

Motivation

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There's the famous story of how Ven. Ananda gained awakening.

He'd been invited to the First Council because he had listened in on more of the Buddha's talks and remembered more of the Buddha's talks than anybody else.

But, unlike the other members of the Council, he was not yet an arahant. So on the night before the Council was to meet, he was meditating really hard. He wanted to be an arahant just like the rest of them. They'd been dropping a few comments about how it would be a shame if he were still just a stream-enterer when attending the Council.

So he was meditating really hard, really hard, really hard, and finally he realized it just wasn't working. So he was going to call it a night. And just as he was about to lie down—he wasn't in a sitting posture, he wasn't in the lying down posture, he was halfway between—he finally gained awakening, full awakening.

This is a very popular story, because the lesson seems to be that if you want too much to gain awakening, it gets in the way. It was at the moment when Ananda gave up that desire—that was when he gained awakening. So the lesson would seem to be if you just give up the desire for awakening, there you are. You don't have to work for it, you don't have to have any strong desires, just let it happen.

And there is a "just letting it happen" aspect to it, but Ananda wouldn't have gotten to that point if it hadn't been for the desire, hadn't been for the persistence and intent and powers of discrimination and discernment that he brought to the practice. If it hadn't been for them, he wouldn't have got to that point of equilibrium.

Awakening doesn't just happen. You have to have the desire for it. We hear stories of spontaneous awakening, but the question is, is it really awakening?

Psychologists talk about what are called "neurotic breakthroughs," where people have been struggling through a really dark period in their lives and then, for one reason or another, it snaps. That really oppressive mind state, that really oppressive state of becoming that they'd been maintaining, had gotten so heavy and so unbearable and so unmaintainable that they just finally dropped it and experienced a great release. But the question is, what did they awaken to?

When the Buddha awakened, he awakened to understandings about intention, action, cause and effect, skillfulness, lack of skill.

In the process of reaching the deathless, he really did have to take apart bit by

bit by bit very subtle and very pleasant states of mind, very subtle mental activities so that he really understood what it was to act, what it was to condition something. That way, when the genuine unconditioned came, he really knew that it was unconditioned.

With neurotic breakthroughs, though, you usually come to just another form of conditioning that, in contrast to where you were before, seems very bright and very light. It's like going from a very dark room into one that's extremely bright. Because you're so blinded by the light, you don't see any objects in the room. You think there's nothing there, just this incredible light. But you'd have to stay with it for a long time to begin to realize, as your eyes begin to adjust, "Oh, there are objects in the room."

So this is one of the big paradoxes of the practice: We want to get to a state that's unfabricated, but we really do have to fabricate strong intentions and strong desires to get there.

Desire is one of the elements of right effort. The formula for right effort always starts out with the phrase, "generating desire." Desire is also the first of the bases for success or the bases for power: concentration based on desire. And the desire has to be coupled with wisdom, one, so that it's neither too excessive—in the sense of getting you all frazzled—nor too weak. And, two, it has to be aimed at causes: what you're doing to get there. And then three, the effort really does have to be directed at the right causes.

There's that image in the Canon of someone who's trying to milk a cow by twisting its horn. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, "I was trying really, really hard and finally when I realized that it was my trying hard that was making me all frazzled and stressed out, I just stopped trying and there I was: a state of peace."

Well, it's milking the cow by twisting its horn and finally realizing that you're putting a lot of energy into twisting its horn but you're not getting anything out of it. You're tormenting yourself; you're tormenting the cow. Wouldn't it be better to stop? Well, yes. It is better to stop. But you still don't get the milk. You've got to figure out the right part of the cow to pull or twist.

That's what we're doing as we're meditating: trying to find where the right spot is to focus your desire. And how do you encourage or how do you generate that desire? That's an important aspect of the path.

Sometimes the Buddha encourages developing a sense of heedfulness, realizing that if you don't train the mind, you're in big trouble. There are lots of passages in the Canon where the Buddha has you ask yourself, "Are you ready? Do you realize the dangers that you might have to face?"

That's the first way of sparking desire: realizing that if you don't make progress on the path, if you don't give yourself over to training the mind, there's going to be a lot of suffering.

At the very least there's aging, illness, and death. There's also the possibility of war or social unrest. There's the possibility that the Buddha's teachings could be forgotten. There could be a possibility of a split in the Sangha. And would you be able to dwell in ease if any of those things happened?

And death, of course, is not necessarily far away. You don't know where you are in the line. If it suddenly came up, would you be ready to drop everything and just say, "Okay, that's it! Let go," without a lot of regret, without a lot of sticky attachments?

One of the biggest regrets would be that you had the opportunity to practice but you didn't make the most of it. You dawdled through the practice saying, "Well, I'll put it off till tomorrow and I won't push myself too hard."

As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, for many of us, the middle way is right in the middle of the pillow.

So you don't want that regret.

