

Generating Desire

November 28, 2008

Part of the definition of right concentration is that you seclude your mind from sensual thoughts, from sensual obsessions, and it's not easy. The mind likes to spend a lot of time planning sensual pleasures. A man once came to see Ven. Ananda and said, "I hear that the monks, even the young ones, train their minds to put aside sensual passion, sensual thoughts, sensual plans. I don't believe that. How can that be?" So Ananda took him to see the Buddha, and the Buddha said, "Well, even when I was a young monk it wasn't easy. My heart didn't leap at the idea of giving up sensual passions. But I realized that for the mind to gain stillness, to gain a sense of solidity, it would have to put sensual passion, sensual ideas aside, at least for the time being."

The way he did it was twofold: One was to think of the drawbacks of sensuality, and the other was to think of the rewards of renunciation. If we compare this to the factors of the path, it falls under right effort—as we chanted just now, *chandam janeti*, generating desire. Desire does have a role in the path: the desire to abandon any unskillful thoughts that have arisen, to prevent unskillful thoughts from arising again, to give rise to any skillful thoughts or mental qualities that haven't yet arisen, and to maintain and develop those that have. In each case, you have to generate the desire for the effort to happen. Try to get your mind on the side of the idea that this is what you want to do. This involves psyching yourself up, giving yourself reasons that actually motivate you to put aside your usual obsessions and to look for something better.

The texts recommend many different ways of doing this. You start with the Buddha's first method: learning to see the drawbacks of sensuality. The Buddha has lots to say on this topic, gives lots of analogies for understanding the drawbacks of sensuality: It's like a pit of burning embers, a drop of honey on the blade of a knife, a chain of bones without any meat. Once when I was in Laguna someone complained, "Why is there so much on the drawbacks of sensuality?" Because we're so strongly attached to sensuality. You have to keep hammering the point home that sensual desire carries heavy drawbacks: all the trouble that laypeople go through in work, for instance, working and working and working to get paid so that they'll have the money to buy pleasures. Then there's fear that they may not get paid. Or even if they do get paid, it's not going to be enough. Or it's going to get stolen. Or, as the texts say, kings or thieves will make off with it. Hateful heirs will make off with it. It's because of sensual desire that we get into wars and battles, even battles at home.

There are a lot of drawbacks to sensuality, and it's good to think about them on a regular basis. It helps incline the mind to the idea that maybe it *would* be good to put those thoughts aside and see if you can develop a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing that doesn't have to depend on them. It's not as if the Buddha is going to starve you. He gives you an alternative pleasure, one that's safe, that provides real nourishment. In the beginning it's hard because part of the mind doesn't want to settle down and work toward it. So you have to go on faith, on the conviction that this is something you really should want. That right there

may seem to be a contradiction: putting together the terms *should* and *want*. We think of wanting as something that happens naturally, and the shoulding as unnatural. But you *can* induce a desire—you do it all the time. So if you want to be truly happy, you should induce desires for the causes of true happiness.

Seeing renunciation as rest is another tactic for generating desire. The Canon contains a famous account of a former king who becomes a monk. He goes and sits under a tree, exclaiming, “What bliss, what bliss!” The other monks are afraid that he’s recalling his past pleasures as king, so they go tell the Buddha. The Buddha calls him into his presence and says, “I hear you’ve been sitting under a tree, exclaiming ‘What bliss, what bliss!’ What do you have in mind as you say this?” And the monk says, “Back when I was a king, I couldn’t sleep at night. Even though I had guards posted inside the palace, outside the palace, inside the capital city, outside the capital city, inside the countryside, and outside the borders of the countryside, I still couldn’t sleep at night for fear that I would be attacked and killed. But now I sit under a tree with my wants satisfied, my mind like a wild deer, feeling no fear from any direction: That’s the bliss I’m thinking about.”

That’s the bliss of renunciation, a possibility that doesn’t even occur to most people. We see this so many times: People who’ve amassed wealth, amassed power, realize that they’re in danger because of their wealth and their power. So they set up prisons for themselves—gated communities with walls, security cameras, watchmen, and guard dogs. Very few of them realize that they’d be a lot better off abandoning that wealth and learning how to sit happily under a tree in the woods with a mind like a wild deer.

So those are two ways of inducing the desire to let go of unskillful states and to develop skillful ones: seeing the drawbacks of sensuality and allowing your imagination to conceive of the rewards of renunciation. There are other ways of inducing desire as well. One is humor. The Canon has a sutta where the Buddha talks about the reasons why people are lazy and the reasons why they’re diligent. For lazy people it’s, say, if you haven’t had enough to eat, you tell yourself, “I’m weak. I’ve got to rest.” Or if you’ve just recovered from an illness, you say, “Oh, I’ve been sick, I’ve got to rest.” And so it goes: “Whatever, whatever, I’ve got to rest.” As for the reasons for being diligent, the external conditions are the same. Say you’ve been sick and now you’ve recovered a little bit. You tell yourself, “I don’t know: Maybe the illness could get worse, so I should try to practice now while I’ve got at least *some* strength.” Or you haven’t had much to eat. You realize, “My body’s not weighed down by food. I’m not drowsy. It’s great for practicing.” And so on down the line.

In other words, the externals are the same in each case. The reasons that some people see as obstacles to their practice, other people see as opportunities. The difference lies simply in the attitude they have toward them. The way the Buddha phrases these cases is humorous, for the lazy excuses are attitudes we all know too well. When you can laugh in a good-natured way at how your laziness justifies itself, it loses some of its power over you.

