Not Getting What You Want

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Most of the Buddha’s descriptions of dependent core arising end with the suffering of aging, illness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, despair. But there’s one that goes beyond that. From suffering, it says, there’s conviction. In other words, conviction in the Buddhist teachings is that there is a way out. And based on that conviction, you practice to gain a sense of joy. The joy becomes the basis for concentration, then discernment, release. So that dependent core arising ends positively. Leading you ultimately to follow the path that gets you to something that’s not dependent. Something independent, which is total release. And it’s interesting to think about how that connection between suffering and conviction comes about. Because remember, in suffering, there’s clinging and craving. We usually think of craving as being bad because it causes suffering. But there’s one of the desires that’s part of the definition of suffering, or the explanation of what suffering means, which includes desire. But it’s actually a skillful desire, one that the Buddha has you cultivate. It’s in the phrase “not getting what you want.” It sounds pretty ordinary. There’s so many things in life where we want something, we don’t get it, and then we’re unhappy. But the Buddha’s not talking about that general, generic kind of suffering. He’s talking about something deeper, that for those who are subject to birth, they don’t want to be subject to birth. Pali says this is not to be gained. Simply by wishing, so on. If you’re subject to aging, you don’t want to age. But that’s not to be gained by wishing. You don’t want to die. But freedom from death is not to be gained by wishing. Down to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, despair. In each case, if you’re subject to these things, you can’t simply wish your way out of them. The Buddha doesn’t discourage you. He doesn’t say, well, just give up all desire. Don’t want things to be different from where they are. Look at himself as a young man. He looked at his life. He realized he didn’t want to age, grow ill, die. He wanted to gain freedom from these things. And as he searched, he finally found that there was a path of practice. That could get you beyond aging, illness, and death. So the desire to go beyond aging, illness, and death is not to be discouraged. You are wanting things to be different from where they are. But you realize that simply wanting is not going to be enough. You actually have to follow the path. That’s what conviction is all about. You’re convinced that this is a good path. So it’s because of that desire in the suffering itself that compels you to practice. As John Fung used to like to say, “Nobody’s hired us to practice. Nobody’s forced us to practice. We’re practicing of our own free will.” Well, it’s true that nobody has forced us to practice the simple fact of suffering. We don’t want to suffer. That’s what pushes us. The Buddha talks about this kind of desire in a positive way in many places. There’s a passage where he talks about household distress, when you don’t get the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas that you want. He says to replace that with what he calls renunciate distress. When you think about the fact that there are people who came to Awakening but you’re not there yet, that should compel you to practice. From renunciate distress then you go to renunciate joy, when you begin to gain insight into things that have burdened the mind and you see that you’re free from those things now. So the distress there is actually useful. It’s to be encouraged. But you don’t just sit, of course, with the distress. You act on it through your conviction that there is a way out. Similarly with the issue of desire as one of the bases for success. You probably know the story. Venerable Ananda is staying in a park and Brahman comes to visit him and asks him this path you’re practicing, what’s the goal? And Ananda says one of the goals is to put an end to desire. What kind of path do you follow? How do you get to the end of desire? And Ananda talks about the four bases for success. Concentration based on desire, concentration based on persistence, based on intent, based on an analysis. And Brahman says that’s impossible. How can you use desire to get rid of desire? And Ananda asks him a question in return. He says you came to this park, before you came here did you have the desire to come here? Well yes. How about now that you’ve arrived? Well the desire is gone because I’m already here. And Ananda says it’s the same with the path. You use desire to get yourself to a place where you don’t need to desire anything anymore. Again you don’t do that simply by wishing. You follow the path. In this case it’s the path of concentration plus right effort and by implication all of the other factors of the path. When the Buddha talks about the various wings to awakening, the question always comes up how do you develop them and it boils down to following the Noble Eightfold Path. So look at your practice. The path comes down to training in heightened virtue, heightened concentration, heightened discernment. Which aspect are you missing? The virtue is there to make you honest and to make you more sensitive to your mind as you go through the day. We’re talking about being mindful of mind states as if we’re happening in something abstract. But it’s actually happening as you’re making choices as you go through the day about what you’re going to do. What kind of choices are you making? What kind of intentions are you acting on? It’s not just a matter of watching things coming and going, but noticing which intentions in the mind are skillful, which ones are not. And if there’s an unskillful intention, how do you say no? In an effective way. This kind of knowledge the Buddha calls penetrative. He talks about how discernment sees things in a penetrative way, sees arising and passing away in a penetrative way. What does that mean to see it penetratively? It’s not just watching the fact of arising and passing away. Noticing that some things arise and you