Frustrated Desires

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The Buddha defines the noble truth of suffering or stress. One of his examples is of frustrated desires, not getting what’s wanted. He tells you to comprehend that, the fact of not getting what you want. To put it in more modern terminology, it’s learning from your frustrated desires. This is one point where Buddhism and psychotherapy are very similar. Psychotherapists will have you look at your frustrated desires and see what you can learn from them. But the Buddha has different lessons than you normally get to learn from your frustrated desires, because he has a different sense of the potential for desires. The potential for desires is what’s actually possible, what kind of happiness is possible. That kind of happiness can be attained by human effort. When he explains the phrase “not getting what is wanted,” he says, “Being subject to birth may not want to be born, but that’s not to be gained just by wanting. Being subject to aging may not want to age, but that’s not to be gotten by wanting. Being subject to illness, if you’re subject to death and you don’t want to be ill and you don’t want to die, that kind of thing,” he says, “is not subject to wanting.” At that point, the psychotherapists would agree. But then they would say, “Well, because you have to age, grow ill, and die, you just have to learn to accept that it’s part of the reality principle.” You can even see in Buddhist psychotherapy where they say you have to learn to live with the fact that not all of your desires are going to be fulfilled. Learn to be calm. Learn to be equanimous about that. See that your desires are basically okay, but the possibility of their fulfillment is pretty limited. Learn to accept that. Learn not to get worked up about it. Be equanimous. But that kind of equanimity the Buddha calls householder equanimity. It’s the fact that you can’t get the kind of sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations that you would always want. So you learn to have equanimity when things don’t go the way you want them to. Notice that’s householder equanimity. It’s a limited kind of equanimity. It’s not the kind of equanimity the Buddha was teaching. He goes back and he looks at that formula for someone subject, say, to death, not wanting to die. So he focuses on the first part. He says, “Well, can you make yourself not subject to death? Can you make yourself not subject to birth, aging, illness, and death? Where are the germs of these things? Well, the germs of these things lie in the mind. So that’s his approach. And he discovered in his practice that it is possible to take yourself beyond aging, illness, and death. That’s why the equanimity he teaches is something very different. It’s equanimity that comes from finally reaching the deathless, and you look back at what you were once subject to but no longer subject to, and there’s a sense of equanimity. It’s a much less limiting equanimity than the one we usually hear about. So think about this as you come up with any frustrated desires in your life. The Buddha says,”Learn from them.” Remember the lessons he wants you to learn. One, it’s not that the issue is that desire has a large monolithic thing. It’s that we have our desires, and some of them are more skillful than others. He takes advantage of that fact. You use skillful desires to overcome unskillful ones or to wean yourself away from unskillful ones. One, it’s by giving you a sense that it is possible to go beyond aging, illness, and death. But also, he gives you some comfort. He gives you confirmation along the way. This is why the practice of jhana is such an important part of the path. In fact, in one of the suttas, he defines the Eightfold Path as basically Noble Right Concentration and its seven requisites. In other words, the concentration is the heart of the path, and the other factors of the path are things that help make it right. It’s difficult to wean ourselves away from ordinary desires unless we can find some sort of satisfaction in someplace else. Basically, what desire is is dissatisfaction with what you have, and it’s a sense that there’s a potential for greater satisfaction. That sense of that potential can live only if you find some evidence of it, if you find something that’s more satisfying. This is why we try to develop a sense of well-being with the breath, a sense of well-being just in the sense of the form of the body. This is not a sensual pleasure. The Buddha said this is a kind of pleasure that’s blameless. It’s based simply on just inhabiting your body, learning from the breath, learning which ways of breathing feel good, which ways of breathing feel bad, which ways of breathing don’t feel good, which ways of concentrating the mind give a true sense of well-being, and which ones give a more distorted or skewed sense. This is something you have to learn through trial and error. Again, it’s learning from your frustrated desires. You sit down and you try to concentrate the mind, and you find it immediately goes off someplace else. One lesson you could learn from that is that you’ve got a goal to have a quiet mind, and if you try to focus on that goal, you’re going to get frustrated. So don’t have a goal about a quiet mind. Just let it naturally settle down on its own, if it’s going to. Again, that’s not the way the Buddha taught. That’s not the lesson he wanted you to learn. He said, “Look at what you’re doing. Look at what you’re identifying with.” Because that’s how he deals with the issue of being someone subject to aging, illness, and death. You look at what you’re identifying with. You’re identifying with things that age well and die, and so of course you’re going to be subject to these things. If you learn not to identify, then the mind isn’t defined by those things. It’s freed. That’s the kind of lesson he has you learn. So it’s the same with the concentration. What are you identifying with? And usually it’s whatever thought comes through your mind. Or sounds come out from outside and they disturb you, and you identify with the hearer of the sounds. You identify with the function of hearing. Or you identify with the function of thinking. Some little stirring comes into your awareness, and you want to look into it. What’s that about? And you open it up a little bit, and it turns out to be a thought. And then you start weaving that thought into larger and larger realities. What started out as simply a little impetus from your past karma suddenly becomes something your present karma is getting entangled in. And you drop your concentration object. You’ve forgotten it totally. You didn’t know where it was. And when you suddenly remember, it’s like you’ve gone into another world for the time being. So what you’re doing is you’re identifying with these other activities, the activities that pull you away from the breath. So you want to learn to identify more with the process of meditating. Be a meditator. Sometimes you hear about that as just creating one more form of self. Well, it’s a useful form of self. So be the meditator. Ask yourself, when something comes up in the mind, what would a skillful meditator do with this? Try to use your ingenuity for getting around old habits, old patterns in the mind. So that you learn the right lessons from the practice of concentration. In other words, you learn that you can finally develop the mindfulness, you can develop the alertness. It makes your concentration more solid. It gives you a center of well-being. So you find your skillful desires really are more satisfying than the unskillful ones that you’ve left behind. The Buddha understood this principle really well. We have to have a certain amount of gratification in the path. Otherwise, it gets too dry and we give up. We go back to our old ways. But if you learn the proper lessons from your frustration, seeing what is it that you’re doing that’s not quite right, where are you identifying? Where are you getting snagged on things that you don’t really need to be snagged on? Then realize that it’s not necessary. This is probably one of the Buddha’s most important messages, is that the suffering that we go through is not necessary. He’s not teaching us to accept it, to be resigned, to the fact that we’re going to have desires that will never be fulfilled. That’s like living a life of quiet desperation, calm desperation, equanimous desperation, but it’s still desperate. There’s a sense that things could be better, but somehow they’re not happening better. He doesn’t leave you there. He says that state of being is not necessary. There is a path of practice that leads out, that leads to the deathless, so that that wish not to have to age, grow ill, and die can be fulfilled. Simply that you have to be willing to learn from your mistakes, willing to learn from your frustrated desires, willing to learn the right lessons. Some people go through life and never learn anything at all. This is why psychotherapists have to dig up childhood patterns. You learn something in your childhood and then you don’t learn anything anymore. The childless way you’ve dealt with frustration is often the way people deal with frustration as they grow older. They don’t learn. So when you meet up with frustration in your practice, ask yourself, “What kind of lesson did the Buddha have you learn from this? What kind of lesson is helpful in going all the way to the goal?” If you look in those terms, you’ll find the path is a lot easier to sort out.

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