

# *Not Getting What You Want*

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When the Buddha explains the first noble truth, one of the examples he gives is *not getting what you want*—that's suffering. Now, the common response to that is, well, just grab what you want and then you won't suffer. But when the Buddha explains what he means by that statement, you realize it's not something you can grab.

His examples are people subject to aging wanting not to age; people subject to illness wanting not to grow ill; people subject to death not wanting to die. As he says, "These things are not to be gained just by wanting."

Now, other people hear that and they feel, "Well, just learn to accept these things. Learn now not to want and we'll be okay," but that's also not what the Buddha taught, either. After all, he didn't teach just one noble truth, he taught four. There is suffering—which is the clinging. And there's a cause to the suffering, craving, and three types of craving in particular, all of which lead to becoming: the process by which you take on an identity in a world of experience.

But it is possible to put an end to that cause. That's what the third noble truth is all about: You can develop dispassion for those cravings. When there's dispassion for them, the cravings stop—and that's the end of suffering. The way to do that is through the path: starting with right view and ending in right concentration. That's the fourth noble truth.

So, the Buddha's not saying not to want. He's basically saying to *want* these things—*want* to be free from aging, illness, and death—but learn how to act on those wants in a skillful way. Think of the young prince who became the Buddha: That was his desire—to find an end to these things. But he realized he couldn't just wish them away.

As he became Buddha, he realized: Aging, illness, and death will happen, but it's possible to learn how not to suffer from them. And more than that, it's possible to find a deathless realm in which these things don't happen again, in which you won't be subject to them ever again. That's why the path is not one of simply learning not to have desires—because there are things you've got to do.

The path starts with the realization that there are skillful desires and unskillful desires. That's part of what right view tells you, so you have to learn how to encourage and nourish the skillful ones and abandon the unskillful ones.

This requires that you make distinctions. There are states of concentration where whatever comes up, you just let it go, but those states are useful only at certain points—they can't do all the work. As the Buddha said, there are some causes of suffering that will go away when you simply look at them steadily. Others, however, require work.

And the kind of work they require is interesting because it's the same kind of work that we do all the time—it's simply that we've been doing it in an unskillful way. That's because the present moment is not just a matter of things presenting themselves to us ready-made.

If we're to make an analogy: A lot of people think of the present moment as being like a TV show. You have no say in what the TV show is going to show you; it's a question of simply watching it, getting upset by it, or learning how not to get upset.

But the way the Buddha describes the present moment, it's more like an interactive game: You play a role in shaping it. There are certain potentials that come in from your past karma, but they're just potentials.

His image is of a field planted full of seeds, and certain seeds are beginning to sprout. It's the seeds that you water—i.e., you pay attention to them: Those are the ones that will sprout first—and the act of paying attention is part of what the Buddha calls *fabrication*. We take these potentials and we turn them into a present-moment experience.

Fabrication has three types:

- There's bodily fabrication, which is your in-and-out breath.
- Verbal fabrication, which the Buddha defines as directed thought and evaluation. This is basically the way you talk to yourself. You choose a topic and then you comment on it, ask questions about it, decide what you like and don't like about it: those kinds of things.
- Then there's mental fabrication—perceptions and feelings. Perceptions here are the images and labels you apply to things, identifying this as this, and that as that. Feelings are not emotions so much, they're more feeling tones: feeling tones of pleasure, pain, or neither-pleasure-nor-pain.

There's an intentional element in all of these things, which is why the Buddha calls them fabrications. This means that every present moment experience has an element of intention. We're in there shaping things.

The problem is that we're so unconscious of what we're doing that we tend to shape things in an unskillful way. We may have some old habits that we picked up, or we're just not paying attention. Or we don't even think that we're *doing* anything. Most people think the present moment comes to them ready-made, and they don't see the extent to which they're shaping it.

This is one of the Buddha's great insights: that prior to sensory experience—which is your old karma coming—there are your intentions, these fabrications that you do. And if you can learn how to do them with knowledge, they become a path—the path to the end of suffering.

Which is why I say that what we're doing as we meditate is taking the same things we've been doing all along, and learning how to do them skillfully. We learn how to breathe skillfully; we learn how to talk to ourselves skillfully; we learn how to apply perceptions and focus on feelings in a skillful way.

As you're meditating right now, you're focused on the breath, but in focusing on the breath, there's already directed thought and evaluation. You're directing your thoughts to the breath, and the Buddha encourages you to evaluate it. It's not just in, out, in, out, and being with whatever comes up. You have to realize: You can change the way you breathe. This is a test case for how you fabricate your present-moment experience. You can breathe short, you can breathe deep, you can breathe long, you can breathe shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow—and it can have a huge impact on your body and on the mind.

And you have the choice to do these things. These are choices that we tend to overlook or to deny to ourselves. When we're taught that we have to be with whatever breath is coming in and not try to change the breath, we have to realize that the Buddha never says that.

All of his breath meditation instructions are *trainings*. There are sixteen steps in all, and only the first two are simply discerning differences in the breath. Once you discern them, you train yourself to breathe in a way that feels good throughout the body. You're aware of the whole body, you calm the breath, you give rise to a sense of pleasure, a sense of refreshment—let it fill the body. So, you're engaging bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and even mental fabrication, because you have to have a perception in mind of what the breath is *doing* in the body to get the most out of it.

