Many Desires, Many Selves

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As we practice, we try to focus our desires on one thing, which is the ending of suffering. But the nature of the mind is that it desires to head off in lots of different directions, like the man who jumped on a horse and rode off in four directions all at once, who desires to pull his hair, pull his hair. We try to find some unity to them, some way of making them not work at cross-purposes all the time. So we’d like to have the idea that we have one self that has one genuine desire, or desires that are all in harmony. That’s one way of trying to bring some order to our desires, asking ourselves, “Who is the real me in here?” But as the Buddha noticed, you try to find the real me, and there are lots of me’s in there. It’s somewhat arbitrary as to which ones you’re going to choose. As you noticed, every desire leads to becoming. Now becoming is a sense of self in a world of experience. It’s focused on a desired object, something you want. Say an ice cream cone. And then there’s a world in which that ice cream cone exists. And all the aspects of the world outside that are relevant to the ice cream cone, either helping you get it or getting in the way, are part of that particular becoming. And then you enter into that particular world as the person who’s going to get the ice cream cone, the person who can do it, either make the ice cream or buy the ice cream, the person who’s going to enjoy it. And then there’s always the commentator, saying, “Are you doing this well? How much do you do it differently?” So every desire has three senses of self right there. Every desire has a world. And rather than trying to find unity among these things by defining yourself as a unitary thing, a unitary self, the Buddha said, “Let’s learn how to look at the process by which these worlds and these senses of self get put together. Learn to look at them in impersonal terms.” That’s where we have dependent co-arising. And how we have the Buddha’s analysis of just looking at events in the mind as events in the mind, before you’ve slapped a sense of self on them. Learn how to look them in. In impersonal ways. See where there are perceptions that go together to build up this state of becoming, or thought fabrications, or feelings. All kinds of things go into this. And we hear about these impersonal terms. And we realize that if you look at your desires impersonally, it’s a lot easier to pull yourself out of them. That’s what we’re trying to do as we meditate. We’re trying to bring the mind to a state where you’re dealing with events in the mind directly. You’re holding to a perception of the breath. The breath, of course, is an aspect of the form of the body. You hold on to a perception that allows you to breathe in a way that feels comfortable. And you’ll be thinking about the breath and adjusting the breath, evaluating it. That’s all fabrication. And you’re aware of these things. You realize there are intentions that keep you here. There are acts of attention. What are you going to pay attention to? What are you going to ignore? You learn to look at your mind in impersonal terms. The problem is that your sense of self moves in here as well. And either it can be helpful or not helpful. The helpful sense of self is the sense of self that says, “I can do this.” “I’ll take on this duty.” “I find it an interesting challenge and I’m going to enjoy it.” Then there’s the inner critic that can be either well-trained or ill-trained with regard to the meditation. The ill-trained one is when it gives up at the slightest disturbance. You’re trying to focus on the breath and the mind seems to want to focus on anything but the breath. And then you tie this into your narratives about what a miserable meditator you are and then from that what a miserable person you are. And it can expand, expand, expand. That’s not very helpful. It’s better to think about times in the past when you have faced difficulties but you were able to overcome them. Or working on a skill that you really wanted to develop, really wanted to master. And you had enough interest in it. To face whatever challenges there are and be up for the challenge. That’s the kind of self you want to develop around the meditation. But notice we’re not trying to find a unitary self here. So many psychologists, philosophers, talk about how we try to unify the self. And if they see the divided self, it’s a big problem. But the Buddha says the big problem is that we haven’t divided desires. Our desires don’t have any clear sense of priority. And if we can focus our desires on this one problem, the problem of putting it into suffering, all our other problems are going to evaporate. In other words, they may still be problems in the world outside, but they don’t weigh us down. We don’t suffer from them. And that’s the important thing. And so from that perspective, he’s perfectly fine with the fact that we have many different selves. The question is, which ones are you going to use and which ones are you not going to use? And as you take them apart, it’s important that you realize you’re going to be dealing with many different people in here. So many people try to streamline the practice by saying, “Well, there’s no self to begin with, so just tell yourself that.” “There’s no self and whatever comes up, put aside your sense of self and you’ll be okay.” Well, you don’t have one sense of self, you have many. And as you practice, you’re going to find that some of the selves inside really enjoy the meditation and some of them don’t. And you have to deal with the ones that don’t on an individual basis. In other words, you’re going to be dealing with individual desires. Which have their individual allure and their individual drawbacks. There’s some general outlines to the drawbacks. That everything that you could possibly identify with is going to be inconstant, stressful, not self. But you can say those things over and over again and it may not have any impact at all. As the Buddha said, you have to look specifically as to what the allure is for that particular desire. That particular sense