Desire

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All things are rooted in desire. That’s what the Buddha said. Sometimes Buddhism is characterized as not appreciating how important desire is. But this shows that the Buddha realized that this is what we are. We come from desire. We were born because of desire and craving. He says, “Without the craving, a being wouldn’t be able to make it from one life to the next.” And that being itself is defined by its desires, by its attachments. We’re defined by what we want. What this means, of course, is that we’re also defined by our frustrations, because so many times what we want gets frustrated. Either we don’t get what we want, or when we get it, we find out it’s something different from what we thought it was. Or it seems to be what we thought it was and doesn’t last, all of which is frustrating. So the Buddha said, “The way out is to go beyond desire.” But desire isn’t something you can simply just drop. You have to learn how to refine it, take it apart. The first step is realizing that desire is not just one thing. There are lots of desires for lots of different things. You’ll hear people telling you that what you really want in life is wholeness or completeness or to be fully in the present moment or whatever. Those are many things that you want. They’re not all one thing. Every desire is aiming at something else. You have a niche and you scratch it. You have a hunger and you try to assuage it. All this is a desire for happiness, a desire for well-being. But each desire differs based on its object, based on where it’s coming from and where it’s headed. The Buddha has us start out by looking at the different places where our desires go. Some go to relative happiness and ease. Others get frustrated. Some are actually destructive. So you start out by learning how to let go of your destructive desires, seeing that they really don’t lead to any kind of happiness at all and lead to a lot of pain and misery. When you live a life of generosity and virtue, you find it really does make a big difference letting go of those unskillful desires. Then you start applying the same principle to the mind. This is why we meditate. Right effort is the first factor in the path that deals with meditation. It’s a factor of desire. It talks about generating desire to let go of unskillful states that have arisen, to prevent unskillful states that haven’t arisen from coming into being, generating desire to give rise to skillful mental states and to develop them when they have arisen. So what you’re doing is you’re taming desire. You’re learning to direct your desires in the right direction, like when you’re sitting here writing. Now, the mind may be wandering off. Thoughts may be wandering off, but the mind doesn’t have to wander after them. They may want this, they may want that. After all, one of the major hindrances is sensual desire. But you learn to say no. In the beginning, with the precepts, you learn that you may have that desire, but you simply don’t give into it. You say no to the activity. The desire may be raging in the mind, but you keep saying no. You say, “No, I’m not going to go there.” One of the principles here is that you learn an awful lot by restraining your desires. People who simply desire and don’t have any kind of restraint at all don’t learn very much in life. You read about Davis, and many times they’re awfully dumb. Things are pretty easy for them. They don’t have to reflect very much. Jesse was telling us one time about the time when he was working as a model. All these really good-looking people were trying out for commercials. He tried to talk them about serious things, and he said there wasn’t much there. They weren’t very reflective people. Things had gone easily for them. So it’s a choice. Even you find people who do have their desires frustrated in many ways, many times don’t learn much from them. Psychologists have done studies of people pursuing things in life. Many times, there are things they’ve pursued before, they’ve tried them out, and they didn’t get any real satisfaction. But then they turn around and they pursue them again. So it’s not simply that frustration teaches you lessons. It’s the willingness to learn, realizing that something’s got to change. The Buddha gives you, on the one hand, instructions on how to develop a sense of well-being that enables you not to be so hungry for certain desires, and also tools for looking at the desire through restraint. When you say “no” to desire, how do you look at it in such a way that you learn from it? That’s one of the most important tools of the path. This is where virtue ends. Then concentration has to go together. Or you can get a sense of well-being from the pleasure that comes from concentration, which the Buddha said is a blameless pleasure. Then you turn around and look at the other pleasures you’ve been pursuing, and it gets a lot easier to see the drawbacks in a more objective way. If you’re simply hungry for them and don’t see any alternative to the pleasure that they give, you’re going to keep rushing after them. But when you see the alternative that comes from concentration, the mind gets still. It has a stillness that doesn’t have to depend on things outside. It puts you in a better position for understanding what the desire is all about, exactly where it comes from, whether it’s something that’s really worth identifying with or not. This is where it gets interesting, because, as we said earlier, you’re defined by your desires, and you’re beginning to let go of parts of things that you used to define yourself by. Some people feel threatened by this. Again, this is why the concentration is so important. It’s a lot easier to let go of things when you’re feeling good, when you’re feeling settled, when you’re feeling whole, as you do in the concentration, than it is when you’re feeling hungry and desperate. Up to this point, it’s simply a question of what you’re choosing to identify with, and the Buddha keeps giving you better and better and better things to identify