

A SECULAR DHARMA TALK

Letting go of craving: a travelogue

Jonathan Wood ❖ Brisbane, Australia

Several years ago I decided to try and reduce the impact of craving in my life. As you may be aware, in Gotama the Buddha's very first discourse after his awakening, he taught that craving is the primary source of human suffering. The transcription of that teaching is known as 'The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta', or the discourse on the setting in motion the wheel of the dharma, and its central topic was the 'Four Noble Truths'. The goal I set myself grew partly out of my study of these teachings and partly out of a growing appreciation of the personal impact of craving, which stemmed from my mindfulness practice.

Contemplation of the Four Noble Truths can take you down a rabbit hole that branches out into many aspects of Buddhist psychology and philosophy. I'll explore some of those connections here, but I also want to share my experience of trying to put the teachings into practice. I should emphasise that this description is based on my personal experience, and acknowledge that others may have different interpretations and different experiences.

Along the way, I'll mention some of the materials I found useful in understanding the psychology of craving and how to manage it. In particular, I want to acknowledge *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*, in which Stephen Bachelor reinterprets the noble truths as four tasks: things to be accomplished or achieved rather than just understood. I'm also grateful for an online course which Stephen ran with three Bodhi College colleagues: Christina Feldman, John Peacock and Akincano Weber. The course was offered by *Tricycle* in 2017 and the teachers provided four insightful and different perspectives on the tasks and their relationship to secular dharma.

So what are the four tasks? The first one is to fully recognise and embrace things as they are, including the suffering (one translation of the Pali word, dukkha) we may experience. The second task is to let go of the craving that is the source of that suffering. The third task is to notice and savour the cessation of suffering. The final task is to cultivate what's known as the eightfold path, in which we work towards more skilful (or 'right', to use the term commonly found in Buddhist literature) understanding, thought, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort (or mental attitude), mindfulness and concentration.

Stephen referred to the tasks using the acronym ELSA:

- ▶ Embracing life as it is;
- ▶ Letting go of craving;
- ▶ Stopping grasping; and lastly
- ▶ Acting.

That last one is important, partly because the eightfold path provides an ethical framework which is often overlooked in contemporary teachings about mindfulness. But the emphasis on action is also important because Stephen's reinterpretation of the noble truths lifts them out of the realm of philosophy and presents them as a roadmap for Gotama's middle way.

Though the tasks describe the path to liberation, it's important to bear in mind that they shouldn't be thought of as a sequence. While they are labelled as the first, second, third and fourth task, in practice you don't complete one and then move on to the next. They're overlapping and mutually supportive, and my own experience has been that the journey they represent is uneven and iterative. Embracing life as it is helps us stop craving things we don't have. Stopping grasping helps us embrace life as it is. This doesn't mean the path involves going round in circles: it's more akin to a spiral which has a forward trajectory as well as a recursive pattern of learning and experience. One almost has to hold all the tasks in mind at the same time, which is perhaps implied by the notion of skilful mindfulness.

With that caveat, let's look more closely at the first task: embracing life as it is. Stephen makes the point that craving prevents us leading a full life. If you're caught up with wanting something, you're not accepting things as they are. You're either wanting something you don't have, or you're wanting to get rid of something that you do have. You might also be clinging to the status quo in the face of change, even though change is an inevitable part of life. Everything we know is conditional on a complex web of other conditions, and everything that is conditioned is impermanent. But we often act and think as if the opposite is true, and we can experience anxiety, depression and other forms of suffering when this delusional bubble is pricked by reality.

Another delusion, which particularly relates to the question of craving, is that we often externalise the source of our happiness. Most people have some kind of version of: 'if only I had X then I would be happy'. Or perhaps even: 'if only I had X then I could stop wanting'. It's true that external objects, relationships or experiences can bring pleasure, but pleasure itself tends to be transitory. It arises and passes away like everything else, and the passing away of pleasure can create more dissatisfaction or suffering.

This often creates a repetitive cycle. We feel dissatisfied, so we crave something we think (consciously or unconsciously) will alleviate that dissatisfaction. If we obtain the object or experience that we crave, after a while we realise that it didn't give us the contentment we hoped for and that we still feel dissatisfied. So the craving emerges once again and – if we are not mindful of the process – the cycle repeats. To quote Oscar Wilde: 'There are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.'