of self. Say a particular instance of anger comes up. Why does the mind like to be angry about these things? Sometimes it’s out of fear, sometimes it’s out of desire. Fear of what? Desire of what? Clinging to what? You want to be really clear about this. Because if you’re not clear about the allure, then you can talk about the drawbacks from dawn to dusk, from dusk to dawn. And they don’t have much impact because they don’t focus directly on what the attraction is. The same with lust. We tell ourselves we lust for a particular body. But is it just the body? Is it your perception of the body? A lot of it has to do with your perceptions. Because our perceptions are like sketches. There’s no perception of the world or perception of you. There’s no perception even of yourself, your own body, that could encompass all the details. So we live with cartoons. That’s why cartoons are so effective at expressing emotions. Because they focus on the specific details of an emotion and they erase all the other parts. And yet they control us. So usually you’re in love with a cartoon, you lust for a cartoon. This is one of the reasons why interpersonal relationships are so fraught. The person you love thinks that you love him or her. But then they find out, no, it’s something else. You have a perception of them. A thought construct. Or you may just be in love with the idea of being in love. And that’s not much of a foundation to build any kind of relationship on. So you’ve got to see specific points of allure. This is why the Buddha says you want to locate the craving. Where is your craving located? Where is it focused? For that particular instance of anger, that particular instance of lust. And you’ve gotten past one instance of anger. Don’t think you’ve taken care of all types of anger. Because you may have many different triggers. Lust may have many different ways of drawing you in, attracting you, being alluring. I mean, it’s been around for a long, long time. It’s learned a lot of tricks. It can hijack your breath. Every time it comes up, it can create a sense of tightness in the body. Something in the body that you can’t stand. You say, “I’ve got to get this out of my system.” It’s amazing how this applies not only to anger, where we talk about getting anger out of our system, but all our emotions. The way we breathe has been hijacked by our defilements. And it’s pretty subconscious. By breathing in a particular way, we’ve already gone over and sided with them. And then they say, “Give in to me now, it’s going to get worse. It’s going to get stronger until you explode, so give in now.” But you know you’re going to give in at one point anyhow, so why don’t you make it easy for both of us? These defilements have lots of different tricks. And so for each type of anger, each type of lust, or whatever the skillful emotion is going to be, you have to see what specifically is the allure. In which particular self have you created around that allure? Do you find that you don’t have an infinite number of selves, or an infinite number of desires? The number that keeps getting thrown out by the cannon is 108. Of course, there’s more than that, but it gives you an idea. There’s lots. But it’s not infinite. This is one of the reasons why the practice takes a while. You’re dealing with specific instances of allures, and specific instances of how to figure out how to see the drawback of those allures. So we’re not dealing with abstractions here. We’re dealing with specifics. We’re not dealing with one self. We’re dealing with many selves. As long as you learn how to see each self as a whole. It’s an activity, part of this process of becoming. It’s a lot easier to let go of these things. It’s not like you’re tearing yourself out, or totally negating yourself. You’re just trying to create some order in this committee inside, or in this crowd inside. So you can train the parts of the mind that can be trained. To be focused on this one issue, putting an end to suffering. That’s where the unity lies. Willing one thing above all other things, and then submitting all your other desires to that. This is called determination. As the Buddha pointed out, determination has four qualities. It has to have discernment. In other words, you have to see clearly which desires are in line with your overarching determination, which ones are not, and what’s a good determination to begin with. And secondly, you have to be true to it. You have to be honest with yourself about which of your desires are actually in compliance, and which ones are not. You have to be willing to relinquish anything that is not in line with that overarching desire. And as the Buddha said, you train only for calm. Trying to find a way of bringing the mind to calm as you’re practicing. Finding what’s disturbing the mind, looking for those disturbances, seeing what’s causing them, being willing to put them aside. It’s by having this overarching determination that you can find some unity, and your desires do all come together. The ones that you finally trained to bring you to the ultimate calm. That’s the unity we’re looking for. But it requires that we deal with a lot of specifics. Because you have so many different desires, so many different selves, you’re going to have to learn all their various tricks. So don’t get discouraged when you’ve given up, say, one specific instance of lust, and only to find that another one comes up. Or one bout of anger and another one comes up. Realize it’s not all the same thing. The allure may be different. The focus may be different. I’ll take that as a challenge. It’s part of the skill. And take heart from the fact that these various tricks of the defilements are not infinite. They may seem a lot, but as you get to know them better, you get better and better at detecting them quickly, and dealing with them quickly as well. You do develop skill as you keep focused on this. So take heart. It’s not an endless job. In fact, it’s one of the few things in the world that actually does come to an end. And the end is more than worth whatever effort it takes to get there.

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