



CRAVINGS, DESIRE AND ATTACHMENT

Ian Prattis
Professor of Anthropology and Religion
Carleton University
Ottawa, K2S 5B6
Canada

ABSTRACT

This essay deals directly with our suffering and unhappiness. The causes are identified as the desire cycles our ego-attachments enmesh ourselves in. The solution is to de-identify with the desire process. How do we do this? I talk about the incorrect perceptions we have of ourselves and of reality. To move out of this we must nurture the capacity to be with our true nature. Mindfulness and daily meditative practice are the keys to get out of this prison. We either eliminate attachments fully, or remain stuck. There are no half measures. Without such understanding we can never take steps to be free, remaining caught in the wrong identifications that allow attachments to entrap us in suffering. Meditation changes their energy, relocates us in heart consciousness, allows the wrong identifications and attachments to fall away, simply because there is no energy to sustain them.

Introduction

At the time of the Buddha some of his monks passed by a prison and saw criminals bound and immobilized by chains and fetters. They asked the Buddha whether there were other bonds stronger than what they had seen. The Buddha replied that the bonds of craving and attachment were 1000 times stronger. Sages, seers and mystics have given us warnings about cravings, desires and attachments throughout the ages, and for good reason. When I look back and reflect on my own life and experiences, the times I was most unhappy and devastated were when I was caught in the process of a desire and craving cycle. From being stuck in that process I not only suffered a great deal, I also caused suffering and hardship for others.

Yet the saints and masters constantly give us guidelines. They tell us in different ways that the craving of a person who lives carelessly, without mindfulness, grows like a never ending creeper. Our monkey minds become fevered and explode with the ego-attachments that cravings induce. We can never be happy because we create sorrow and suffering through our desires and cravings, and cause so much grief. The Buddha told his disciples:

Dig up the root of craving, and let not illusion (Mara) crush you again and again as a flood crushes a reed.

Our craving and desires can take many forms. We can crave sensual pleasures, so that lust and desire become the bane of our lives. We can crave for forms and objects in our desire to have things. We can even crave for enlightenment and nirvana. All these forms are attachments and take us down the path of illusion, whereby we create so much suffering. The cravings and desires that lead to attachment are cumulative and unlimited. When we get caught up in this process, we cannot be happy without having the object of our desires. This creates the basis for all kinds of actions as we are driven to search, strive, fight and even kill to realize, or obtain, that “something” we crave for. We often do not realize that this makes us suffer all our lives, as we are never happy with what we get or achieve – as there is always that “want” for something more. To do something about this trap, that we all fall into at different times, we need some understanding, clarity and insight about what is involved.

We operate with incorrect perceptions of ourselves and of reality. When knowledge is solely based on the projections provided by the senses and the mind, we come to rest in a collective quagmire of illusion, for we take our definitions of reality from external events upon which we then place our perceptions, and not on the internal consciousness of heart energy. This is what David Bohm, the noted physicist, referred to as “implicate reality” that exists beyond the limitations of our “explicate” senses, which cannot grasp “the ground of all that is.” (Bohm, 1982, 209)

What we do with our senses and mind is to engage in flights of fancy with our desires, cravings and attachments. The flights of fancy are monuments to the fertility and scope of the human mind and imagination. They are dangerous substitutes for reality, and deceive us as to their validity while they produce internal destruction. The quality of

energy within rapidly erodes, as thought, reactive emotion, attachment and desire, redirect our sense of self away from alignment with the heart, into fantasy of one form or another. The problem with fantasy is that the one fantasizing is always doomed to disappointment, as reality can never match up to the constructions of a fertile imagination. There is no quality to reality when the mind dips into karma, and spins out a web that entraps. Reality is experienced fully for its quality as and when we choose to be mindful, aligned with inner consciousness and with the heart. There is no masquerade in this, no imagination driven by karma to build artificial and ultimately disappointing constructions.

There is an obvious need for balance. The balance is to know that flight from the heart is what flights of fancy are all about. They remove energy from the heart centre, locate it at the level of ego-attachment, and say to the mind "O.K. make a picture, spin out a story, weave a tapestry." Then we get caught in the unreality of this construction by believing that the flight of fancy, of projection, of desire, of attachment is really Truth. Indeed it may appear to be real, but it is not Truth, nor is it from the heart.

