Desire & Reality

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One definition of happiness is having reality and a perfect fit with your desires. We all desire to be free from suffering, to find a lasting happiness. There are basically three ways of approaching this. One is to just force your will on things. Try to push reality in line with your preconceived notions. The problem is that a lot of those preconceived notions are pretty ignorant. And although we may be able to push a few things in the direction we want, all too often the side effects compromise what we’ve achieved. But some people keep barging in in that direction, largely through denial. They just close their eyes to unfortunate side effects that they’re causing for themselves or for other people. As a result, they just keep getting themselves worse and worse and worse, into more difficult situations. The other extreme is to totally abandon your will. Decide that radical acceptance is the way out of the problem of not having your desires mesh with reality. We have to accept reality as it is and not pass judgment on it, not do anything, just be. Many times that’s what meditation is all about. Instead of doing anything, you just be there, totally abandoning your will. Although some people might conceivably be able to do that, again, it involves a lot of denial. Your desires tend to go underground in that way, and they surface in strange places. Yet these two extremes tend to be the way most people go about the problem. It’s the middle way that the Buddha discovered, through exploration. Exactly what can you make go in terms of your desire for true happiness in such a way that doesn’t have bad side effects? That requires precision. It requires experimentation. It requires taking risks and also being very attentive, all of which are things that people don’t like to do. They like to have the easy way. It’s one extreme or another. That’s why people tend to go to extremes. You just get one notion in your mind and run with it. But the Buddha didn’t go for the easy or the obvious way of doing things, which is why Buddhas are so rare. He took that middle ground where you have to experiment, you have to learn, and you have to be very clear about your own mistakes, being able to admit your own ignorance. This is why conceit is one of the defilements that we have to learn how to overcome. It isn’t finally overcome until you’ve totally abandoned ignorance. But it’s interesting that the ignorance and the conceit go at the same time. But you chip away at both of them all along the path, starting from looking at your physical actions, verbal actions, and when you get to meditate, looking at your mental actions. Do you settle down in a state of consciousness? Do you settle down in a state of concentration? You have to see what works, what doesn’t work, just to get there, to begin with. See what works, what doesn’t work, in the course of trying to stay there. And then also educating yourself as to the idea of what works. What does it mean for something to work? You can get your mind to be settled and still, but then the question is, does that really end your suffering? Well, no, if you look really carefully. Not only do you find yourself going back to suffering when you leave the meditation, leave the concentration, but there’s an element of stress in the concentration itself. When you back off a little bit and see that, let go of whatever you’re doing that’s connected with that stress, then you find that meditation goes to a deeper, more satisfying level. This is the pattern that the Buddha recommends. As you work with the concentration, you can ultimately take that same approach and it can take you beyond concentration. But it’s a process of exploring. It’s a process of developing a skill. It requires all the mental faculties that are needed in developing any kind of skill. There has to be the desire to get those results, but also the desire to do it right. And that desire itself has to be temperate, so you focus on the causes of what you’re doing, not getting too obsessed with the results way down at the end of the road. And you have to be persistent, and you have to give things your full attention, and you have to use all your intelligence. It requires a lot. This is why the Buddha’s path is such a difficult path, why people keep straying off on either extreme on either side, thinking that they’ll be easier, but they end up causing themselves more trouble. It means being very sensitive to what’s you’re doing and very sensitive to the results of what you’re doing, and being very honest about where you’re mistaken and where you’re not. So you perceive precisely what’s there in terms of stress and lack of stress. When the Buddha has us look at things in terms of the Four Noble Truths, it’s precisely this “in terms of stress,” “in terms of the cause of stress,” making that the framework for how you see things. Often we don’t see it in that way. We personalize things. This is my idea. This is my action. This is what I’m doing. This is what somebody else is doing. We turn it into abstractions of various kinds. But he says, take it down to the most basic level, where there’s stress, where there’s lack of stress, where there’s an action that’s causing the stress, where there’s a set of circumstances that help to put an end to stress. Just look at things in those terms. It’s about as basic as you can get. It’s right here in front of our noses, and yet we tend to take this stress or lack of stress and turn it into all kinds of other issues regarding it in all kinds of different ways. So we miss what’s happening right in front of us. Ignorance is not ignorance of something far away. It’s ignorance of what we’re doing right here and now. In the most simple terms. Even children can understand the terms of stress or pain, and lack of stress, lack of pain. And yet we’re too interested in other things. So we miss what’s right in front of our noses, what’s right in front of our eyes. So the practice requires a real training in this direction, this middle ground between just simply forcing your will on things or just simply accepting things. It’s a combination of using your will, looking at what happens as a result, not denying what happens as a result. This is where the acceptance comes in. But underlying it all is that desire, that desire for the end of happiness, that desire for the end of suffering, that desire for the end of a happiness that lets us down. That desire is always there. The Buddha once said, “Desire lies at the root of all dhammas.” All the things that are created by causes and conditions. All things that arise and pass away. As I said, all experiences, all phenomena, come from the will, come from the heart. So our suffering comes from our heart, but also lack of suffering can come from the heart as well. We can use our desire to create suffering, or we can use our desire to create the path that leads to the end of suffering. So don’t try to snuff out desire just because the opposite is just as bad. Simply try to force your will on things, not being able to admit when you’ve made mistakes, not being sensitive to what you’re doing. We’re constantly chipping away right here in the middle way. It’s messy work. If everything were nice and neat, like the lists and the texts, it would be very easy to do, but it’s not. This defilement comes up, that defilement comes up. They don’t come in any particular order. So you deal with the issues as they arise. But you find that in dealing with them, you develop sensitivity, and you develop the attitude that’s willing to work with what you’ve got. It’s not picky or choosy. I’m saying, “I’d like to work with this defilement right now, the one that’s coming up right now that I don’t particularly care for.” Well, if it’s the one that’s there, that’s the one you deal with, and that’s the attitude you want to develop, so you’re ready for whatever happens. That way you can learn from whatever happens. It’s this willingness to learn, to put aside your preconceived notions, to put aside whatever it is that you’ve been, propositions you’ve been operating on, and be willing to learn anew. This is not just beginner’s mind, though. It’s also a willingness to develop experience that you can trust. So you maintain the freshness of being a beginner, but you also have the knowledge that comes from being experienced, from having tested things, having learned from cause and effect. This is why the Buddha placed such an emphasis on cause and effect in his definition of what constitutes the knowledge of awakening. Cause and effect in terms of what you do and the results that you get. It wasn’t abstract knowledge of cause and effect. It was from working with reality and being really sensitive to how things work, and then what works in the ultimate sense. In other words, what works for the sake of ultimate happiness. This is probably the Buddha’s most radical discovery, that you can use the processes of condition, you can use cause and effect, to take you to a point that goes beyond cause and effect, where true happiness lies. But you have to explore. You have to be willing to use these faculties of desire, intelligence, learning how to improvise when things don’t work, learning how to put things together, seeing patterns in your experience as a meditator, in your experience in practicing the Dhamma. So you develop the sensitivity needed to see through the process of conditioning. This is why meditation can’t simply be done by the numbers. It has to engage you fully. This willingness to take risks, this willingness to improvise and see what works. There’s something about that willingness which is essential to any real understanding, any real discernment that’s going to cut through things. So we bring our desires in line with reality by exploring, seeing what works, educating our desires as we’re learning about reality so that finally there is that perfect fit. So the happiness that arises from the meditation is something that’s that actually goes beyond what we could possibly have imagined. It more than fulfills our desires. But it requires that we be fully engaged in what we’re doing right here and right now. And it may not be the easy way, but it’s the only way that really works.

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