. All too often it’s like people standing at a bus stop. It’s raining. It’s miserable outside. Any bus that comes along, we’re going to jump on. But if you’re standing at a bus stop that has a roof and walls to protect you from the wind and the rain, then you look at the bus. If this is line 17, where’s it going to take you? If this is line 24, where’s it going to take you? If this is line 36, where’s that going to take you? You take the bus that takes you where you really want to go. In other words, you start thinking about consequences because you’re not so hungry. The word for craving can also be translated as thirst. So the practice of concentration is to quench your thirst, at least somewhat, so you’re in a better position to see which desires are worth going with, that will actually lead to a really good goal, and which ones are going to change you and change your world in bad ways. That’s what the Buddha is talking about when he says craving is the cause or the origination of suffering. Specifically, it’s the craving that leads to further becoming. In order to get that desire, you have to become a certain kind of person, and the world around you is going to change. And then you’re stuck with being that person. Suppose you had a desire to become famous in this lifetime. Okay, you become famous, but then you’ve got a human body and you’ve got all the ills and problems that come with having a human body, and you can’t spend your entire lifetime being famous. And you find yourself doing other things simply because you’ve got this human body, and that quality of oneness can take over again. So you’ve got to be heedful of this quality of heedfulness and compunction. The two of them together are what enable you to become skillful, because you’re going to be looking at the consequences of your actions and taking them seriously. That’s the discernment part. When they talk about the Four Noble Truths being noble, this is why. They give you a perspective on your craving that lifts you above it, outside of it. It’s only when you get outside of it that you can see it for what it is and what it does. Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. First he had that knowledge of his previous lifetimes. Then, just seeing the one story, there were a lot of questions. There didn’t seem to be any particular pattern. Sometimes he did good things in one lifetime, and the next lifetime he fell to hell. Then the next lifetime he’s up in heaven. What was that all about? So in the second knowledge he looked at the entire universe, all beings passing away and being reborn. He stepped outside of himself for a bit and looked at the larger picture. It was looking at the larger picture that he could see, “Oh, this is what happens. People act on unskillful motives. People act on ignorance. And they’re going to do things that lead to a low rebirth. It may not be right away, but eventually it’ll come. They act on skillful motives with right view. Then it will lead to a higher rebirth. Again, not right away, but eventually it’ll come.” So looking at things from outside like that, he was able to turn around and look at himself again and see, yes, it was the craving that led to more becoming that led to all these problems. Someone once said, “How can craving be a noble truth?” The Buddha didn’t say that craving is a noble truth. He said, “Seeing that craving is the cause of suffering, that’s the noble truth. It enables you to take a noble attitude towards your craving. You can step back from it. You can combine it with the other noble truths that give you a solid foundation. So when you step back, you can stay stepped back. You can develop some dispassion for your craving. That’s what makes the noble truth noble, because you see the full implications of what you’re doing. That’s why this kind of knowledge is the knowledge that leads to the end of suffering. You see the implications and you take them seriously. You’re following a path or practice that enables you to have the strength that doesn’t fall back. So at the very least, when you find yourself really lusting for something or really craving something, ask yourself,”What would the consequences be if that actually happened? What would I have to do? What kind of person would I have to become? And what kind of world would I find myself associating with?” Step back and look at the craving as a process. Take a noble view of it. And that’s when your life can become more noble. We don’t hear about people talking about that in our society very much, that so-and-so has a noble life. But from the Buddhist perspective, that’s entirely possible. The life that’s devoted to finding true happiness rather than just muddling around the way we’ve been doing in our wanton ways for who knows how long. You can make something noble out of yourself. That’s the message of the Noble Truths, all of them. So take that message to heart.

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