Desire Is Part of the Path

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A group of monks came to see Venerable Sariputta one time, before they were going to go out to a foreign part of India where there hadn’t been any Buddhist monks going before. And he asked them, the people there are intelligent, what if they ask you, “What does your teacher teach?” Are you going to respond? They said, “We’ve come a long way to hear what response you would give.” He started with an interesting phrase, “Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion.” Then he goes on to explain, subduing desire and passion for what? And then why? Why would you do that? He said, “Because you’re able to overcome the suffering that comes when you’re passionate about these things like form or feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. You’re able to avoid that suffering.” Why does he say that? It’s to give rise to a desire in his listeners, the desire to want to practice. So he talks about subduing desire and passion, but then he speaks in ways that give rise to desire, and he continues. He says that the Buddha realized that developing skillful qualities in the present moment led to pain now and into the future. He wouldn’t have taught it. But because it gives rise to a sense of well-being in the mind now and leads to good results in the future, that’s why he taught it. The same for abandoning unskillful qualities. If it led to pain in the present moment and to painful results in the future, he wouldn’t have taught it. When you abandon unskillful qualities, you have a sense of well-being in being skillful, and it gives rise to good things in the future. So again, he says that to spark a desire in his listeners to want to practice. He’s not being inconsistent here. He’s being strategic. You can see this in the Four Noble Truths. The path to the end of suffering, the Buddha says, is the karma that leads to an end of karma. There are things you have to do in order to stop doing. You have to have a desire to act. You see this in Right Resolve. You set your mind on doing things that are going to be skillful, and then in Right Effort you actually give rise to the desire to abandon whatever is unskillful and to develop what’s skillful. So desire is an important part of the path. Because without it, we wouldn’t be able to do it. It’s good to keep this in mind as you’re practicing concentration. In the old days, every time you’d hear about concentration, especially in books that came out of the Vipassana teachings, they said, “Watch out for concentration. It’s very pleasurable. You’re going to get stuck. You’re going to get attached. You’re going to get addicted.” Even nowadays, when the Jhana merchants the people who offer online retreats in Jhana, want to make it very clear that you’re not going to get addicted to the pleasure. Well, a lot of people do get addicted. And it’s not a bad addiction. As the Buddha said, it’s the kind of addiction that pulls you away from other addictions. Because all your clingings to unskillful thoughts, unskillful attitudes, those are addictions. In fact, that might be one of the definitions of clinging aggregates, is being addicted to the aggregates. Aggregates, you know, are not things. They’re activities. Your body is constantly active. Your feelings are activities. Your perceptions are things you do. Thought constructs, fabrications are things you do. Consciousness is something you do. And we’re addicted to these activities. The Buddha is giving us something better to be addicted to. As we get the mind into concentration. He himself said he got on the right path when he realized that he could divide his thoughts into two types, skillful and unskillful. And he didn’t have to keep unskillful thoughts under control. The same way a cowherd has to keep his cows out of the rice fields when the rice is growing. If he doesn’t, they get into the rice, eat the rice, trample the plants, and he’ll get into a lot of trouble. He has to beat them back. As for skillful qualities, skillful thoughts, skillful attitudes, you can let them roam around. Just like the cowherd can let the cows roam during the dry season when the rice has been harvested and there’s nothing that they can do to harm any more rice plants. Just be mindful about where they’re going. But, as you noticed, you could think skillful thoughts for a whole day. You wouldn’t have any drawbacks. But it would tire the mind. You know what happens when the mind gets tired? The body gets tired. When the mind and body are tired, you don’t have the strength to keep up the practice. So the mind needs to rest. So after having the right resolve to overcome unskillful qualities and making the right effort to actually do it, he realized that that was not enough. He had to get the mind into concentration to settle down. Here again, he had to want to do it. As I said, he realized he had to drop all thoughts that were not related to the concentration. At first, his mind did not leap up at the idea. So he had to remind himself of the drawbacks of thinking sensual thoughts, thinking on things that aren’t skillful. He was able to focus his thinking on getting the mind together with its object, based on the realization that if he didn’t do that, there’s going to be trouble down the line. So that’s one of the ways he, as you give rise to desires, realizing that if you don’t learn how to get the mind concentrated, there’s going to be trouble. All your work in being skillful and in trying to get some control of your thoughts starts to unravel. You need a good solid place to stay to gather your strength. So that way you might say he’s using the stick. If you don’t do this right, you don’t do this well, you’re going to suffer. But then there are the positive things that come from concentration. A sense of well-being. A sense of refreshment that you can spread around your body. It doesn’t depend on things outside at all. Your own independent source of well-being. Thinking about that is like the carrot. And then actually experiencing it as you get the mind to settle down. It’s much better than carrots. Much more refined food. So the desire is important, which is why the Buddha talks in so many ways to remind you of the drawbacks of an untrained mind. And to remind you of the virtues and the rewards of training your mind. And your ability to find some pleasure with the breath. Find a sense of refreshment with the breath. That strengthens your mind. Strengthens the ability to stay here and stick with the path. And it’s good for the body, good for the mind. Even if you’re not planning to gain Awakening, it’s a good skill to be able to develop. Because it helps get your mind under control. And as we’ve seen many times in our lives, when the mind goes out of control, you can inflict a lot of damage. You can get all kinds of wrong attitudes. And they reinforce one another. Your mind becomes an echo chamber of bad ideas, unskillful ideas. And they reinforce one another. So you’ve got to learn how to get some control over your thinking. Give it something simple to focus on. Something that gives you a sense of well-being. And as for any thoughts that would go in any other direction, you just subdue them, as the Buddha said. You put them aside. Because you’ve got something better to focus on. And the description of right mindfulness, which is basically the Buddhist prescription for how you do right concentration. He says you keep track of the body in and of itself. And an aspect of the body would be the breath. Ardent, alert, mindful. Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Greed and distress cover all the unskillful attitudes you might have about the world. Just put them aside. Because you’ve got something else you’ve got to focus on. And you do that with three qualities. Mindfulness, ardency, and alertness. What you’re going to be doing here, and how best to do it. Alertness is watching what’s actually happening. What you’re doing, and the results you’re getting. And ardency is trying to do this well. Again, there’s an element of desire there. I really want to do this well. It’s not going to happen on its own. There’s people who talk about just relaxing to your awareness in the present moment. They’re replacing the Buddhist path with something else. Right relaxation is not one of the factors. There are activities that you abandon, that’s for sure. But there are other activities you’ve got to develop. Other skills you’ve got to develop. Because there’s more going on here than just being aware in the present moment. The awareness of the present moment is something that’s manufactured. Something you’re putting together yourself. You’re not going to see that if you tell yourself that the awareness of the present moment is unconditioned, or it’s outside of space, it’s outside of time. It’s very much in time, and it’s very much conditioned. And you’ve got to see how these conditions are put together. The best way to do that is to put them together in a good way. And that requires desire. So you remind yourself of the drawbacks of going out in the world, and you remind yourself of the virtues and the rewards that come when you can get some control over your thinking. As the John Lee points out, of those three qualities, mindfulness, alertness, ardency, the ardency is the wisdom factor. It burns into things, tries to understand them, and tries to do this well. So these are the qualities that go into right concentration. You’re not just zoning out. You’re not just blissing out. The bliss is there. But one of the skills of concentration, especially if you want to get good at it, is you have to learn how to experience the bliss. The sense of well-being. And not get sucked into it. In other words, you stay focused on the breath. Because your focus on the breath is going to be the cause of the sense of pleasure. So you manufacture the pleasure and let the pleasure do its work on its own. You don’t have to stretch it here, or gobble it down, for fear that it’s going to go away. Let it do its work. And then when it’s done its work, then you can let it go. It’s like eating your meal. Once you’re full, you can stop. And then the mind can settle into a state of equanimity that’s really solid, because it’s well-fed. You’re not just telling yourself to be equanimous. You’ve got good reason to be equanimous. You’re well-fed. You’re well-provided for. And then you can watch what’s going on in the mind a lot more clearly, and with a lot more objectivity. So the pleasure is an important part of the practice. Partly as your motivation, partly as your sustenance. So you can be with what’s going on in the mind, watch it, and not get sucked in. You can develop that state of equanimity that’s strong, because it’s well-fed. That equanimity is good, because it allows you to see things clearly for what they are, as they’re happening. Because you’re going to gain some control over the mind. You have to be able to observe it clearly, for what’s actually going on. And that’s the best time when the mind is still, perfectly balanced. That balance is something that has to be maintained, so your desire gets focused there. The Buddha has that teaching that all Dhammas are rooted in desire. By that he means all objects in the mind, all activities in the mind, are rooted in desire. So you have to desire for the path, desire to develop concentration. Don’t be afraid of it. Just learn how to relate to your desire in a mature way. That makes it part of the process of getting the mind to settle down. Turn it into the ardency that wants to do this well. Focus your desires on the causes, and the results will come. You can see that the Buddha’s thinking strategically here. In general, sorry, Buddha’s comments that talk about the rewards that come from subduing desire and passion, are part of that strategy. Use desire to get past desire. And as you develop the path, Right View teaches you to look at all things that are fabricated as worth letting go. And at first you’re going to be letting go of things that are opposed to the path. But then you realize that the path itself is fabricated, so that too has to be let go. This is why Right View is right. It directs you in a way that you use it and then you can put it aside. And it gives you good reasons for putting it aside. The reasons are built into the view itself. You end up putting that aside and the whole path gets put aside. And the mind is really free. And that’s when you can put your desires down. Because desire is what? It’s a sense of lack. It’s aimed at gaining something you don’t have. But when you’ve got the ultimate happiness, you don’t need it anymore. So you simply let it go. Not because you’ve been told to let it go, but because that serves no further purpose. John’s and Tyler like to use it, you’re building a table. You’ve got the tools that are needed to build the table. As long as your table is not yet done, you pick up the tools, you put them down, you pick them up again, you put them down again. But then when the table is done, then you can put them all down. And enjoy the table you’ve got.

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