A common feature of this dissatisfaction is a feeling that something needs to be fixed. This comes up a lot in mindfulness classes that I teach: many people describe feeling that something needs to be fixed in their environment, their home, garden, car, job or whatever it may be. Sometimes we feel that it's other people that need to be fixed and very commonly we think we need fixing ourselves. In her book *Radical Acceptance*, the clinical psychologist and meditation teacher Tara Brach

refers to this as the trance of unworthiness: leading a life that's caught up in the delusion that we are unworthy of admiration, or praise, or love.

The task of embracing life involves accepting and owning these feelings that 'something's not right'. That requires us to be honest with ourselves about the dukkha we experience, especially in terms of that word's meaning in the original Pali. While it is often translated simply as 'suffering', in the Bodhi College course Akincano Weber suggested that this is too blunt and simplistic to convey what the Buddha meant by the term dukkha. A more complete translation, says Akincano, would be 'anything that might make us feel contracted, anxious, disappointed, deficient, unsafe, painful or uncomfortable in our lives'. Or more succinctly: 'that which is painful, or that which is hard to bear, or that which is stressful'.

There are two versions of this kind of dukkha and it's important to differentiate between them. You may have heard the expression that pain is inevitable but suffering is optional. We all experience the dukkha of ageing, illness and death, as well as loss and unwelcome changes in our lives. Christina Feldman, another of the Bodhi College teachers, refers to these as the 'unarguables' of life. But when the Buddha spoke of the cessation of dukkha, he really meant the cessation of the arguments we have with these unarguables. In other words, how we respond to those experiences.

This is summed up by the Buddha's analogy of the second arrow. When we experience a negative event, it's often as if we are hit with two arrows. The first arrow is the negative event itself and the second is our reaction to that event: the rumination about it, the stories we tell ourselves about it, the anxiety or worries we generate about it is now and will be in the future. Our minds are master storytellers, but the tales they tell us are seldom cheery and upbeat. Most often they involve narratives that reinforce the experience of dukkha – that which is painful, hard to bear, or stressful.

As we become more mindful of these processes, we realise that the narratives are often not based in reality. This is especially true when it comes to worries about the future. As the author Mark Twain is reputed to

have said, 'I've lived through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened'.

When I started to pay more attention to these patterns of rumination, craving and dissatisfaction in my own life, I became aware of several things. First, I realised how much time and effort I was devoting to different forms of craving and clinging. This included thinking about ways to improve my own and my family's lives, planning and researching purchases, and so on. Associated with that was a fair amount of worry about making the wrong choice and, as a result, not achieving the best possible outcome. I also noticed that even once I had made a choice or a decision about something, I often worried about whether the choice had been the right one. All these processes felt so normal that I suspect they may have been playing out either consciously or unconsciously for much of my adult life.

I also started to recognise that these mental gymnastics were often displacement activities. At times when I was particularly stressed, I found myself seeking distraction from the present by focusing my attention on craving a new object or experience for the future. I think this may have dated back to my childhood but while craving may have been a useful displacement activity when I was growing up it had become something entirely different by the time I was an adult. What may have started as a means of escaping – or at least trying to ignore – dukkha had itself become a significant source of dukkha.

What's more, I noticed that satisfying that craving didn't make the craving go away: often it simply moved to something else. I started to think about the pressure of craving as a sort of neurotic searchlight. It would alight on a physical or mental object, but once the craving for that particular object had been satisfied, it started casting about for something else to crave.

For me, contemplation of these patterns began to reveal just how much dukkha, in terms of Akincano's definitions, I was really experiencing. It also showed that most of this stemmed from my attempt to argue with the unarguables. Craving wasn't just distracting me from stressors, it was

distracting me from embracing life as it is – which of course is the first task.

The good news was that becoming more mindful of the dukkha I was creating for myself slowly began to loosen the hold these patterns had on me. This was another important point underlined by the Bodhi College teachers. Craving is not the sort of thing that goes away on command, but its grip on us can be weakened through mindfulness and contemplation.

There are several ways in which we can encourage this, in addition to become more aware of the negative consequences of craving. One is to challenge the (often unarticulated) rationale for the craving. We can reflect on the futility of externalising the source of our happiness. We can also ask ourselves whether satisfying the craving will make a material difference to our lives. Is this something we need, or just something we want? How have we fallen into this craving? There's a wonderful zen question about this: 'What is truly lacking in this moment?'. Practising meditation and watching cravings arise, asking that question often made it clear that nothing was lacking and that the cravings were inconsequential. This helps one allow them to arise and pass away like any other thought and reinforces their transitory nature.