We need the insight that ego-attachment, craving and desire, and getting caught up in the process, is the obstacle to our true happiness. This insight then leads to another insight - that we also have within us the capacity to simply "be" with our true nature, and this gives us a clue as to what to do about digging out the roots of craving, desire and attachment. We return to our true nature, be with ourselves in heart consciousness - and the path to this is through meditation. Yet we all know that our true nature, and the path to it, is obscured by bad habits, by acquired and inherited addictions, and by emotional afflictions. We must release these obstacles, rather than feed off and be driven by them. That release comes about through meditation, surfacing and clearing our addictions and by practicing mindfulness. As our consciousness expands through diligent practice, and we enter the heart, it becomes less of an option to hold on to our patterns of attachment. The answer is a return to the "implicate reality" of heart consciousness. Before this can be explored further and made concrete, it is necessary to examine the nature of the craving, desire cycle, and the generation of attachment and subsequent suffering. We do need clarity about the entire process.

Getting Out Of The Desire Cycle

You want something, then even if you get it, you want something else, then something else. You get only a momentary satisfaction before the craving/desire cycle drives you on, as it inflames your attachments. We carry on being caught up in the process of desiring and craving because we identify with the process. We have false identifications, through our ego-attachments, about this identity, that profession, this body and so on. We have to bring a measure of awareness and understanding to the problem. When we get caught in attachment and desire we know that we are not free. We are not clear, nor can we be vehicles for the expression of heart consciousness. So we must do something about it with our awareness, and take the appropriate steps. Mindfulness is the important key in stepping into freedom. It is our passport to liberty. For the moment we take the steps to generate mindfulness, we nurture the seed of freedom within us, and cease being the victims of attachment. This significant cultivation enables us to transform our distress and suffering. Here are some practical guidelines.

First, we learn to notice the effects of attachments and desires on us, and to be aware of whether we are controlled by them. We are often controlled by our anger, by wanting to be praised, by bearing grudges, being self-righteous and in judgement of others. We must give up being caught in all this, and be aware that whether we are controlled or not by our attachments, we have the seeds of weakness within that produce these same attachments. The seeds of weakness are there and have the potential to be expressed. We must be aware of whether we are in control of our weakness, or if our weakness is in control of us. If our attachments and desires manifest in behavior, then it becomes necessary to take appropriate steps of meditation and mindfulness, so we can end the separation from our true nature. We take refuge in meditation, we seek help from our sangha and wise teachings. Then we apply our mindfulness to the task of taking care of our attachments and desires in such a way that the seeds of weakness in us are not watered.

If our attachments and desires are not expressed, it is the same solution. We know the seeds of weakness are in us, they are there, only not expressed at the moment.

It is then that we practice our meditation with renewed fidelity, so we may become stronger internally, and can more readily bring mindfulness to bear on any seeds of weakness that manifest into behavior. Whether we are caught or not caught in the attachment/desire cycle, the answer is the same – diligent meditative practice and cultivation of the energy of mindfulness.

Underlying this argument is a basic recognition. We do know that we are not our attachments, that we are not a cycle of desire and craving, that we are much more than that. We also know these weaknesses are there, through a process of wrong identification of our true nature with status, identities, thoughts and the body. When we have these insights, then we know that Mara has kicked in with her patterns of illusion, and that our ego has taken over and deflected us off the path of enlightenment. So we must de-identify with the attachment/desire/craving process. Remember the Buddha's advice to his monks:

Dig up the root of craving and let not illusion (Mara) crush you again and again as a flood crushes a reed.

How do we do this? How do we get out of the desire cycle and deliver ourselves from the suffering brought about through attachment? Simply go back into your true nature - through meditation. You stop, do nothing but “be” with your true nature, and the desire/craving cycle, and subsequent attachments, fall away. They disappear with meditation and the conscious step to move into the energy of the heart. Mindfulness and fidelity to daily meditative practice provide the tools to take care of our attachments, and thus bring an end to the suffering that attachment inevitably produces. Prior to this point, what happens is that we imprison ourselves when we are stuck in the desire/craving cycle. We expand the prison by getting this, acquiring that, in the name of a particular identification or attachment which has to do with our wants, status, body or ideology. The prison gets bigger and full of things – none of which allows you to be free and happy.

