Taming Desire

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There’s a passage where Sariputta is talking in the Canon. He’s saying that the Four Noble Truths cover all the teachings, all the Dhamma, in the same way that an elephant’s footprint would cover all the footprints of every other animal. One of the important lessons that the Four Noble Truths teach us is that to understand suffering and the way to the end of suffering, you have to be able to look at what’s happening in your mind and figure out which truth the events in your mind fall under. When there’s something happening in the mind, is it suffering or is it causing suffering? Or is it actually putting an end to suffering? So instead of looking at things in terms of yourself or who you are, or what belongs to you, look at things in terms of whether they’re suffering or causing suffering, or a lack of suffering and something leading to the lack of suffering. Those are the categories for sorting things out. Sometimes you find that events don’t quite fit where you thought they might, like desire. Everyone knows that desire comes under the Second Noble Truth, the Kriya. It’s the craving for sensuality, the craving for being this or that, the craving not to be this, not to be that. But we tend to miss the fact that desire also falls under the Fourth Noble Truth, the path to the end of suffering. It comes under the factor of right effort. The Buddha talks about generating desire to prevent unskillful states from happening, or, if they’re already there, the desire to abandon them, the desire to give rise to skillful states, and once skillful states are there, the desire to keep them going so that they develop and reach perfection. So desire is an important part of the path. Without it, you couldn’t make right effort. The path would simply be a path of watching whatever comes up and having no defense against unskillful things attacking you, and having no real approach about how to give rise to skillful things. Desire is important. You can’t concentrate the mind without the desire to have it concentrated. Sometimes states come into the mind where things are settled and calm. You don’t know quite how they got there. But if you want to maintain them and turn the practice of meditation into a skill, you’ve got to cultivate skillful desire. So a lot of the problems we encounter in the path is just that. How to keep the desire skillful. There are times when you want peace of mind so much that it gets in the way, and then you get frustrated, and so you abandon the desire, neither of which is skillful. Or you want to get rid of unskillful states. They seem to go away for a while, then they come back again, and you get frustrated again because you thought you’d already dealt with that. So it’s learning how to manage your desires properly that’s an important part of the path. To see when the desire is skillful, to see when it’s not. And when it’s not skillful, how to let go of it, how to give rise to skillful desires instead. Take, for example, the sense of frustration when you’ve dealt with a problem in the past and it seems to come back again. Of course it comes back again. You have to realize that this is a long, drawn-out project that we’re on here. The common metaphor is to compare it to a war. Some wars take a long time. You’re going to have battles. You win some battles or you lose some. But if you stick with it, this is one of those wars that you’re going to win in the end. If you don’t stick with it, then of course you’re going to lose. Keep on losing. So it’s learning how to deal with defeat, how to learn from it, and not to get upset when you’ve felt that you’ve handled something in the past and it comes back again. You have to realize, okay, you took care of it at that particular time. It may have been just right for that particular time, but you didn’t really end the problem. But that doesn’t mean that what you did in the past was useless. Sometimes that technique will work again. At least it’ll push the problem out of the way for the time being, give you some space so you can get the mind established in the concentration. At least give you enough space to keep working, to develop skillful qualities. All too often our image of the practice is that you take care of this defilement, take care of that defilement, and they’re scattered all over the place, dead on the side of the room. But that’s not the way it happens. You take care of them as they arise, at the very least enough to give the mind space to settle down. And you learn something about them in the course of dealing with them each time, each time, even if you haven’t uprooted it totally. The fact that you’ve been able to push it away, undercut some of its strength, is an important lesson. Over time, as you get to know the defilement, you get more and more acquainted with it and you understand it better. This is one of those processes where an important element is the time you put into it. In this culture of ours, which emphasizes things being instant and right away. As soon as you want it, there you’ve got it. All the kinds of things you can get that way. They leave you pretty quickly, too. We’re looking for something that’s going to give long-lasting results, so we have to be willing to put a fair amount of time into it. Don’t think about how much time you’ve put into it or how many times you’ve contemplated a particular problem. Just keep at it. Learn to give yourself pep talks. This is generating desire. Keep reminding yourself how good it would be not to have anger say, “Get in the way.” Not to have lust say, “Get in the way.” That’s part of generating desire. Learn to appreciate patience. Patience doesn’t mean just being very laid back about the whole thing, but it means realizing that this is a long-term project. We’re engaged in it here. You can’t let momentary sense of frustration take over. So, as with any project that involves desire, the desire itself has to be tamed. It has to be brought into line with the rest of the path. But we’re not here to extinguish desire right off the bat. We’re here to learn how to put it to use and to deal with some of its drawbacks, the sense of frustration that comes with it. You want to attain the goal, and yet it’s not here right now. Remind yourself, if you feel frustrated that way, ask yourself, “Okay, what’s needed in order to at least point the mind in the proper direction and be willing to take whatever seemingly small steps are needed?” Don’t get frustrated by the fact that you can’t get there in one instant’s stride. What you’re doing here is not so much uprooting desire as learning how to tame it, train it, put it in the service of what you really want in life, which is true happiness. Remind yourself that that’s a worthwhile goal. It’s a realizable goal. It involves going against a lot of your own preconceived notions, a lot of things that you’ve picked up from the society around you, the culture around you. Everybody has to face this. It’s especially hard here in the West, where the culture seems so bullheaded about going in the other direction. But you look at even, suppose, Buddhist cultures, and they’ve got their own ways of resisting the Dhamma. It’s a lot of the practice of learning how to sort out the various desires you’ve got sloshing around in your mind. You look at which ones are helpful for the purpose of the path and which ones are not, and generate desire to develop the first sort, and generate desire to get rid of the second. In this way, the desire that underlies everything we experience, as we said the other day, is that passage in the Cathedral where it says, “All dharmas, all phenomena, all events, are rooted in desire.” So the path itself has to be rooted in desire, too. It’s simply learning how to use that desire for the proper purpose, learning how to tame it, make it realistic, so that it gives real results. Learning how to make the desire a mature desire, in other words, in the service of mature goals, in the service of a mature understanding of what’s required. So it’s not just id, but it’s intelligent and mature application of desire for what you really want in life.

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