

Non-Craving and Simple Caring

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On the altar this week, we have a guest statue. Known by different names, she is Kuan-yin, Kannon, Avalokiteshvara. I left the statue here yesterday morning because I wanted to give a talk about care and compassion for the coming new year called “The Year of Care.” I want Kuan-yin to be here for the talk. I thought of giving that same talk, spread out over five days, but I woke up this morning with a different idea. And it begins with a story.

There was a monastery. In the monastery, there was a long hallway, and at the end was a door that led outdoors into a very special garden. Along the hallway were many passageways that led to other parts of the monastery. But if you went straight down the long hallway, you would come to a big, wooden door. The door was special – maybe even magical – because the only way to visit the very special garden was to go through that door.

Many of the monks and nuns at the monastery wanted to see the garden. They had heard rumors of how wonderful and peaceful it was. Some were depressed, angry, upset, or disturbed. They wanted to go someplace away from everyone else, where they would be safe. Some wanted to see beauty. Some wanted to get away from all the chores at the monastery.

Many of the monastics would find themselves standing in front of that door, trying to open it. But the door wouldn't open. They would try and try again, and still, it wouldn't open. That was because the door only opened under very particular circumstances. The monastics tried and tried to discover how to open the door because they really wanted to go to see the garden or they wanted to get away from what they were doing or feeling.

Sometimes, when the door didn't open for them, they ended up going down the side hallways, which led into the labyrinth of the different parts of the large monastery. Some of them would even forget about the door, and it would take a long time before they remembered it.

But every once in a while, some people, having tried all the different ways they could think of to open the door, just stood in front of the door. They stood there long enough that they no longer had any desire or wish for the door to open. And when that happened, the door opened. The door only opened for people who no longer had any craving or clinging, who no longer were caught in the grip of desire.

So this story represents a huge possibility for us – that a door is always standing in front of us, ready to be opened when we meet reality without projecting and asserting our desires. The strongest desire that Buddhism talks about is craving. Craving is a desire that has the better of us. It directs us. It is compulsive, and we cannot put it down easily.

Some desires are a dime a dozen; they come and go easily. They are no big deal. But cravings are the ones we can't put down. They are a kind of force within us like, “I have to have this.” As long as that force is present in us, there is a door that won't open. That door is a door to reality. A door to our hearts and minds. This door only opens when we put down our craving, when we stop desiring for a few moments at least.

This is hard to do because some people identify with desires: “I desire, therefore I am.” “Desire is me.” “If I have a desire, it's an important part of me, and to deny my desires is to deny myself in some way.” And of course, there is some truth to that. Not all desires are a problem. But the desires of craving, the desires that are compulsive, the desires that have the better of us – those are the desires we learn to address in Buddhism.

When we strongly identify with our desires – follow them and try to understand our life through them – then it is like the metaphor of a big tangled ball of string. It's like a three-dimensional maze or labyrinth. Once you go into that world of desires, wants, not wants, cravings, and aversions, it's hard to find your way out. You're trying to understand it, navigate it, and find the right way to go. With all the long side trips, you might never come out of it.

There is a sword that cuts through that Gordian knot – that big knot of entangled desires. It's a very simple thing but very hard to do, and maybe even harder to appreciate the value of it. And that is to crave nothing. In a sense, to be present without any compulsive desire or no desire whatsoever. To be just here, just present.

And what opens then? If the door opens, do we just stand there?

Some people don't like having no desire because they feel like they won't do anything. But there is the next instruction – in the monastery, if the door finally opens for you, take the rake that is on the other side of the door and begin raking and cleaning the garden.

It works to have no cravings – but having no cravings doesn't work if we are just couch potatoes. Instead, have no cravings, no compulsion, no real desire driving you, and then start raking. Sweep the kitchen floor. When was the last time you cleaned the shower? Clean the refrigerator. Take out the trash. Go say hello to the neighbors. Call a friend. Start doing the simple things of life, the ones that are in front of you and obvious. Don't do nothing.

Have no cravings and start caring for this world in the simplest possible ways. Then that will grow and develop and become the whole world.

The challenge is how to engage in caring for the world without succumbing to, or falling back into, the world of craving and desire. One of the ways to avoid this is to meditate every day. Find a way to be present that allows you to shed or put down the burdens of desire – the weight and force of craving and aversion. In meditation, to discover or get close to a way of being in which you put down desires and craving, even healthy ones that are good to pick up again after meditation. Come to a place of calm, diminished desires and have that as a reference point to understand what are the healthy desires to act on when you come out of meditation.

If we have no desires and just stand in front of that open door, then very quickly that becomes a desire. It's a natural thing – follow the natural pull into the garden. The rake is there. Start raking the leaves.

When I was a Zen monk, there was a very formal way of eating in the meditation hall. We would have three bowls nestled inside each other. There was one big bowl, a middle one, and a small one. Usually, the rice would go in the big one, the soup would go in the middle one, and the salad or vegetables would go into the small one. And I thought: "Well, I will eat the most efficient way there is. I don't have any desires for anything. I'll eat everything from the first bowl, then everything in the second bowl, and then everything in the third bowl, and I will be done." One day I was sitting next to the abbot in the meditation hall where we ate in silence. At some point, he saw what I was doing, and he said to me, "Gil, just eat naturally."

Then I noticed that if I stopped my drive to eat efficiently, simply because I was not supposed to have any desires, I would take a few bites of the rice and then I'd put the bowl down. Then I would naturally pick up the soup and then put it down. I would go back and forth between bowls. It was almost as if there was no desire. It was just a natural thing to eat from different bowls at different times.

What is your natural inclination when you have no craving and no desires? Maybe it is to clean the kitchen floor, refrigerator, or bathroom, or go visit a neighbor. There are all kinds of things that this world calls on us to do. To have no desires – to be desireless or cravingless in a way that allows us to care for the world. And then please engage and be careful that you don't get caught back up in the world of craving.

Thank you very much.