You de-identify with the false identifications by going back into your true nature, and re-affirm who you truly are. That is what happens in meditation. As you go back to your true nature, desires and cravings leave. That is it. When you are in heart consciousness you know that everyone and everything is part of you – so what can

attachments cling to, when you remove the hooks of desire and craving? In heart consciousness you are in a state of true emptiness, and know there is no such thing as a separate self. There cannot be the phenomena of aversions and cravings, when you know everything is already yours through interconnectedness. The obsessive unrest and fever of attachment prevents clarity, and leaves you with scars and grief that are automatically extended to others. This dis-ease with yourself is laid to rest when you abide in heart energy, your own true nature. This is the mindful step to cut out the roots of craving, desire and attachment.

You cannot decide to reduce your desires by 20%, or 50%, as desires and cravings never decrease. You must cut the roots of desire and craving by going back into yourself, into your true nature. Meditation is the vehicle for this. There is then no struggle as you meditate, cultivate the energy of mindfulness, remove the wrong identifications and realize that you are unbounded and free. You either eliminate the desire/craving process fully, or you remain stuck in it. There are no half measures here. It is a quantum shift, and that is what meditation can bring about. It is a zero or one phenomenon, with little in between. For instance there is either truth or un-truth and this has remarkable clarity and consequences. The Buddha once remarked to his disciples:

“The gift of Truth excels all other gifts. The flavor of Truth excels all other flavors. The pleasure of Truth excels all other pleasures.

Desires and cravings originate from wrong identifications. Meditation comes at desires and cravings from a different angle. Once you are in your true nature the wrong identification is removed, it falls away simply because there is no energy in this state of being to hold on to it. A quantum leap has occurred, because instead of wanting to take, wanting to have, you locate yourself in the energy of wanting to give fully of yourself. In this change of context your desires have now become gifts of sharing, not a burdensome cycle of getting yourself chained up in the prison of attachment. The different context of desire is a very significant consideration. All great masters had a very similar desire. It was the desire to offer their knowledge to all, to give to everyone the insights from their own awakening, from their own fullness and freedom. They offered themselves 100% to everyone, so that the lives of others could be full of happiness. This is the offering of desire from a state of fullness rather than the taking of desire from a state of lack and

deficiency. It is very easy to fall into a state of dissatisfaction and of want, so at the first sign of this coming over you, go inwards to your heart, do nothing other than be present with your true nature. Meditation provides the technology and methods to go inwards, and changes your energy so you can return to heart consciousness and touch your divine nature, that is ever expanding. The more you give from the heart the more joyous you are, and this energy grows exponentially to include the whole world.

Let me now apply some methodology to the process of cutting out the roots of desire, craving and attachment. There are many tools readily available: conscious breathing, meditations with internal tones or mantras, focus on mandalas etc. You could also deal with your attachments/cravings/desires in walking meditation. This means that you acknowledge the presence of cravings/desires/attachments within you on the in-breath, and release them from your body and mind, through your feet into the ground, during the out-breath.

The meditation I wish to do with you is one that is drawn from Thay Nhat Hanh's book of meditations *The Blooming of a Lotus*. I have used this one many times, to good effect, and have adapted it slightly. Of all the meditations that directly apply our mindfulness to attachments I have found this one to be the most powerful.

Meditation for Letting Go of Attachments

Sit comfortably and quietly. Keep your spine straight and just let go of everything as you relax. You will need a small bell, as this meditation has different sections, which are divided by the sound of a bell. The resonance of the bell, once it is gently invited to sound, takes the meditation deep into your cells, body and consciousness. Initially you will breathe slowly and deeply for ten breaths, just noticing the quality of your breath as you breathe in and out. Then you invite the bell once. As the resonance of the bell fades into silence, read or say out loud the first sentence on the in-breath, and the second sentence on the out-breath. For instance with section 1 of the meditation, read on the In-breath "Contemplating the attractive body of a woman or a man, I breathe in". Read on the Out-breath "Seeing the impermanent nature of that body, I breathe out."

Then continue silently inside for ten breaths with the key words. For instance in section 1 of the meditation, the key words are: In-breath/Attractive body: Out-breath/Impermanent nature of body. At the end of ten breaths using these key words, invite the bell once more and wait until it falls silent. Then continue with the next section in exactly the same way. First of all reading the sentences (or saying them out loud), then continuing silently inside for ten breaths with the key words.

