

Skillful Desire

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It's often assumed that the Buddha criticized desire of every form. After all, he said the three kinds of craving were the cause of suffering. But those three kinds of craving don't cover every kind of desire. In fact, he says all phenomena, all experience, come from desire. That includes skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind.

The only thing that doesn't come from desire is nibbana. That's not based on desire at all. But the path to nibbana *is* based on desire. Desire is part of right effort. And it's the first of the four bases of success. In many ways it's the most important of the four, because without desire the other ones don't develop.

A brahman once came to see Ven. Ananda and asked him, "This path that you teach, where does it lead?"

And Ananda said, "In one sense, it leads to the end of desire."

The brahman asked him, "How do you get to the end of desire?"

And Ananda listed the four bases of power, the four bases of success, starting with desire. The brahman said, "Wait a minute. There's no way you can put an end to desire by using desire."

And Ananda said, "I'll give you an analogy. Before you came to this park"—the park where Ananda was staying—"didn't you have the desire to come here?"

The brahman said, "Yes."

"And while you were walking here, did you have the desire to keep walking?"

"Yes."

"Now that you're here, where is that desire?"

"It's gone. Because I'm here, I don't need the desire anymore."

Then Ananda said, "That's the way it is with the practice. To get to the end you need the desire, but when you reach the end there's no more need for that desire. You can put it aside."

The problem with desire, of course, is that sometimes it can get in the way if you're focused too much on the results and not enough on the causes. That kind of desire can be an obstacle.

It's like driving to a mountain on the horizon. If you focus on the mountain all the time, you're going to drive off the road and never get to the mountain. You'll run into people or trees or run off the road. But if you're convinced that this is the road that goes to the mountain, you don't have to look at the mountain. You'll look at the road, give all of your attention to the road, all your desire to follow the road, and that'll get you there.

So as you're meditating, even though you may want to gain nibbana, gain jhāna—that's why you're here, you don't deny that—you don't focus on those things. Jhāna is not the object of jhāna. The object of jhāna is your breath. So focus all of your desire on the breath, to get to know the breath. Learn to convince yourself that this is something really important to do, something interesting, something you *want* to do.

You can think about the benefits that come to the body, the benefits that come to the mind.

For the benefits that come to the body: If the breath energy in the body is going well, then there are many diseases that can be cured simply by breathing properly. Even if they're not cured, they can be made lighter. When dealing with pains in the body, if you have the breath as your foundation, then you can be at one spot in the body while the pain's in another spot. You can use the good energy in your comfortable spot to spread through the pain, and many times it will help lessen the pain, or at least the tension around the pain. On days when you're tired, you can breathe in ways that give yourself more energy. On days when you're tense, you can breath in ways that make you more relaxed. So the breath can do a lot of good things for the body.

As for the mind, it can do even more good things. Simply having an alternative place to stay aside from your pain, aside from the sorrows and ups and downs of daily life, puts the mind in a much better position to deal with those things and not feel threatened by them. For instance, if you're sitting here with a pain that doesn't go away when you breathe through it, at least you've got another place to stay in the body. You can stay in the part you can make comfortable. Then, if you want to analyze the pain and understand it, you're coming from a position of strength.

When the mind has a sense of comfort inside, then it's not so willing to run

along with greed, aversion, delusion, fear, or any of the things that make it go off course.

My teacher had a student, a woman, who had cancer. And she had it for twenty years. She'd get cancer in one part of the body; they'd cut that part out. It'd spread to another part; they'd cut that part out. But even though her body was sick like that, her mind always seemed to be very stable. I visited her in the hospital one time, the day after she'd had a kidney removed, and she was sitting up in bed looking perfectly normal. Her eyes were bright. I asked her if there was any pain. She said there was pain, but that she didn't go into the pain. She stayed with the breath, she stayed with *Buddho*. As for her husband, though, he didn't meditate. And he was in a really bad condition because of her illness. He constantly worried about her, but she wasn't worried.

So having the breath as a friend can be really good for the mind, because it gives you a comfortable place to stay, a solid place to stay, if you know how to work with it. Then, when other things come up in the mind, you can see that you're not so hungry for them. All too often we're like a person standing in the sun by the side of the road. You're hot and tired and have no place to rest. Someone comes along in a car and says, "Jump in, let's go!" And you jump right in. You don't ask "Who are you, where are you going?" You figure that wherever he's going must be better than where you already are. And so you jump right in.

This is the way we tend to deal with our thoughts. Something comes driving up in the mind, and you just go with it. Sometimes it doesn't even invite you. You jump in on your own, thinking that it must be better than where you are. But if you already have a good place for the mind you stay, you can be selective. You can ask, "Who are you? Where are you going? Where is it going to take me?" If you see that it takes you someplace good, then you can go with it and come back safely. If it's going someplace that doesn't look so good, you can say, "No thanks," and just let it go.

This way, you can look into the intentions arising in the mind and decide which ones are worth going with and which ones are not. This puts you more in control. Instead of your thoughts running your mind, your mind is in charge of your thoughts. If a thought is insistent, you can figure out what spot in the body the thought is associated with—because there will be tensions associated with

every thought. Breathe right through the tension in that thought, and the thought will go away.

So these are some of the benefits that come for the body, the benefits that come for the mind when you stay with the breath, when you start studying the breath. So give all your attention to the breath, realizing that all the good things you want in your meditation are going to be found right here.

Don't have one eye on the breath and the other eye someplace else looking for what's going to happen down the line. "When are the results going to come? When am I going to see this? When is jhāna going to come?" You don't need to think those thoughts. Just get to like the breath. Become friends with the breath. Pay it some attention, in the same way you'd pay attention to a friend. When you're trying to make friends with a person, don't make it too obvious that you're using the person. You really want to have some compassion for the friend, be empathetic with the friend, be interested in the friend. And then the friend will be happy to help you.

So take your desire for happiness, take your desire for freedom from suffering, and focus it here on your breath. If you're going to get there, this is what you've got to know first. This is what you've got to empathize with first. This is what you've got to be friends with first. This friend will take you where you want to go. At the same time, you find that your desire to get to know the friend will lead to all the other bases for success. You'll be persistent as you keep coming back, coming back, coming back to the friend. You'll give your full attention to the friend, figuring out what needs to be done to make things better.

Those are all the bases of success right there. They all come from desire. The desire is the part that you have to provide and that you have to focus in the right place. When you do that, the other qualities will develop in a natural way.