

Desire

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All things are rooted in desire. That's what the Buddha said. Sometimes Buddhism is characterized as not appreciating how important desire is. But this statement shows that the Buddha realized that this is what we are: We come from desire, we're born because of desire and craving. He says that without the craving, a being wouldn't be able to make it from one life to the next. The being itself is defined by its desires, by its attachments. In other words, we define ourselves by what we want.

What this means, of course, is that we're also defined by our frustrations. All too often our wants get frustrated. Either we don't get what we want; or when we get it, we find that it's something different from what we thought it was; or it seems to be what we thought was, but it doesn't last. All of which is frustrating. So the Buddha said that the only way out is to go beyond desire.

But desire's not something you can simply drop. You have to learn how to refine it, take it apart.

The first step is realizing that desires are not just one thing. There are lots of desires for lots of different things. You hear people talking about desire as a single cosmic force. You hear them telling you that what you really want in life is wholeness or completeness or to be fully in the present moment, or whatever. Those are actually many things that you might want. They're not the one thing that every desire is aiming at. You have an itch and you scratch it. You have a hunger, and you try to assuage it.

All desires aim at happiness and well-being, but each desire differs based on its object, based on where it's coming from and where it's headed. The Buddha has you start out by looking at the different places where desires go. Some go to relative happiness and ease, others get frustrated, and some are actually destructive. So you start out by learning how to let go of your destructive desires, seeing that they really don't lead to any kind of happiness at all, and instead lead to a lot of pain and misery.

When you live a life of generosity and virtue, you find it really does make a big difference letting go of those unskillful desires.

Then you start applying the same principle to the mind. This is why we meditate. Right effort is the first factor of the path that deals with meditation. It's a factor of desire: It's about generating desire to let go of unskillful states that have arisen, to prevent unskillful states that haven't arisen from coming into being,

generating desire to give rise to skillful mental states, and to develop them when they have arisen.

What you're doing is that you're taming desire. You're learning to direct your desires in the right direction. As when you are sitting here right now: Thoughts may be wandering off, but the mind doesn't have to wander after them. They may want this; they may want that—after all, one of the major hindrances is sensual desire—but you learn to say No. In the beginning, with the precepts, you learn that you may have an unskillful desire, but you simply don't give in to it. You say No to the activity. The desire may be raging in the mind but you keep saying, “No, I'm not going to go there.”

One of the principles of the practice is that you learn an awful lot by restraining your desires. People who simply follow their desires and don't have any kind of restraint at all don't learn very much in life. You read about the devas in the Canon, and often they're pretty dumb. Things are easy for them. They don't have to reflect very much. Than Jesse was telling us one time about the time when he was working as a model and he found himself among all these really good-looking people, trying out for commercials. He tried to talk to them about serious things, but, he said, there wasn't much there. They weren't very reflective people. Things were going easy for them.

On the other hand, you find people who do have their desires frustrated in many ways, but they often don't learn much from them, either. Psychologists have done studies of people pursuing things in life, and often they're things they pursued before, they've tried them out, and they didn't get any real satisfaction, but then they turn around and pursue them again. So it's not simply that frustration teaches you lessons. What you need is the willingness to learn, realizing that something's got to change.

So the Buddha gives you, on the one hand, instructions on how to develop a sense of well-being that will enable you not be so hungry for certain desires and, on the other, tools for looking at the desire through restraint. When you say No to desire, how do you look at it in such way that you learn from it? That's one of the most important tools for the path.

This is why virtue and concentration have to go together. When you gain a sense of well-being from the pleasure that comes from concentration, which the Buddha said is a blameless pleasure, then you turn around and look at the other pleasures you've been pursuing, and you find it a lot easier to see the drawbacks, in a more objective way. If you're simply hungering for them and don't see any alternative to the pleasure they give, you're going to keep rushing after them. But when you see the alternative that comes from concentration when the mind gets

still, and that stillness doesn't have to depend on things outside, that puts you in a better position for understanding what the desire is all about, exactly where it comes from, whether it's something that's really worth identifying with or not.

This is where it gets interesting, because as I said earlier, you're defined by your desires. Now you begin to let go of some of the things you've used to define yourself. Some people feel threatened by this. Again, here's another area where concentration is helpful. It's a lot easier to let go of things when you're feeling good—when you're feeling settled, when you're feeling whole as you're doing the concentration—than it is when you're feeling hungry and desperate.