We can also let go of the behaviours that fuel craving. The Bodhi College teachers referred to craving as a fire which we feed with particular types of fuel. The fuel we use might be different for each of us: it could involve browsing online auctions sites, obsessively following social media, Googling items we desire, or simply daydreaming about acquiring new things or gaining new experiences or relationships. All these activities feed cravings and keep them alive, so letting go of the behaviours helps short-circuit the craving cycle.

More proactively, we can also focus on savouring the cessation or absence of craving – which is an important part of the third task. All of us have times when we are content; times when we aren't craving, fretting or arguing with the unarguables – even if those periods may be fleeting. Bringing mindful attention to the peace and contentment which seems to arise naturally at these times reinforces our appreciation for those mind

states. It also throws into sharp relief the state of dukkha which we create for ourselves when we mindlessly fall into patterns of resistance and delusion.

We need these active processes to escape craving's grip, because dissatisfaction is a trait that seems to run deep in human nature. The Buddha's teachings have a two and a half thousand year history, resonating with millions of people living in different societies with different attitudes, values and spiritual perspectives. When patterns exist like this over time and across cultures it suggests that they are innate rather than learned.

The journalist Robert Wright discusses this in his book *Why Buddhism is True: the Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*. He argues that this apparently universal pattern of wanting things to be different from the way they are has been hardwired into our brains through the process of evolution. For early man or woman, the possession of food, fire, tools, or a secure place to sleep would have increased their attractiveness to the opposite sex. That meant that those primitive men or women who had the strongest desire to obtain objects, or create living conditions that would attract a mate, would have been the most likely to pass on their genes to the next generation. Over thousands of generations, the genetic pattern that drives craving became an inbuilt feature of our species.

Craving behaviour is reinforced by psychological tendencies which probably co-evolved with desire itself. I've already mentioned the tendency to externalise the source of our happiness, but we also tend to overestimate the benefits of having a desired object and underestimate how short-lived the pleasure of having it will be. These are all delusions – to use the Buddha's word – that support craving and its continuation in the face of contradictory evidence.

The tendency to be dissatisfied with the status quo has had enormous benefits for homo sapiens. It has helped drive invention and development and has allowed us to control our environment and either reduce or eradicate many external sources of suffering. It is also a major driver of consumption in our material societies – particularly conspicuous

consumption and the accumulation of unnecessary possessions. As such, it is one of the foundations of economic growth and development, the favourite measure of success for our politicians. But the craving that drives growth and continuous consumption comes at a considerable cost, and not just for the planet. The hardwired psychology that has served us so well as a species creates significant dukkha for us as individuals.

This is reinforced by the industries that feed off (and at times, feed) craving. For example, I once saw a sign in a clothing accessory shop that read: 'My only constant is the need for a new look'. In effect, that sign marketed dissatisfaction as a desirable state to the shop's largely young female demographic, and it was as good a recipe for unhappiness as I've come across. Marketing may not always be so brazen, but manufacturers and retailers rely on consumption so their advertising inevitably spins the allure of the next purchase into the promise of a better life. This has become so embedded in popular culture that we have, in a way, replaced the Cartesian idea 'I think therefore I am' with 'I own, therefore I am'. Often we identify with and measure ourselves and others by our possessions.

When I began to focus on the Buddha's four tasks I found that my relationship with this dynamic began to shift. Not only did I become more mindful of the dukkha created by craving: I also became more aware of the psychological processes that underpinned it. For example, I noticed how much more energy I put into thinking about what I did not have than I did into appreciation and gratitude for what I did have. That neurotic searchlight I mentioned earlier was always on the lookout for new objects of desire. I don't think this phenomenon is unique to me: after all, what is window shopping if it's not looking for things to want? This can be very seductive, but I am now quite wary – even suspicious – of the cravings I have learned are most seductive to me. I imagine that addiction to craving is like any other form of dependence. One tells oneself it's okay to give into the desire just once, but it's a very slippery path.

Despite my caution and growing awareness of craving-induced dukkha, I've been surprised by the strength of my resistance to letting go of craving. This may partly be due to my genetic predisposition, but I think that there's a part of me that's unwilling to give up the displacement activity and a bit

anxious about what I might find if I do. After all, the notion that we can externalise the source of our happiness is a comforting thought, and if we can't displace or mask our dukkha we may just have to sit with it. In my own contemplation, the realisation that I should no longer distract myself with external searching led to a feeling similar to grief. There were times on the cushion when I felt a clear sense of loss, and sitting with that was both challenging and enlightening.