want them to continue because they’re skillful. Other things arise and you should want to put an end to them because they’re not. You’re making value judgments. So you’re thinking about not simply things arising and passing away, but also thinking about where are they leading you? What kind of actions will they inspire in you? And bringing the practice of the precepts into your daily life makes you sensitive to that aspect. What’s going on in your mind? It prepares you for concentration because you’re looking at your intentions. So now you’re going to focus on one intention, you’re going to keep with the breath, here and the present moment. Over the time being you’re just going to preoccupy yourself with the breath. We know that concentration is not the end of the path. It’s not the goal. But you really want to focus on it because it is the path. You want to give all your energy to the path. There’s a Zen teacher, Dogen, who made the comment one time that the development of the path is basically the same thing as the realization of the end of suffering. What he meant was that you don’t sit here going through the motions of the path with your mind down at the end of the path, saying, “When is that going to come?” You focus here on what you’re doing, getting really involved in the breath. As the Buddha said, you would leap up or you would leap into the breath. You go confident, steadfast, and your mind gets released into its perception of just being breath. The whole body, think of every sensation you have in the body, is being related to the breath somehow. Make a survey through the body. When you breathe in, where do you feel it inside? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? Is there a boundary around the breath? Well, no. How far can you gain a sense of how the breath relates to it? The different organs of the body, the different parts of the body, out through the skin, out beyond the skin. Really immerse yourself in the perception of the breath. If there are any tight spots in the body, don’t think of them as being solid. Think of them simply as blocked breath, stagnant breath. And if breath is stagnant, what do you do? You open up all the channels around it so it can flow. In other words, you relate to your sense of the body as you feel it from within, totally in breath terms. Try to gain a sense of oneness with the breath, your awareness in the breath, and a sense of well-being fill the whole body. As you do this, you begin to notice how you’re putting this together. The way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the images you hold in mind. All of these things are called sankara, fabrication. They’re things you put together. And the Buddha wants you to get really good at this, because the path is the best fabricated thing there is in the world. And as you put it together, you begin to gain some insight into how you not only put this together, but you put all your other emotional states, mental states, together using these three things, breath, the way you talk to yourself, and the images you hold in mind, feelings you focus on. This training in heightened concentration gets you to training in heightened discernment. Because fabrication, when you look at dependent co-arising, is right next to ignorance. The implication being that if you fabricate your experience with any of these means, breath, your inner conversation, and your perceptions, you’re going to suffer. But if you do it with knowledge, it can become the path to the end of suffering. You’re developing new skills. There’s the word for ignorance, avijjana, which means not only not knowing, but also means lack of skill. That’s your discernment that comes with mastering these skills, that you’re going to see things. You’re not just cutting out the Buddha’s brilliant ideas and pasting them on your mind, or his concepts and pasting them on your experience. You’re actually learning about what’s going on in your mind. And your body, by developing skillful mental states, skillful physical states with the breath. It’s in this way that you complete the path, composed of the eight factors that boil down to virtue, concentration, discernment. To the point where you can let go of everything else that’s not on the path. Let go of the path itself. Because it encourages you, the right view encourages you to look at things as fabrication, so you can see where they’re not worth it, where their appeal is, where their lure is, but also where their drawbacks are. To the point where you discover that it’s not worth it. The value of judgment. When you’ve cleared away your other attachments, then you turn on to this attachment. Take this apart. Because it tells you to. It basically refers back to itself. This too is fabricated. So take it apart. Take it apart. Take apart your desire and passion for it. And then you’ll be freed. That’s the one where the Buddha tells you to totally let go of desire and passion. But up to that point, you use it. The desire to find what is free from aging, illness, and death. That’s what’s been motivating you all along. Like the brahmin walking to the park. And when you get there, you can put it down. To have a clear sense of which of your desires are part of the problem, and which of your desires are part of the solution. And the desires that are willing to put in the effort to master the path, those are the ones you want to encourage. The desires to simply sit around, “I want this, I want that,” without really doing what needs to be done. Even with worldly things, that doesn’t work. Of course, it’s not going to work with the Dhamma. And you can’t play the reverse of Barney, the dinosaur, by saying, “I don’t want something strong enough,” then it’ll come. You learn how to cultivate skillful desires and then apply them in a skillful way. So those desires that are there in suffering can actually be cultivated wisely. The desire not to age, not to grow ill, not to die. They actually become part of the path, the motivation behind right effort, the motivation behind right resolve. So as you apply them to the path, you find the happiness of getting what you want.

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