

Conditioned Consciousness (3 of 5) Craving and Aspiration

October 12, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

constructed, suffering, compulsion, freedom, tension, object, narrow, pressure, alienated, disconnected, contraction, wellsprings, attachment, wishes, heart, compassionate, expectation-free, conceit, content-full, biological drive, desire, cognition, discontent, lack, assuage, soothe, distract, entertain, fullness, emptiness, settling, quieting, space, room

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This is the third talk in the series on conditioned consciousness. The central idea is that the way we perceive, experience, and construct the sense of consciousness is conditioned. It is constructed and influenced by all kinds of factors in our minds, our hearts, and in our life. As we start to understand some of these conditions that influence how we put together the sense of consciousness, we can begin to appreciate that some conditions can create a consciousness that does not feel good, while others help produce one that feels wonderful.

Today I want to talk about the distinction between craving and aspiring. In Buddhism, craving is considered to be a form of suffering. Craving has a compulsion that, when it's strong, grabs us by the throat or pulls us around by the nose, so we are not very free. With intense compulsion, there are two kinds of freedom. With craving itself, there can be a sense of freedom when we give in to it. But this is just going along with and giving into attachment so it has free rein. It is not real freedom.

The second kind of freedom is one we can discover when we have craving, but we do not succumb to it. We don't give in to it. We have the ability to see that we are craving and not pick it up, not get involved. We are free enough from craving that we can have a broad sense of awareness, presence, and attention to it. Like other tensions, one effect of craving is the tendency to narrow the range of consciousness. Attention tends to be focused in the present on the object of the craving. This can be a laser focus, a narrowing of the field. Things get smaller, tighter, and somewhat tense and agitated. Sometimes there is heat. Sometimes a feeling of pressure comes with craving, as if to say, "it has to be now."

As powerful as it can be, craving is a relatively shallow layer of the mind that nonetheless keeps us alienated

and disconnected from ourselves. This is partly because we are constantly looking outside ourselves for the object of craving, so we can't settle back into ourselves. But when we do settle back, relax, and find a place to rest inside where we're free of craving, compulsion, agitation, and contraction, with time, we can discover that there are wellsprings of wishes and aspiration that arise from within without any compulsion. We see that, because they well up freely, their influence on our sense of awareness is to support it, to buoy it. If you are a practitioner and know something about being present and mindful, the inner welling up of the aspiration to be free and compassionate – or whatever it is that comes from the depth of who we are – seems to spread and expand the sense of consciousness or awareness, rather than contracting and narrowing it.

But aspiration has to be free of expectation and conceit, both of which tighten up and narrow the field of consciousness. This aspiration (or wish) is not compulsive and does not even need to be fulfilled. This is what the heart's wish is, and if it's possible, great. If not, it just arises, and, like an exhale, can just flow out. You don't necessarily lose aspirations like this when they don't get fulfilled or acted on, any more than you lose your exhales just because you exhaled once. Another exhale will come.

If it is a sincere, deep aspiration, it also will come again.

One advantage of sitting in meditation, being mindful, and learning to really settle below the layers of agitation, tension, and craving, is that we arrive at a place where we have deeper wellsprings of compulsion-free desires, where the expectations do not have to come with a sense of need (e.g., “this needs to happen”).

So, noticing the difference between craving and aspiration is a very significant exercise. I think some people do not have much sense of what an aspiration is, in the way that I mean. Maybe they have never been shown it. In my case, I grew up without ever having any sense of what an aspiration might be. But it was through doing Buddhist practice that I came to appreciate aspiration. I sometimes called it a “biological drive” and sometimes “biological desire” because it did not seem to be connected to the ordinary cognitions of the mind, the ordinary surface thinking and concerns, or the surface emotions. It seemed more to be built into the depth of the whole operating system.

I used the word “biological” in the sense that it’s deeper than cognition and thinking. This kind of aspiration can feed into our cognitions, our desires, our dreams, and our imagination. It can enrich a person’s life phenomenally to come from a place of aspiration.

Begin noticing the difference between craving and aspiration, and notice the different ways in which they

affect you physically, emotionally, and in relation to awareness. How does the sense of being aware change, depending on which one you are operating from?

I believe that with craving there is often a feeling of discontent. Craving can often come from a sense of lack. We are trying to fill that sense of lack, to assuage it, to soothe ourselves, distract ourselves, or entertain ourselves so we don't have to feel the pain of that sense of lack and emptiness.

With aspiration, there is contentment, a sense of nothing lacking – a sense of fullness because we have learned to take whatever lack or discontent there might be, and bring our attention to it and massage it from the inside out. We turn it inside out and fill it with something profound. We fill it with ourselves, with awareness. We fill it so that the tension inherent in the feelings of vacuity, pain, or loneliness begins to relax, soften, and settle. This is why I associate craving with discontent and aspiration with contentment.

The funny thing about discontent is that when we are discontented, the mind is kind of content-full. Discontent churns up thoughts, ideas, desires, aversions, projections, fantasies, and all kinds of things. So discontent actually makes the mind busy and agitated. The mind of discontent is content-full.

Contentment, on the other hand, allows for settling and quieting of the mind and the heart. In a certain way, contentment is content-free. There is space and room for input, for things to arise and be there, and for us to feel more deeply what is going on in the world.

Craving tends to create very little room because it's so full of all kinds of churning stuff. Contentment tends to be content-free, in that there is room for us not only to feel and be aware of the world in a significant way, but also to be aware of ourselves. We can be aware of what is going on, and we can be sensitive enough to start living and feeling more from the depth and the fullness of who we are, rather than from lack. The sense of lack feels empty, but then becomes kind of content-full.

I hope that this wordplay between lack and fullness and content-full and content-free points you to new possibilities, and allows you to begin seeing more clearly the difference between a world lived from craving and a world lived from aspiration. May aspiration be your guiding light. May it support you in living with desires in a way that's phenomenally free of compulsion. Thank you very much. I look forward to being here again with you tomorrow.