Up to this point, it's simply a question of what you're choosing to identify with. The Buddha keeps giving you better and better and better things to identify with. He tells you when there's a perception in mind that allows for stillness, you try to settle the mind and make it stable, make it confident in that perception. The more solidly you can develop concentration, the easier it is to let go of other things. If the concentration is still wobbly, you're half holding on to the concentration, and half holding on to everything else in your life, because the concentration hasn't yet provided you with any sense of security that seems special, seems more reliable than the pleasure you get from outside. That's why mastering concentration is so important in the practice.

Once you've developed it as a skill, then you can start getting into the more interesting aspects of learning how to let go of your more refined attachments. This is why the pursuit of true happiness asks the question of you: Are you going to hold on to the way you've been defining yourself, or are you going to go for true happiness? A lot of people stop right there. They say, "My desires *are* me. How can I let them go? It would be like letting go of myself." And the Buddha says, "Precisely the point.

But if you can learn to see your sense of self as a strategy, you realize that you came up with the whole idea of self to begin with as a way of organizing your experience so as to maximize happiness. It's simply a matter that you've now run into the limitations of that particular strategy. You can see the limitation that comes from defining yourself in terms of feelings or perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, when they finally do start appearing to be burdensome. This requires a fair amount of sensitizing the mind, because otherwise you're willing to put up with all kinds of burdens. You think, "Well, this is as good as it gets." But as you get more and more sensitized through the concentration practice, and your sensitivities get more refined, you begin to see, "Yeah, this is a burdensome, this need to keep identifying myself, to say, 'This is this, and that's that, and I'm this, and this is mine.'" You learn to let go in stages.

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, once there's the experience of ultimate happiness, who cares what's experiencing it? You certainly don't care. At that point, you give up desire not simply to be very stoic, but because you've reached a point where desire is no longer needed. You've got the ultimate happiness. What other need would there be for desire?

This is why there's that passage where the Buddha says that you can't talk about what the arahants are like, whether the arahant exists after death, or doesn't exist, or both or neither, because you can't even define the arahant.

You can't even define the Buddha in the present lifetime. There's that passage with Ven.. Anuradha, where the Buddha chases him down a long list of questions: How can you talk about the Buddha after death when you can't even define him in the present life? You can't define him in terms of the khandhas, you can't define them as something that's not the khandhas, because how would you define that? He goes through all the different contorted ways that you could use the khandhas to define him, and you can't do it, because he doesn't have any desire, he doesn't have any attachment for those things. He's undefined.

This doesn't mean he doesn't function. He functions perfectly well. In one of the suttas, the Buddha talks about his attitude toward teaching, saying that he teaches people with the purpose of getting them to practice so that they can gain awakening. If they do put his teachings into practice and they do gain awakening, he's gratified by that, but he doesn't let the gratification overcome his mind. That's because he doesn't identify with it. When his listeners don't follow his words, he doesn't let any disappointment overcome his mind. He can still function. He can see that one result is better than the other. But in terms of the results of his actions, he just lets them go.

Sometimes we're told to clone that attitude as we practice: Practice but don't be attached to the results of your practice. Well, that works only when you've achieved full happiness. That's when you can relate to the world in that way. Prior to that, though, you've got to have your attachments. You've got to have your desires. You can't pretend that you don't. Otherwise, you start lying to yourself. What you want to do in the practice is learn how to really look truthfully and seriously at your desires, to see how much happiness they actually give you. You really want to be happy. But then you test the object you've been desiring for, you test the desire itself, and you see where they're lacking.

In that way, you learn from them. You learn to be more and more skillful in your desires, to focus them more precisely in places where they really do benefit you. Again, there's a strong desire, a strong wanting in this, but it's tempered by the knowledge that you've got to learn how to give up a lot of things that you may

have been holding on to very tightly. But when you see the benefits that come from letting go, it gets a lot easier.

So you treat desire not as a big monolithic thing, but as desires, individual events in the mind, and you gauge them by what they do for you. That way, the direction of your desires gets more and more oriented toward the point where you really can finally open up and reach a happiness that's totally gratifying, to the point where you're no longer a slave to these things, these likes and dislikes, these desires. You don't need them anymore.

So desire is an important element in the path. A lot of our training is turning desire from being part of the second noble truth into being part of the fourth noble truth, learning how to let go of the desires that are the second noble truth, and how to encourage the ones that are part of the fourth. We're willing to take those skillful desires and see how far they go, even to the extent of letting go of our sense of who we are. But the rewards are more than worth it.