

Greed

Our unskillful relationship to sense pleasure ultimately manifests in greed. It's greed, the Buddha teaches, that is the primary reason for conflict amongst human beings.

In the sutta, "The Rod Embraced," (Sn 4.15), the Buddha describes how, as a young man, before he became the Buddha, he looked at the world and saw people at odds, in competition with one another, fighting over limited resources.

When embraced,
the rod of violence,
breeds danger & fear:
Look at people quarreling.
I will tell of how
I experienced
 dismay.
Seeing people floundering
like fish in small puddles,
competing with one another –
as I saw this,
fear came into me.
The world was entirely without substance.
All the directions
 were knocked out of line.
Wanting a haven for myself,
I saw nothing that wasn't laid claim to.
Seeing nothing in the end
but competition,
I felt discontent.
(Sn 4.15)

The hunger for the pleasures of the world is expressed in various subtle ways: the battle over the last spare rib on the buffet table, the line around the block to buy the latest smartphone; and myriad blatant ways: the competition in the business world, corporate greed, insider trading and so on and on.

In the sutta, "The Great Mass of Stress," (MN 13), the Buddha offers a stirring explication of the way the desire for external sense objects (sensuality) leads to greater and greater suffering. He depicts the unfolding consequences of greed, how the lust for sense pleasure leads to fear, hatred, violence, and, finally, war.

"If the clansman gains no wealth while thus working & striving & making effort, he sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught: 'My work is in vain, my efforts are fruitless!' Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"If the clansman gains wealth while thus working & striving & making effort, he experiences pain & distress in protecting it: 'How will neither kings nor thieves make off with my property, nor fire burn it, nor water sweep it away, nor hateful heirs make off with it?' And as he thus guards and watches over his property, kings or thieves make off with it, or fire burns it, or water sweeps it away, or hateful heirs make off with it. And he sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught: 'What was mine is no more!' Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"Again, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source, sensuality for the cause, the reason being simply sensuality, that kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmans with brahmans, householders with householders, mother with child, child with mother, father with child, child with father, brother with brother, sister with sister, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. And then in their quarrels, brawls, & disputes, they attack one another with fists or with clods or with sticks or with knives, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"Again, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source... that (men), taking swords & shields and buckling on bows & quivers, charge into battle massed in double array while arrows & spears are flying and swords are flashing; and there they are wounded by arrows & spears, and their heads are cut off by swords, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

"Again, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source... that (men), taking swords & shields and buckling on bows & quivers, charge slippery bastions while arrows & spears are flying and swords are flashing; and there they are splashed with boiling cow dung and crushed under heavy weights, and their heads are cut off by swords, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here & now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality."

(MN 13)

Is there any question that things haven't changed much since the Buddha's time? The desire for money, wealth, power, and the material things and pleasures they provide, causes human beings to engage in all manner of unskillful action, brings suffering to others.

But we should always remember that the desire for the pleasures of the world begins in the individual human being.

It begins with us, in us.

The Buddha makes this point in "The Rod Embraced" sutta. After surveying the greed and conflict in the world, he looks inside himself.

And then I saw
an arrow here,
so very hard to see,
embedded in the heart.

(Sn 4.15)

As dharma students, taking the Buddha's example, we come to understand that our duty, above all, is to look at what's inside us, the greed and desire in our own minds and hearts.

Our main task is to see the arrow in our own hearts.

We come to understand, in following the Buddha's path, that if we're going to do anything to help alleviate the suffering in the world, if we're going to take action to help to heal the greed in the world, we must begin by looking at ourselves, at our own unskillful qualities, our own greed.

We come to understand that if we want a greater happiness in this life, we're going to have to do something about our own unskillful relationship to pleasure.

From *Skillful Pleasure*

Copyright©2020 Peter Doobinin