

Older than the Cosmos

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We read about the universe, how huge it is, how long it's been going: 14 plus billion years. Stars have been in existence for hundreds of millions of years. It makes you feel very small. But then the Buddha says we've been around longer than they have. This is just one universe, but we've been through many cycles of many universes, to the point where he says you can't trace back and find a point where ignorance began and got the whole process started—and he was someone whose mind was not blown away by the size of the universe and the amount of time that's passed.

But he also saw that this constant craving that keeps us going is potentially endless. And what does it create? It creates lots of things that then come crashing down. Even in just one lifetime, there are a lot of things you do, there are a lot of things that you're attached to, and they just slip from your fingers. I know a lot of people have been commenting on how living in the pandemic, living in constrained circumstances, has gotten them thinking a lot about the past: the things they miss from the past, the things they regret having done in the past.

It's good to put that all into perspective. This casting back to the past can often hurt. You think about the dumb things you did, the heartless things you did, the unthinking things you did: That's one source of pain. Then there are all the things that were really nice about the past but they're gone, gone, gone. There's no way of getting them back: That's another source of pain. And that's just one lifetime. How many lifetimes have you been through? Well, it's been the same story again and again and again. I know a monk who one night had a whole series of memories, ten past lifetimes in one night, and that was just ten. He said that when each life ended, one thing kept coming to his mind: "all that suffering, all that suffering." And yet we keep going for it.

Think about King Koravya. Here he is, 80 years old. He means to put his foot in one place and it goes someplace else. He's got a recurrent illness. He's stashed away all kinds of treasures that he knows that he won't be able to take with him. Yet when he's offered the opportunity of conquering another kingdom and getting more treasure, he'll go for it, even if it's on the other side of the ocean. That's what craving does. As the Buddha said, we're a slave to craving. And this is our payment: aging, illness, and death. We're going blind into the future.

Kurt Vonnegut in a couple of his novels talks about a force he calls "the universal will to become." He says that extraterrestrials have learned how to

harness it and can use it to fuel their spaceships around the galaxies. But it's a blind going forward, going forward, going forward, not knowing where you're going. You get some vague idea and you run for it, and then you turn around and look what you've actually accomplished, and it just disappears, leaves some pain, and then you go for it again.

This is what we have to tame if we want to find any real happiness. We've got to get this craving under control. The Buddha says there are three kinds. The big one is sensual craving. That's why, when a monk ordains, the first things that get taught after the Triple Gem are the five subjects of meditation: contemplating the parts of the body you can see—hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin.

These are the parts of the body you can see, the ones we go for, because we think they're attractive. But if you took these parts off—to say nothing of what was left, just take those parts off and put them in a pile on the floor, and there'd be nothing that you'd really go for. You'd want to run away. Yet we want another body, and then another body. We keep going for it. When will we learn?

The craving to become: You've tried this out to become who you are. Next time around, you may try something else, and then something else: different identities, different worlds of experience.

That was one of the Buddha's discoveries: that there are many, many worlds of experience. What they all have in common is that they're fabricated. You wouldn't experience them unless you had fabricated them.

I was asked a question a while back, "How can we say that everything is unsatisfactory if we haven't tried everything?" Well, for one we don't say "unsatisfactory." We say "stressful." And the Buddha didn't just say that everything is stressful. He said that all fabricated things are inconstant, all fabricated things are stressful, not worth calling you or yours. They're not self. And how do we know that they're not worth laying claim to? Because they come out of the mind. You can see the process by which they all happen, and it starts in the mind.

The Buddha calls craving the guide to becoming. He also calls it the seamstress, what stitches things together. It thinks, "This together with that and that together with this: That would be kind of nice." That's what it thinks. Then it goes for it. And then it decides it doesn't like where it is, so it develops craving for non-becoming. But in the craving for non-becoming, you end up creating more becomings. That was one of the Buddha's insights: The craving to destroy what you've got leads to more becoming.

So you want to see how these things get stitched together. The reason we look for that is because the Buddha said when you learn how to stop doing it, you find

that there's a happiness that's unfabricated. It's always been there, but you've been too interested in what you can fabricate to see it.

When you pass judgment on fabrications, saying they're stressful, you're not passing judgment on things out there. You're passing judgment on the process of fabrication as it comes out of the mind. As I said, you wouldn't experience the worlds of becoming unless there was this fabrication in the mind, so you look at the process of fabrication and you can see that it's very inconstant. You go for this, then you go for that, then you go for the other thing. And because it's inconstant, everything it produces is inconstant. Everything inconstant is stressful. This is how we know that all fabrications, including all becomings, are stressful.

Even when you get focused in concentration and try to fabricate just one thing continually, you have to fight to begin with. But it's doable and it's part of the path out, but still, it's just part of the path. It's not the goal, because it, too, has to be constantly fabricated.

Then you begin to wonder, "Is there anything that doesn't require fabrication at all?" The Buddha says there is. The noble disciples have said the Buddha was right. Even though the path is fabricated, it can take you to the threshold of the unfabricated. It does it by abandoning your cravings.

So look at your cravings. How much can you trust them? Now, the craving to get out: The Buddha says to trust that one. But it has to be trained, because like all other cravings, it starts out blind.

This is why right view is the first part of the path: to give eyes to your craving. Right view is not right knowledge yet. Knowledge in terms of the four noble truths, which finally cuts through the craving, doesn't come until the path has been fully developed. But right view as a beginning factor gives you some direction.

So when your views are in line with right view, remind yourself: That's when you're beginning to see clearly. That's when you're beginning to point your cravings in the right direction. Any parts in the mind that go against right view, you've got to call them into question because they're going to take you down blind paths, the paths you've been down many times before.

Some people say, "Well, let me try everything before I go to nibbana. I want to taste this, want to taste that, what this level of being is, what that level of being is." But you've already been there. The problem is that you keep forgetting. And one of the reasons you forget is because the moment of death that separates being in one world from another one is just so painful.

So we have the Dhamma, we have the example of the Buddha, an expert with regard to the cosmos: *lokavidū*, as we chant it every day, every day. He said to look

at the cosmos: This is what it has to offer. All these wonderful things, but the only way you're going to experience them is through this process of fabrication, and anything you're going to fabricate is going to be inconstant, so it's going to leave you. The best response is to look for the one thing that'll take you to something that's not fabricated. You fabricate the path that can deliver you to the unfabricated.

That's your lifeline. That's your only hope to get out of here.

Think about those conjectures they have about the fate of the universe: Everything turns into black holes, everything gets swallowed up, then it starts all over again.

So ask yourself whether you've had enough. As long as the mind isn't fully trained, part of it keeps on saying, "Not yet, not yet. Let's start over again." Just make sure you don't let that part of the mind stay in charge.