Desire Concentration

August 18, 2016

You may have noticed as we were chatting just now the different factors of the eightfold path. Under right effort, there’s the phrase chandang jeneti, generating desire. Desire is an essential part of the path. Without it, you could not do anything. Think of the Buddha as he was practicing. He didn’t go out in the woods and say, “All desire is bad. I’m just not going to have any desire.” He gained awakening. That’s not how it happened. He was determined. He studied with two different teachers. They didn’t satisfy him. He went off on his own and tried austerities. That didn’t satisfy him. He kept looking for some way to find what was skillful that would lead to the end of suffering. There was a desire there. That was what fueled his effort. Then there was a desire that had to overcome lots and lots of obstacles. To begin with, it was the culture that said the kind of happiness he was looking for just didn’t exist, that he should satisfy himself with lesser things. But, as he said, one of the secrets to his awakening was that he didn’t let himself rest content with the skillful qualities he had. He kept pushing further and further. There’s a very lion-hearted desire behind that. That’s the kind of person our teacher was. That’s the kind of person we should be, too, as we follow the path. Not all desire is bad. At the craving, of course, that’s the cause of suffering. But there’s the desire that’s part of right effort, which means that you have to learn how to look at your desires and sort them out. That’s an important part of the path, too, to figure out which desires are going to lead in a good direction and which ones are going to lead in a bad direction. Part of it lies in the motivation. Under right resolve, we’re told, any desire that leads to sensuality—in other words, fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures—that’s something to be avoided. A desire that leads to ill will, a desire that is motivated by a desire to harm, those are things that you should put aside. They’re clearly wrong. You should develop their opposites. One is called the desire for enunciation. Basically, that means the desire for happiness that doesn’t have to depend on sensuality. This is why we’re meditating. As we focus on the breath, as we focus on getting the breath energies in the body to spread smoothly through the body, to get them coordinated, we’re dealing with what’s called form, the sense of the body sitting here. That’s called proprioception, your sense of your body from the inside. And you can get that to be pleasant, easeful. That’s a pleasure that’s higher than sensual pleasure, and that’s the pleasure of renunciation. Usually, when we hear the word renunciation, we think of people going off and living in tiny cells and living off dried bread and water, subjecting themselves to a lot of hardships. That was the kind of thing the Buddha did himself to begin with, but he realized that was the wrong path. It was when he realized that there was an alternative pleasure and an alternative happiness that was not involved in sensuality that allowed the mind to be still, clear, and cause no harm to anyone. He went for that and made it the central part of the path. So the desire to get the mind concentrated is not a bad thing. It’s simply a matter of learning how to do it properly. In other words, you focus on the cause. You may have been frustrated with desires in life. You wanted this, you wanted that, and it didn’t come out, it didn’t come about. It’s easy to get very depressed and discouraged and just say, “Well, my desire must be bad. I’m not going to have any desire at all.” That’s not the path. That’s craving for non-becoming. And it pulls you down. It pulls you up. Because when the mind can gain this state of concentration, it’s in a much better position to figure out what’s worthwhile in life and what’s not. So you focus on the causes so you can get this. If you focus on the results but don’t do the causes, again, you’re going to feel frustrated and give up, get discouraged. But focus on the causes. Be mindful, ardent, and alert. You keep one thing in mind—in this case, the breath. Your alertness here is to watch, “Are you actually staying with the breath or are you slipping off?” That’s the element of desire, right effort, in the concentration practice. You want to do this well. You want to be on top of things. So put some energy into it. Keep careful watch on the mind. If it’s wandered off from the breath, bring it right back. When it’s with the breath, try to reward it. You want to be on good terms with the breath if you’re going to settle down. So be friends with it. Allow it to spread through the body in ways that feel good. You can breathe in any way you want. No one’s forcing you to breathe in the old ways you used to breathe. There are lots of different ways you can breathe, and you can find that different parts of the body can get nourished, refreshed, if you allow the breath to go. It’s a matter of allowing. And part of the allowing means you have to allow yourself to imagine it going in different ways to begin with. If you have preconceived notions about the breath, that it has to flow here and has to flow there, it’ll run in those courses. But you won’t get the full benefit from it. So play with the breath. Learn how to enjoy being with the breath. So the meditation becomes something you want to do. It feels good to be here. That desire is to be encouraged. As the Chan Fung used to say, you have to be crazy about the meditation if you want to do it well. And being crazy means you do it all the time, every chance you get. You’re washing dishes, you stay with the breath. You’re sweeping up around the monastery, you stay with the breath. You’re trying to make it pleasant. No one else has to know that your breath feels really, really good. That can be your own secret pleasure inside. So work on the causes—the ardency, alertness, and the mindfulness. Keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath. Getting to know it really well. And as you play with it, these factors turn into the factors of right concentration. You’re directing your thought to the breath and you’re evaluating it. The evaluation means three things, basically. Just the in-and-out breath. How does it feel? And then once you’ve got a sense of ease coming with that, then the next question is, how do you allow it to spread through the different parts of the body? Thinking of the breath energies flowing through the nerves, flowing through the blood vessels. How do you get that sense of ease to spread well? Because if you push it out, you destroy the ease. And it’s largely a matter of allowing. Then you evaluate how to maintain that sense of ease as you move through the day. And if people say you’re stuck on your concentration, that’s perfectly okay. There are things you have to be stuck on in order to do them well. Because if you’re not stuck on the concentration, you get stuck on your old ways of thinking, the old ways the mind had of looking for pleasure, most of which fall into the realm of sensuality. And pleasure and sensuality usually lead to conflict. And it drags the mind down, it drugs the mind. So allow yourself to desire this pleasure of renunciation, and focus on the causes so that you can actually get what you want. You’ll get more and more familiar with the kind of desire that’s part of the path, and you can learn how to distinguish it from the desire that’s part of the cause of suffering. Eventually you give them all up, but you don’t give them up because you’re frustrated. You give them up because you’ve actually attained the goal. Venerable Ananda’s image was of a person going to a park. To get to the park, you have to desire. Once you’ve gotten your desire to the park, you don’t have to drop the desire or shake it off or say that it’s bad or anything. It just goes off on its own because you’ve got what you want. As the Buddha said, the pleasure of awakening is so intense that there is no hunger for anything. The mind is truly free from hunger, because all of its needs have been satisfied. So don’t try to short-circuit the path by saying, “I’ll just go to a place where I don’t desire anything and hang out there.” That’s not a path to any place good. The path to the end of suffering has to be fired by the desire to put an end to suffering and the desire to get all the causes for the path all lined up. So allow that desire to be intense. The word for ardency, atappa, comes from a root that means “to burn.” The desire for the end of suffering should be something that burns well inside, but it’s a good burning. It’s the burning of the fuel that’ll take you there. And that kind of desire is a good thing. Capital letters.

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