with. He tells you that when there’s a perception in mind that allows for stillness, you try to settle the mind and make it stable, make it confident in that perception. The more subtle and solidly you can develop the concentration, the easier it is to let go of other things. If the concentration is still wobbly, you’re half holding on to the concentration and half holding on to everything else in your life, because it hasn’t provided you with any sense of security that seems special, seems more reliable than the pleasure you get from outside. That’s why concentration practice is so important in the practice. Once you’ve developed it as a skill, then you can start getting into the more interesting things of learning how to let go of your more refined attachments. This is where the pursuit of true happiness asks a question of you. Are you going to hold on to the way you’ve been defining yourself, or are you going to go for true happiness? A lot of people stop right there and say, “Well, my desires are me. How can I let them go? It would be like letting go of myself.” And the Buddha says precisely the point. But if you can learn to see yourself as a strategy, you came up with the whole idea of self to begin with as a way of organizing your experience to maximize happiness. It’s something about it now that you’ve run into the limitations of that particular strategy. You can see that the limitation that comes from defining yourself in terms of feelings or perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, when they finally do start appearing to be burdensome—and this requires a fair amount of sensitizing in the mind, because otherwise you’re willing to put up with all kinds of burdens because you think, “Well, this is as good as it gets.” But as you get more and more sensitized through the concentration practice, your sensitivities get more refined and you begin to see, “Yeah, this is a burden, this need to keep identifying yourself, to say this is this and that’s that, and I’m this and this is mine.” And you learn to let go, stage by stage by stage. And when the ultimate happiness comes, as Ajahn Swayu used to say, once there’s the experience of ultimate happiness, who cares what’s experiencing it? You certainly don’t care. So it’s a giving up of desire, not simply to thwart yourself or to be very stoic, but you’ve reached a point where desire is no longer needed. You’ve got the ultimate happiness. This is why there’s that passage when the Buddha says you can’t talk about what the arahant is like, whether the arahant exists after death or doesn’t exist, or both or neither. Because you can’t even define the arahant, you can’t even define the Buddha in the present lifetime. There are passages with Anuradha and Yamaka where the Buddha chases them down a long list of questions. How can you talk about the Buddha after death when you can’t even define him? You can’t define him in the present life. You can’t define him in terms of the khandhas. You can’t define him as something that’s not the khandhas. Because how would you define that? It goes through all the different contortions that you could use the khandhas to define him. And you can’t do it because he doesn’t have any desire, he doesn’t have any attachment for those things. He’s undefined. This doesn’t mean he doesn’t function. He still functions perfectly well. He talks about his attitude towards teaching in one of the suttas, when he teaches people. He does it with a purpose of letting them practice so they can gain awakening. And if they do gain awakening, if they do put his teachings into practice, he’s gratifying. But he doesn’t let the gratification overcome his mind. It can’t, because he doesn’t identify with it. When they don’t follow his practice, he doesn’t let any disappointment come over his mind. He can still function. He can see that one is better than the other. In terms of the results of his actions, he learns to let them go. Sometimes we’re told to clone that attitude as we practice work, but don’t be attached to the results. Well, that works only when you’ve achieved a full happiness. You can relate to the world in that way. Prior to that, though, you’ve got to have your attachments. You’ve got to have your desires. You can’t pretend that you don’t. Otherwise, you start lying to yourself. But what you want to do in the practice is learn how to really look seriously at your desires, see how much happiness they give you. You really want to be happy. But then you test the objects you’ve been desiring for. You test the desire itself, and you see where they’re lacking. And that way you learn to let go. Learn from them. You learn to be more and more skillful in your desires. Focus them more precisely in places where they really do benefit you. And again, there’s strong desire and strong wanting in this, but it’s tempered by the knowledge that you’ve got to learn how to give up a lot of things that you may have been holding on to very tight. But when you see the benefits that come from letting go, it gets a lot easier. So you treat desire not as a big monolithic thing, but as desires, individual events in the mind, and you gauge them for what they do for you. That way, the direction of your desires gets more and more oriented towards the points where you really can finally open up and reach the happiness that is desire. It’s totally gratifying, to the point where you’re no longer a slave to these things, these likes and dislikes, these desires. You don’t need them anymore. So desire is an important element in the path. And that’s a lot of our training, is turning desire from being part of the Second Noble Truth into being part of the Fourth Noble Truth. We’re learning how to let go of the desires that are the Second Noble Truth and how to encourage the ones that are part of the Fourth. And we’re willing to take those skillful desires and see how far they go, even to the point where it means that we have to let go of our sense of who we are. But the rewards are more than worth it.

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