This meditation brings us face to face with the danger, suffering and hardships caused by our cravings, desires and attachments. As we shine the light of awareness on our weaknesses, we stop watering these seeds, because we are seeing deeply into the consequences of our patterns of attachment – of our pursuit of fame, money and sensual pleasures. We gain the strength to enter life renewed, and stop wasting our energy agonizing over our desires and ego attachments. There is a clear step of letting go, first by acknowledging with our mindfulness that the patterns are there, then choosing to let them go. In this we are assisted by the focus and concentration on breath - In-breath and Out-breath - which keeps us in the present moment and allows us to see whatever is there, just as it is. That places us firmly in the consciousness of the heart, and enables letting go and transformation to happen. Mindfulness, seeing clearly and locating yourself in the present moment of heart consciousness are the keys.

So sit quietly and begin. Take ten slow breaths in and out, noticing the quality of the in-breath and the quality of the out-breath. Then invite the bell to sound once. Read the first sentence on the in-breath, the second sentence on the out-breath. Continue for ten breaths using the key words on the in-breath and out-breath respectively. Then invite the bell to sound once more. Wait a short while for the resonance of the bell to fade into silence, then begin the second section of the meditation, following exactly the same structure of the section you have just completed.

(Bell)

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 1. Contemplating the attractive body of a woman or a man, I breathe in. | Attractive body |
| Seeing the impermanent nature of that body. I breathe out. | Impermanent nature of body |

(Bell)

2. Contemplating the danger that my
craving for sex can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the craving,

I breathe out.

Danger from craving sex

Letting go

(Bell)

3. Contemplating the suffering that my
craving for sex can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the craving,

I breathe out.

Suffering from craving sex

Letting go

(Bell)

4. Contemplating the hardship that my
craving for sex can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the craving,

I breathe out.

Hardship from craving sex

Letting go

(Bell)

5. Contemplating running after possessions,

I breathe in.

Seeing the impermanent nature of possessions,

I breathe out.

Running after possessions

Impermanent nature of
possessions

(Bell)

6. Contemplating the danger that my craving
for wealth can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the craving,

I breathe out.

Danger of craving wealth

Letting go

(Bell)

7. Contemplating the suffering that my craving
for wealth can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the craving,

I breathe out.

Suffering from craving
wealth

Letting go

(Bell)

8. Contemplating the hardship that my craving
for wealth can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the craving,

I breathe out.

Hardship from craving

Letting go

(Bell)

9. Contemplating the pursuit of fame,

I breathe in.

Seeing the impermanent nature of fame,

I breathe out.

Pursuit of fame

Impermanent nature of
fame

(Bell)

10. Contemplating the danger that my craving
for fame can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the craving,

I breathe out.

Danger of craving fame

Letting go

(Bell)

11. Contemplating the suffering that my craving
for fame can bring about,

I breathe in,

Letting go of the craving,

I breathe out.

Suffering from craving
fame

Letting go

(Bell)

12. Contemplating the hardship that my craving
for fame can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the craving,

I breathe out.

Hardship from craving
fame

Letting go

(Bell)

13. Contemplating my greed for things,

I breathe in.

Seeing the impermanent nature of things,

I breathe out.

Greediness

Impermanent nature of
things

(Bell)

14. Contemplating the danger that my greed
for things can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the greed,

I breathe out.

Danger from greed

Letting go

(Bell)

15. Contemplating the suffering that my greed
for things can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the greed,

I breathe out.

Suffering from greed

Letting go

(Bell)

16. Contemplating the hardship that my greed
can bring about,

I breathe in.

Letting go of the greed,

I breathe out.

Hardship from greed

Letting go

(Bell)

17. Contemplating letting go of cravings, Letting go

I breathe in.

Contemplating letting go of cravings, Letting go

I breathe out.

(Bell)

18. Filling myself with love and light, Love and light

I breathe in.

Filling myself with love and light, Love and light

I breathe out.

Thay Nhat Hanh says of this meditation:

This exercise helps us to see the impermanence as well as the dangers, complications and hardships of our endless pursuit of material and sensual pleasure – whether that pleasure takes the form of a beautiful man or woman, riches and possessions, fame, or other objects of desire. (1993, 65).

Bibliography

Bohm, D.

1980 Wholeness and the Implicate Order. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Hanh, Thich Nhat

1993 The Blooming of a Lotus. Boston: Beacon Press