The Buddha also recommends using a sense of pride and honor as a reason for wanting to practice. For the monks, this means living up to the fact that you’re a monk. When you say you’re a contemplative, are you really a contemplative? Or are you just here as a tourist, checking it out, seeing what it’s like wearing robes, going for alms, playing the role of a monk? If you had any

sense of honor, you'd want to make your mind the mind of a monk, the mind of a contemplative.

This ties in with the motivation of compassion. You're here receiving alms and all these other requisites from people. You're living off their generosity. As a return act of kindness to your supporters, you want to keep practicing partly to pay back the debt, partly so that their gifts to you will bear great fruit for them. That's part of the way kamma works: If you purify your mind, those who support you will reap great rewards.

The Buddha also talks of developing a warrior's sense of pride and honor in your ability to master the practice. Monks, he says, are like five different kinds of warriors. There's the warrior who sees the dust of the approaching army and grows faint, runs away. There's the warrior who sees the top of the banner of the approaching army, feels faint, runs away. There's the warrior who actually sees the army running at him, hears the tumult, hears the noise of the army, gets faint, runs away. There's the soldier who gets engaged in hand-to-hand combat, gives up, loses. And then there's the soldier who comes out winning: doesn't get faint when he sees the dust of the approaching army, doesn't get faint when he sees the banner, hears the tumult, or actually engages in hand-to-hand combat. He comes out victorious.

These warriors are like five different kinds of monks. There's the monk who hears that there's a beautiful woman in that village over there. Just the thought that there are beautiful women out there is enough to make him give up the training. That's the one who grows faint on seeing the dust of the approaching army. Then there's the monk who gives up when he actually sees a beautiful woman: He's like the warrior who sees the top of the banner of the army, gets faint, runs away. Then there's the monk who faints on hearing the tumult of the approaching army, i.e., he's sitting out meditating under a tree and a woman comes up and teases him, makes fun of him, and he gives up the training. Then there's one who gives up when engaged in hand-to-hand combat—in other words, the woman actually comes up and throws herself all over him, so he gives up the training. The one who comes out victorious doesn't grow faint or give up with any of these things. He sticks with his resolve that he's going to try to overcome his sensual passion, regardless.

The Buddha teaches in this way to instill a sense of honor, a sense of pride that mastering this practice is an accomplishment. Some people look down on monks: There's one vipassana teacher I know whose highest praise for me is that I would have made a good layperson. For him, most monks are losers. But he's wrong. See that our ability to overcome sensuality is not a weakness; it's a strength. It requires a sense of honor to do this, a sense of pride and mastery. Of course, the problem with pride is that you tend to compare yourself with other people, but there are times when it serves a good purpose. And ultimately the Buddha tries to put a check on comparisons like that, reminding us that we're not here to compete with other people. We're here to compete with ourselves.

When he talks about the traditions of the noble ones—your ability to be content with whatever you get in terms of food, clothing, and shelter—he says that you're also careful not to compare yourself with other people who live more luxuriously, who are not so content. You don't try to exalt yourself or disparage others around this issue. You realize that you're here to overcome your own weakness, not theirs. As he says, when you're able to overcome your weakness

and heedlessness in this way, it's the same as when the moon released from a cloud illumines the world. Someone who maintains this tradition heedfully makes the world a brighter place.

The Buddha also makes comparisons with physical skills. Once, when Ven. Ananda was on his almsround, he passed some youths in the city of Vesali practicing their archery skills, learning how to shoot arrows through keyholes from a great distance. He went back and reported this to the Buddha, commenting that that was quite an impressive accomplishment. So the Buddha asked him, "Which is more difficult, to pierce a keyhole with an arrow, or to take a very fine hair and use it to pierce the tip of another very fine hair?" Ananda said, "Oh, the second skill is an even more amazing one." And the Buddha replied, "Even more amazing than that is the skill of being able to pierce the truths of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation." In other words, he reminded Ananda that this path requires a great deal of precision and skill. When you can accomplish it, you've mastered a great skill. Have pride in your craftsmanship.

So the Buddha uses a sense of honor and pride as a way of generating desire to develop skillful qualities in the mind and to abandon unskillful ones. It's a shame that in modern society the sense of honor seems to have wasted away as we become a society of consumers. There's not much honor in consuming. We take pride in amassing things, in conspicuous consumption, but that's the pride of a fool. Honorable pride, the pride that comes with a skill, seems to be disappearing from our society—and it's a real loss. The sense of honor that's required to develop a skill makes better people out of us.

If you can think of some skill you've mastered, and the sense of pride and accomplishment that came from having overcome whatever problems, whatever difficulties lay in your way, you can take that same sense of accomplishment and apply it to the practice: realizing that this is a much more demanding skill, but also much more rewarding, much more useful. The fact that it's demanding should simply spark you to even greater efforts, greater enthusiasm, so you can generate the desire that's such an essential part of right effort.

So instead of bemoaning the fact that you have to give up this or give up that, think of the good things that appear in your own mind when you have the strength to give them up. After all, renunciation is not only a skill but also a wise exchange, a wise trade. You're trading in something of little value for something of much greater value. You're trading candy for gold. You're doing something very difficult but very honorable.

Rather than feeling faint at the difficulty, you should stir yourself up to say, "Yes, I can do this." As Ananda says, this is the proper use of conceit and pride in the path: "Other people can do this, why can't I?" That's the way in which desire and conceit are actually part of the path. We usually think of them as things to be overcome and abandoned, but if they're properly used, they do have their role. So learn to use them whenever appropriate.