We always carry our own mental images around about which muscles of the body are involved in the breath process. If you're breathing in, where do there have to be sensations so that you know that the breath is coming in, where it's going out? It's good to explore other possibilities, so that you can gain a sense of refreshment from the breath, a sense of ease from the breath—because the breath is going to be a very useful tool to have once you've learned its variations.

So, this is a test case: Is the Buddha right? Can you make differences in the present moment by what you're deciding to *do* in the present moment?

And when we think about doing, we're thinking about karma: Some things, of course, give their results only over time. Other things give their results immediately. You stick your finger in a fire, and it's not going to burn in your next lifetime. It's going to burn right now.

If you decide to breathe long, well, you can breathe long. You have that within your power. This is an important part of understanding the four noble truths. The Buddha says you have a lot of power in your hands. You're using it to create suffering, but you don't have to. You can use it to create a path to the end of suffering, and he's showing you the way.

So, it's not just a path of acceptance. After all, look at those duties with the four noble truths. We chanted the sutta on *Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion*, and sometimes people ask, "Well, where's the wheel?" It's in that passage where the Buddha talks about how he gained light, knowledge, understanding of things he had never seen before.

First he identifies: What is actual suffering? It's not what you think it is—it's clinging. What's the cause? The cause isn't the economy, it isn't the society, it's coming from within—

your cravings. What is the cessation? Learning how to end the craving, to end your passion for craving. And there's a path: the noble eightfold path.

So, he gained knowledge into the four truths, and then he gained knowledge into the *duties* appropriate to them: Suffering should be comprehended; its cause abandoned; its cessation realized; and the path developed. So: four different things you can do there. It's not just accept, accept, accept. There are *value judgments* being made, *distinctions* being made. Once you make the distinctions, then you know what to do.

Finally, when he had completed the duties for all four truths, as the Buddha said—that's when he knew that he'd gained awakening.

Now, the wheel as a symbol in his time had two meanings. One was just that, what we saw just now: where he takes these four truths and the three levels of knowledge—truth, duty, duty completed—and he goes through each permutation: twelve permutations in all.

Here in the West we would call that a table: We'd have a list of four variables going across the top, another list of three variables going down the left side, and then there'd be twelve boxes.

In those days they called it a wheel, something that rotated through all the different permutations. So, that's the Wheel of the Dhamma.

The wheel was also a symbol of power. Once you had a wheel on your chariot, you could go anywhere. A king who had a chariot on wheels could conquer anything. In the same way, when you have total knowledge of a topic like this, that, too, is a way of mastering the knowledge, mastering the topic.

So, when the Buddha set the wheel rolling, it meant the power of his teaching could extend all throughout the world.

So, pay attention to those duties. They're distinct. You have to make distinctions: Which kind of thoughts are worth abandoning, and which kind of thoughts are worth developing? Because that's the difference between causing suffering and not. If you develop the things you should be abandoning, you're going to cause suffering. If you abandon the things you should be developing, you go nowhere. You stay stuck in your suffering.

So, these are important dualities. It's why we have four truths. Skillful and unskillful, cause and effect: That gives us four.

Years back, I was listening to a scholarly monk from Bangkok complain that a lot of vipassanā traditions teach that right view is the three characteristics. He said, "No! It's the four noble truths." At first, I thought he was being pedantic, but then on reflection I realized he'd had an important insight.

If you think that the three characteristics are *the* view of reality that the Buddha's trying to teach, it teaches you simple acceptance: "Okay, everything is going to change, everything is stressful, so just let go of it." There are no distinctions being made; there are no duties. You can

take those facts and you can say, “Well, how do I let go? Do I just do whatever I want? Do I eat, drink, and be merry? Do I have no desires at all?”

On its own, the teaching about the three characteristics is incomplete, but when you use it in the context of the four noble truths—which is what right view is—you begin to realize: There are distinctions, there are duties.

One of the duties is to develop dispassion for the causes of suffering so that you can let go. And one of the ways of doing that is to see those causes as inconstant, stressful, not-self—not worth holding onto, not worth doing, not worth developing. It’s a value judgment.

Ultimately, when you’ve finished the work, you let go of everything. That’s the meaning of the image of the raft going across the river. First you make the raft out of what? Twigs, branches, on *this* side of the river. This is the side of the river, remember, that’s not safe. But you can’t wait for a nibbāna yacht to come over and pick you up. You’ve got to take what you’ve got: your breathing, your directed thoughts, your evaluation, your perceptions, your feelings. Those are twigs and branches, but you learn how to make them into a raft. Then you hold onto the raft as you use your hands and feet to make your way across the river.

When you get to the other side, okay, *that’s* when you let go. Don’t let go before you’ve gotten to the other side, though. If you let go in the middle of the river, you just get washed away.

So, as you’re meditating, as problems come up in the meditation, ask yourself, “Okay, where does this problem lie in the four noble truths? Where does it lie with regard to the duties of those four noble truths?” That can give you some idea of what you should be doing.

When you keep these four truths in mind and have a correct understanding of why the Buddha taught that *not getting what you want* is suffering—and what he meant by that—then you’re going to be on the right path.