That's one way of stirring up a sense of desire: realizing there are dangers out there—dangers in the mind, dangers outside. And of course the biggest dangers are the ones inside, having a mind you can't really trust.

We like to think that we're kind, generous, harmless people. But what if society really did break down? Or what if what the Buddha called a "sword interval" came? People would start hunting one another down. Can you trust yourself that you would do the right thing, you would maintain your precepts? If you can't, that's pretty scary. You've got work to do because the scariest thing in the world is when your own mind is something you can't trust.

Another way of sparking desire is through developing a sense of *samvega*, thinking of the long wandering-on that wanders around and stops here and then turns right and turns left and turns right again and just keeps wandering in pretty aimless circles—and all the suffering it involves, both for you and for the people that you have to depend on.

One of the reasons we have that reflection on the requisites is to remind ourselves that simply by being born as a human being with a human body, you've got these big gaping needs: food, clothing, shelter, medicine. When you start out, your parents have to find these things for you. But as you grow up, you have to find them yourself.

And it involves a burden on others. Some people like to think, "I'm going to be a bodhisattva, just keep coming back and doing good, doing good, doing good and

won't be so selfish as to stop coming back." But each time you come back, there's a huge debt, there's a huge weight you place on other people, other beings.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us develop a sense of gratitude as well: to think of all the good that people have done for us. The simple fact that we're here alive has meant that people have had to make choices where they had to sacrifice. Starting with our parents—they had to make lots of sacrifices for us—and on through other people who had to go out of their way so that we could survive, we could learn, we could understand what it is to be a good person, a person of integrity. That's something you want to keep in mind as well: that you've got some debts.

The Buddha said the only person who's totally debt-free is an arahant. There are so many debts we have to repay. And if you keep coming back again and again and again, you're just piling up more debts.

So the Buddha has you keep that in mind. There's an interesting connection between gratitude and mindfulness. The word gratitude in Pali literally means, "knowing what was done." And mindfulness is something the Buddha defines as "the ability to remember what was done"—both the things you've done and the things other people have done for you. That ability to remember, that ability to appreciate what was done, is an important motivation for the practice. At the same time, it's part of the skill that you have to develop in order to get the right perspective on things as to what's skillful and what's not.

So that's another way of sparking desire.

And there are the positive contemplations: thinking about the positive things that come with the practice, realizing that this is a precious Dhamma that we have to practice here. We read about those who've gained awakening, the happiness they tell of, the sense of freedom, release. This is a legitimate way of motivating your practice to want to gain that release as well.

Sometimes they say that the Buddha doesn't talk about nibbana that much, but he actually has a lot to say about how good it is. What he doesn't do is to define it or try to pin it down in words, because it can't be pinned down. There's a long string of adjectives, a long strings of imagery that he uses to give a sense that it's secure, free, absolute happiness, totally beyond any kind of danger at all.

Another way of generating desire is to develop a sense of shame. One of the more unusual passages in the Canon is where the Buddha talks about three governing principles in the practice when you feel tempted to slack off.

The first two relate to the themes we've already discussed. One is the dangers of slacking off, realizing that here you've come, you've learned of a path that leads to true freedom, and now you're going to go falling back for a lesser happiness. Do

you really love yourself if that's the way you act? That thought is meant to develop a sense of the danger of slacking off.

The second governing principle is the appreciation of the Dhamma. This is a wonderful Dhamma we've got here, taught by someone totally free from greed, aversion, and delusion. It's timeless. That points to the positive aspect of the practice.

Then the third governing principle is the world. This is the unusual one. The Buddha says that there are people in the world who can read minds. How would you feel if they were reading your mind right now? Wouldn't you be ashamed? Or if they were watching your life, would you be proud that someone was watching and seeing all the wonderful things you do from moment to moment to moment? Or would you be ashamed of the times that you slack off?

So those are the three main ways the Buddha has us generate desire. One, through a sense of heedfulness or *samvega*: realizing the dangers of not practicing. The second is the developing confidence, seeing the positive things that do come from the practice. And third is the healthy sense of shame—healthy in the sense that it builds on a sense of self-esteem, that you wouldn't want to do anything that was beneath you.

So an important part of the practice is learning how to generate desire in these ways, to figure out which ones work for you—and to train yourself so that you're quick to respond. Don't be the worst horse.

The Buddha talks about five different kinds of horses. The best horse is the one that all you have to whisper "whip" into its ears and it'll do what you want it to do. With the second one, you actually have to show the whip. With the third one, you have to touch its skin with the whip. With the fourth, you have to go through the skin a little bit into the flesh. And the fifth is the one where the whip has to go all the way into the bone before the horse responds.

So don't wait around until things hit the bone before you say, "Gee, I've really got to get my act together here." If you simply hear about the dangers, i.e., you hear about the whip or if you hear about the good things that come with the practice, try to be the sort of person who responds immediately.

That way, your practice will have energy, the power to lead to the results that the Buddha promised.