These feelings have subsided over time, and as I've started to reduce the influence of craving I've been drawn to the idea of simplifying, of decluttering and letting go of material attachments. Breaking the ties with material things helps break the habit of identifying with those things, which weakens the habits of acquisition. One of the inspirations for this process was the book *Slow: Live Life Simply* by Brooke McAlary, which is about her experience of trying to live life more mindfully and with fewer possessions.

McAlary recommends not trying to declutter too much at once. If you're like me and you have a family with children, you've probably also got a house full of stuff. And if you're like me and my family, you'll find that a lot of that stuff oils the wheels of family life – it keeps the household running, or the kids need it, or you and your partner need it. It may take a village to raise a child, but in our society it also seems to involve a mountain of clothes, books, toys, games, technology, arts and crafts equipment, bikes, camping gear, musical instruments and more. Regular purges are good and healthy, but trying to achieve too much at once is hard and potentially counterproductive (and I doubt it would make for a happy family life either). McAlary recommends breaking tasks down and viewing decluttering as a slow process. It is as much a change in one's relationship with stuff as it is getting rid of stuff.

Despite all these steps in the right direction, I have to be frank and admit that letting go of craving remains, for me, a work in progress. I've made some gains with some of the grosser and more material manifestations of craving in my life, and I'm now both more mindful and more cautious about cravings when they arise. But there is a much deeper aspect to the

second and third tasks which involves letting go of reactivity itself. I continue to find that hard and I suspect I always will.

As humans, we are continually assessing our environment in terms of attractive/good, aversive/bad, or neutral. Buddhists sometimes refer to this as hedonic tone, and it seems that the immediate assessments we make about that involve processes over which we may have no control. But we have, at least in theory, the potential to control how we then respond to those judgements. Therein lies the opportunity to let go of reactivity. This is far more subtle and refined than the processes with which I've grappled with so far, but I hope that the lessons I've learned through contemplating more obvious cravings hold some promise for my dharma path in the future.

Meditation has been an important part of the journey I've described here, but for me it wasn't enough. In addition to time on the cushion, I needed to develop a clearer intellectual understanding of the psychology of craving. Without this, I think it would have been more difficult to see what was happening in my mind and manage that more skilfully. Studying and practising the four tasks helped explain things I was experiencing in my mind and in my life, but actually putting that knowledge into action was still not easy. One is fighting a lifetime of habit, the norms of society, and couple of hundred years of evolution. It's like many things in life: a messy and iterative process that requires perseverance and patience.

At the outset of this article I said I had decided to reduce the impact of craving on my life. When I made that decision I saw this as a goal: a state to be realised or achieved. In retrospect, that was probably misguided. While it may be helpful to have a general outcome in mind to guide my direction, I now think it's probably more helpful to think in terms of a journey of discovery and continual learning, with all the highlights and pitfalls that travel usually involves. I've heard there's a saying that the three most important things in dharma practice are 'let go, let go, let go'. I suspect this should be my watchword. My experience so far suggests that eventually I may be able to realise and savour the cessation of craving, and that this may lead to a cessation (or at least a diminishing) of the more

subtle forms of reactivity. In the meantime, I know that even small victories along the way can bring great rewards.

Not too long ago I was sitting with some friends in a cafe and we were talking about BHAGs – Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals. My friends were talking about muscular things like going on competitive runs across the Simpson desert in Australia, completing a PhD, hiking to Everest base camp, learning a new language, and so on. As I sat listening to all these tales of would-be adventure and derring-do, I realised that I already have my own version of a BHAG: putting the four tasks into practice in my life. That may be more of a journey than a destination, and the journey may be more internal than external, but I feel that it's no less Big, Hairy or Audacious because of that.

– adapted from a talk given to *One Mindful Breath*, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, on 18 July 2018

Jonathan Wood began his meditation journey nearly forty years ago. While he trained as a psychologist, his practice draws on secular Buddhist teachings about the nature of the mind and human experience. He co-facilitated the first course on secular Buddhism in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, in 2007, and has taught meditation and mindfulness in Australia for more than ten years. Jonathan lives with his wife and their two children in Brisbane, where he works for Children's Health Queensland and teaches for Mindfulness Works.

This is a gift for readers of Tuwhiri's newsletter *News from Tuwhiri*
Feel free to share this with your friends

Tuwhiri offers our thanks to Jonathan Wood, as well as to the people who support Tuwhiri by paying for your subscription. If you'd like to subscribe to *News from Tuwhiri*, or to offer support The Tuwhiri Project by paying for your subscription, go to:

<https://tuwhiri.substack.com> or <https://tuwhiri.nz>