A Path Rooted in Desire

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Make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath. All the way in, all the way out. Each breath as it comes in, as it goes out. Notice when you breathe in, where do you feel it in the body? Because when the Buddha talks about breath, he’s not talking about the tactile sensation of the air at the nose. He’s talking more about the energy in the body. And that can be felt anywhere. The energy that flows that allows the breath to come in, allows the breath to go out. Where is it most prominent right now? Focus your attention there. Stay there. And then ask yourself if the breath is comfortable. You can experiment for a while. See what kind of breathing feels best, whether it’s long or short, fast or slow, deep or shallow, heavy or light. Take some time to get to know the breath, how you feel the breath from within. Then do your best to stay here, making the breath interesting, making it comfortable. That helps. But you also have to have the determination. This is what you want to do. In other words, you have to have the desire. We hear so much about how the Buddha said that craving is the cause of suffering. Okay, we must be bad. You’re going to practice without any craving, without any desire. But that’s impossible. The Buddha himself says that desire is an important part of the path. That’s right there in right effort. As you generate desire to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, if they’re not there, if they are there, you generate desire to get rid of them. As for skillful qualities, if they’re not there, you generate desire to give rise to them. Skillful qualities that are there, you generate the desire to develop them, to their consummation. In fact, the whole path is a path of desire. The Buddha takes the strategies by which we approach any desire we might have and gives a right version of them so that they will lead to the end of suffering. We start with views, say with the desire to make money. You have a view about how money is made and the best way you want to do it, whether you’re going to be honest about it or dishonest about it, where money can be found. You have to have a working hypothesis on how money is made. Then you have to make the resolve that this is what you want to focus on. Then you adjust your speech. Your actions and the way you look for your livelihood in such a way that it will make the money you want. You motivate yourself. You keep in mind what you have to do. And then try to stay focused on that. That’s how any desire is accomplished. Notice those are all versions of the yet full path. They may be wrong versions, but they contain all the elements of the path. So here our desire is to put an end to suffering, to act in a way that instead of causing suffering, will actually bring about its end. So try to understand what is suffering, how is it caused, and what would be required to put an end to it. That’s Right View. And you realize that the various truths of Right View, suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation, have their duties. You don’t just sit there wanting things. Remember there’s suffering, you try to comprehend it. In other words, you don’t try to push it away. You don’t try to deny it. You admit that it’s there. You try to see exactly what it is. It’s all too often we think that suffering comes from people outside, things outside, events outside. But in the Buddhist sense, the suffering itself is not so much something that happens to us, it’s something we do. We cling. We cling to the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, consciousness. And that’s the suffering, passion and desire that wants to hold on to these things as you’re feeding on them. There’s a hunger. The hunger is not yet satisfied. That’s where the suffering is. That’s to be comprehended. The cause is the craving, the thirst that wants to feed off these things. For the sake of sensuality, for the sake of states of consciousness, of becoming, or to destroy a state of becoming you already have. That’s to be abandoned. And abandoning is through dispassion for the craving. That’s something you want to realize. In other words, actually experience what is it like to have dispassion for your cravings. And you develop that passion by developing the eightfold path. So that’s your working hypothesis. It informs your actions on the path. It’s built on the assumption that you really do have the power to make actions, you have the power to make choices, and your choices can make a difference. They depend on the quality of your mind as you do something. And they do have the potential to put it into suffering. That too is part of your working hypothesis. And based on that, you make a resolve. You realize anything that’s harmful to yourself or harmful to others will get in the way of this path. So you resolve. You resolve on renunciation. You realize that your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures is going to get in the way. So you renounce that. You realize if you have any ill will for anyone, you want to abandon that. You resolve on abandoning ill will. You resolve on abandoning harmfulness in general. That resolve is part of discernment. We tend to think of wisdom and discernment as observations about things. But for the Buddha, wisdom involves resolving on doing what’s skillful. It’s an act of will. Something you want to cultivate. And based on that, that act of will, you try to bring your speech, your actions, and your livelihood in line with the principle