

Rooted in Desire

May 24, 2005

The Buddha once said that all things are rooted in desire. Everything you experience, everything you do, comes out of the desire of some sort. We sometimes think that he said that desire, craving, is the cause of suffering, and that it's a bad thing, so we should stop desiring. Well, it's not something you can just stop doing, because, after all, the path to the end of suffering is something you do, and it's based on desire. There's right resolve. And, if you look carefully there in right effort, the Buddha says to generate desire: the desire to abandon skillful qualities that have already arisen and to prevent unskillful qualities that haven't arisen yet from arising. You also generate the desire to give rise to skillful qualities and then to maintain them.

So, you need desire in order to practice the path.

Sometimes they say there's a path of no desire, but just sitting where you are and not doing anything is like being dead. Or, simply trying to develop equanimity for whatever comes up: The Buddha says that's limited equanimity; it's a path that goes nowhere.

You look at the Buddha himself: What kind of person was he? He looked at his life and saw that it wasn't satisfactory. He wanted something better than the happiness he had, and he was willing to sacrifice everything that went against that desire. And of course, what was everything that went against that desire? Other desires. This means that our path is one where we have to sort out the different desires in our minds.

Now, we can decide either to be buffeted around by the different desires or not. They're like winds. Some of them blow west, some of them blow north, south, east. Some of them are whirlwinds. Or, you can decide that there's one or two big desires that you want to hold true to. Then use those desires as your standard for deciding which other desires you're going to follow. That's what right resolve is all about.

You look at the way you cause suffering and you decide, "Do I want to continue doing this? I have the choice to stop." And you look at the kind of desires that lead to suffering. The big one is the desire for sensuality. Then there's the desire for ill will—you want to see other people suffer—but that's unskillful. Or, there's the desire to be harmful. You're not just sit around wishing for people to suffer. You decide you're going to go out and actually do something to harm them—or to harm yourself. Desires of this sort, even though they may seem

attractive in one way or another, really cause suffering.

The one we're most resistant to giving up is the desire for sensuality. Giving up the desire for ill will: We can see that that's a noble thing, something you really would aspire to. Giving up the desire to be harmful: That's easy to aspire to as well. Whether you can follow through with that aspiration or not is another matter. But, it's easy to see in the abstract that those are good things to aspire to.

The desire to give up sensuality: That's something else. After all, it was because of sensual desire that we were born on this plane, that we took birth as human beings. The Buddha said the main reason we're so attached to it is that we don't see any other escape from pain. When pain comes along, we rush for something to relieve the pain, and sensual pleasure seems to be just the thing.

What we need is another alternative. That's what right concentration is for, learning to develop a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture and fullness simply by the way you breathe. This is giving you an important alternative. Once you've learned to master that kind of pleasure, you can tap into it whenever you need it. You can do it all the time. At least, once you have tasted this pleasure, then you look at the pleasure that comes from sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and you realize that that pleasure doesn't have all that much to offer; it has a lot of drawbacks as well.

Look at all the things you have to do in order to get the sensual pleasures you want. See how you get yourself tied down with other people, the jobs you need in order to maintain that level of pleasure. Then you realize that the things that give you sensual pleasure are not yours. The Buddha said they're like borrowed goods. They can be taken away at any time.

One of the reasons we practice right concentration is to put the mind in the right place—where it can see that sensual desire is not all it's cracked up to be, and it really is something you might want to let go of. Learn how to give up your attachment for it.

Now, this requires a strong desire of another kind. The Buddha talks about the bases for success, and one of the bases for success in practicing right concentration is desire—wanting to do the practice, wanting to get the mind to settle down, wanting that sense of inner rapture, inner pleasure. Desire of this sort is a good thing; it's part of the path. The trick here is learning how not to let the desire get in the way. As the Buddha said, when desire is too lax, the path gets lackadaisical; when it's too strong, sometimes you run off the path. You're too anxious to get to the end, so anxious that you don't actually do what's required. You've got to learn how to focus on the path itself. Direct your desire there. You want to do it right.

As with any job, the desire to finish the job should be focused on each step as

you do it. Don't give in to the old habit of just rushing, rushing, rushing through things—that's when desire gets in the way. Think of whatever skills you've mastered. You had to *want* to master the skill in order to do it, so that you could put in the effort, stick with it, practice, practice, practice. But, you had to learn how to balance that desire so that you can actually pay attention to what you're doing while you practice.

So, just thinking about how much you want to do it well, you actually focus on the steps. If you're learning a musical instrument, you focus on your scales, you focus on your intonation, you focus on your fingering—all the little bits and pieces that go into mastering the skill. That way, you take your desire and focus it where it should be: on actually putting together the causes that will lead to the results that you want. In that way, desire becomes your friend.

The same in the path as a whole: We want peace of mind, but if all you do is sit around and think about peace of mind, peace of mind, how much you want peace of mind, and yet it's not coming, that kind of desire is not helpful. Instead, if you want peace of mind, what do you have to do to get it? Sit down, focus on the breath, each breath as it comes. Learn how to make this breath comfortable, and then the next breath comfortable. And then the next. If some voice in your mind asks, "When is this going to get the peace of mind I want?" Say, "Be quiet for the time being."

Peace of mind comes from in actually following the path, doing the practice. If you focus your desire on the causes, desire becomes your friend and not your enemy, because you learn how to fine tune it.

So, this is not a path of giving up craving. It's a path of learning to be selective in which desires you want, which desires really are your friends—leading to the results you really want—and then learning the skills you need in strengthening the skillful desires and weakening the unskillful ones.

Someday this will get you to the point where you really don't need desire anymore. That's the Buddha's promise. And it won't be because you've become dried out and cynical. It'll come because you've actually reached something that satisfies every possible desire of the heart and mind. After all, desire aims at happiness. So when you get a true happiness that doesn't depend on conditions and is there all the time, what more could you desire? It's at that point that you can put the path aside.

You know the image of the raft. When you get to the other shore, you can let go of the raft. You don't have to carry it on your head as you go along. But while you're still crossing over the river, you don't want to let go of the raft. You hold on to it. The desire of right resolve, the element of desire in right effort: These are

things you hold on to, because if you let them go, you drown. It's by holding on to the raft that you get to the other shore.

So, don't look at life as a question of using reason versus desire; it's actually reasonable desires against unreasonable desires, skillful desires against unskillful desires. That's the battle going on in the mind. The path is to help us side with the reasonable ones, side with the skillful ones, so that we can reach that point that actually every desire aims at. Every desire aims at happiness. The problem is that we misconstrue true happiness, we misconstrue what's going to work getting there, so the path is here to help us get a clear idea of what true happiness might be like, and of what works and what doesn't work along the way. That way, you can take that principle that all things are rooted in desire and you can use it to your own advantage—to your true advantage—and you can finally reach something that isn't rooted in desire: the *one* thing, nibbana. That's when you can put the whole issue of desire aside.