Good Craving, Clinging, Becoming

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All too often, we’re told in the world outside, or the world at large, that desire is a good thing. Without desire, the world wouldn’t go around. All too often, in Buddhist circles, we’re told that desire is a bad thing, that it causes suffering. The actual truth is that there are good things and bad desires. Desire plays a role in giving rise to suffering. It also plays a role in putting an end to suffering, depending on how you use it and which desires you encourage and which ones you try to abandon. The desire to give rise to skillful states in the mind and to abandon unskillful ones Those are good desires; they’re actually part of a right effort. That’s the desire that lies at the beginning of what the Buddha calls the basis of success or the basis of power, the qualities that give energy and give strength to your concentration. The desire to get the mind to settle down. The desire to ferret out anything that gets in the way. These are all good desires. The desire to be on the path, follow the path to the goal. These are all good desires. It’s simply learning how to relate to them skillfully. That’s the issue for right now. You want to get the mind to settle down, but all you can focus on is how much you want it to settle down. You’re not going to get there. You have to focus on wanting to do the steps that get you there. You have to focus on wanting to stay with the breath, wanting to come back to the breath, no matter how many times the mind wanders off. You don’t give up. Because we are making changes in the mind as we meditate. We’re giving rise to a state of becoming called concentration. Again, we’re sometimes told that becoming is the cause for suffering. But if you do it right, it becomes part of the path. Becoming does depend on desire. It depends on actually craving and clinging. In this case, you have to want to stay with the breath, and you have to hold on to the breath. You hold on to all the habits that get the mind to settle down. You hold on to the views that tell you that this is a good thing. You even hold on to your view of self that says you can do this. One form of clinging you don’t hold on to is sensuality. You let that go. You don’t need thoughts of sensuality over this kind of pleasure. This is something deeper. This is the pleasure of form, of inhabiting your body from within, and getting used to how it feels. Too often we think of our body in terms of what we’ve been told about it from the outside. This is what a doctor would tell you about the body. This is what they could tell you about your body if they hooked you up to machines. But you’re more interested right now in how your body feels from the inside. When you think about the breath, it’s less the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the sensation of breathing, the process of breathing. This can be made very pleasant. And every breath is at least one spot where the breath feels good. If it didn’t, you wouldn’t be breathing. Find that and allow it to expand. Take some good deep in-and-out breaths. If it feels like you’re getting strained at the end of the in-breath, relax the areas that feel that strain. See if the breath can still come in. If you can’t do that, then shorten the breath. You can experiment with the breathing to see what feels good, whether it’s longer or shorter, deeper or shallow, heavier or lighter. If you can’t make up your mind, just hold in mind the perception that the whole body is breathing in. If you were to allow the whole body, every little cell in your body, to participate in the breathing process, how would it breathe? Find some way of engaging with the breath. Find some way of wanting to be with the breath. And it’s from that desire that the other factors develop. There’s persistence when you stick with it. There’s intent where you really give it your full attention. Again, this perception of the whole body breathing in. Don’t let there be any part of the body that you’re not occupying with your awareness. And that you’re not allowing the breath to come in and out of. Try to be as fully attentive to the breathing as possible. And if something doesn’t feel right, you can adjust it. You can play with it. Change the breathing. Change where you focus. Change the quality of your focus. Sometimes the focus may be so heavy that it’s putting some constriction on the breath. So lighten up a bit. Sometimes the focus is too light. If it’s too light, your mind just keeps slipping off, slipping off. Try to find just the right amount of pressure. So you adjust and evaluate. When you find something that feels good, then just settle in. You’re creating a state of becoming, i.e., your sense of where you are in a particular world of experience. That’s what becoming is all about. And where you are has to deal a lot with that particular desire. The desire is the point around which your identity revolves. And the world of your experience is whatever there is around you and in you that’s relevant to that desire. Your identity has to do with who’s going to experience whatever you want, and then what powers you have under your control to bring that about. All these things together constitute becoming. And as the Buddha says, most forms of becoming lead to suffering. In fact, the craving for becoming is one of the usual types of craving that’s listed as a cause of suffering. But you create this kind of becoming. You’re centered and still. You can watch the process as it’s happening. And you see clearly when the mind is beginning to form other states of becoming that are not quite so skillful. And you can let them go. You see them form as kind of bubbles inside the mind, or right at the spot where the mind and the body meet. And if you’re secure enough with the breath, you’ll see these little becomings as they form, and you’ll not be interested in going back. You want to maintain this birth in this state of becoming, i.e., inhabiting your body as fully as you can. This not only doesn’t allow you to observe other forms of becoming as they might start, but you get to examine them. And this one from the inside. The greater stillness, the greater clarity you can gain here, the more you’re going to see this process. And it’s through understanding this process that you’re going to learn a lot about the mind and how it causes suffering and how it can put an end to those causes. There was a scholarly monk one time who was studying meditation with a John Lee. He said, “Wait a minute, I thought we were supposed to be doing away with becoming, but here we are. Aren’t we creating states of becoming as we sit here and meditate?” And John Lee said, “That’s precisely what we’re doing.” How are you going to understand becoming unless you give rise to it? And where are you going to get the energy to study it unless you give rise to good states of becoming that can nourish the mind? He said, “It’s like having a chicken.” You want to understand eggs, but you don’t eat all the eggs. You don’t analyze all the eggs and destroy them. You have to eat some of them. Otherwise, you won’t have the strength to analyze the rest. The mind being centered like this, it’s food for the mind. It gives you the energy to watch these other states of becoming and not get interested in them. Because otherwise, if you’re starving for pleasure or starving for entertainment, you’re going to go. Whatever comes up, you’re going to go with it. It’s like somebody driving up in a car and saying, “Jump in.” You jump in without even asking, “Who are you? Where are you going?” You’re just so eager for entertainment, eager for change, that you’ll take any change that comes along. Well, getting the mind into a state of concentration, where you’re really settled, changes the balance of power. You’re not so hungry anymore. You’re in a better position to ask, “Well, who are you? Where are you going?” So this is a good place to be, a good kind of becoming, to develop a good desire to nurture. As long as you’re still on the path, keep nurturing this desire. There’ll come a day when you don’t need this anymore, and then you can let go. But the Buddha never asked you to let go of anything that you don’t need. You let go when it’s fulfilled its purpose, then you can put it aside. But as long as you need this, and you’re going to need it way down the path, try to get as good at creating this state of becoming as you can.

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