of non-harm. So you resolve on not lying, on not engaging in harsh speech, divisive speech, idle chatter. You resolve on not killing, not stealing, not having illicit sex. And you want to make sure that your livelihood is honest and harmless. Because if it’s harmful, it’s going to be hard to sit down and get the mind really quiet. You think about the way you live in the world. And if you see that you’re doing harm to yourself or other people, it’s hard to put those thoughts out of the mind. If you can succeed in putting them out of the mind, then it becomes a blind spot, which is not conducive to insight. So realize that holding to this principle of harmlessness is a really important part of your meditation. All too many people walk in off the street, want to meditate. They don’t have any background in the precepts. Sometimes as they sit down and get the mind quiet, things will come up that are hard to deal with, based on their past actions. But if you’ve already made up your mind that whatever past mistakes you’ve made, you’re not going to repeat them. It’s a lot easier to deal with those thoughts as they come. That’s for your motivation, what Buddha calls generating desire. That’s going to vary from person to person, why you would want to practice, why you would want to get rid of your unskillful mental qualities. You see that to cause you harm, you see that if you act on them, it’s going to cause harm down into the future. You realize that if you really are concerned about your well-being, or the well-being of others, you don’t want to act in harmful ways. You don’t want to encourage unskillful mental states, because it’s out of unskillful mental states that all the harm in the world comes from. So out of compassion, out of heedfulness, out of a sense of shame, you think of all the great people in the past who followed this path. And if they were looking at you right now, what would they think? You decide that you’re going to get rid of unskillful qualities. That’s right effort. Right mindfulness keeps in mind that you want to get the mind to settle down right here in the present moment, because you want to see these processes of how the mind creates suffering, what the Buddha calls the process of becoming. As you have a desire, then you have a sense of who you are in relationship to that desire, and the world around you in which that desire, that desired object can be found. You want to learn how to take that apart, so you can see what goes into it. So you try to stay simply with the body, or the sensation of the body in and of itself, or your feelings, or mind states as they come. Keep in mind that if anything unskillful comes up, you want to abandon it. Anything skillful needs to be developed. That’s what the Buddha says. Mindfulness is the governing principle. If skillful qualities are not there in the mind yet, you try to develop them. If they are there, you try to develop them even further. Make sure they don’t fall away. And when you do this, the mind gets into compassion. The kind of concentration where you are centered inside, clearly aware of how you’re breathing, how you’re talking to yourself, the perceptions you’re holding in mind as you’re trying to create a state of concentration. This way you see the processes of the mind in the present moment, for what they are, what they’re doing. And it’s in this way that you can see when the passion comes around. Or desires that are unskillful, you recognize them. And because you’ve got a good state of concentration here, you’re not so easily inclined to want to follow through with those other desires. You’ve got something better here. So all the factors of the path work together, taking the pattern of how we deal with desires to begin with, and applying it to the desire to put an end to suffering. The difference being that this desire, once it’s accomplished, there’s no need for desire anymore. You can let go of all this fabrication of the path. That’s how desire leads to the end of desire. So the Buddha takes our approach for trying to attain our desires, and applies it to the most important desire of all, the desire not to suffer, and not to cause any suffering for anybody. So recognize the fact that as you’re practicing the path, it does require desire. We’re not here pretending that we’re not doing the path, or pretending that we don’t want Awakening. We do want Awakening. But realize that it requires a lot of skill in how you focus that desire. The Buddha lays it all out as we chanted just now. It’s up to us now to focus on how to bring those qualities of mind into being right here, right now. To do whatever’s going to help with attaining our desire, and to abandon whatever’s going to get in the way. And when you recognize that there’s a desire there, it’s a lot easier to be honest with yourself. If you pretend that you’re not acting on desire, then your desires go underground, and how are you going to figure them out? How are you going to deal with them when they’re underground? It’s best to be honest and above board. So you do what needs to be done, and when it’s accomplished its task, then you can let these things go. As John Lee would say, “You let go like a rich person.” People who let go without having developed anything, he says, are like poor people letting go. They have nothing to show for it. Whereas rich people let go, they have their wealth. They’re not just clutching it, and they’re not carrying it around with them, but the wealth is there for them to use whenever they need it.

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