

Training Your Desires

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All phenomena are rooted in desire—everything we experience, the Buddha said. And we desire happiness. So the question is, why don't we get the happiness we desire? Because our desires are ignorant. We're ignorant of the way things work.

We want to put in only a little effort, or no effort at all, and get a happiness that lasts. And we've learned, of course, at least to some extent that that doesn't always work. There's a good part of the mind that really doesn't like that. It's when we realize that we have to change our understanding of what works and doesn't work, and that we have to train our desires: That's when wisdom begins.

We realize that we can't get everything we want the way we want it. We have to learn to choose what we really want more than anything else and focus on that. As the Buddha says, if you see that a greater happiness comes from letting go of a lesser happiness—and if you're wise—you're willing to let go of the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater.

There was an English scholar who translated that verse one time, and in a footnote he said that this couldn't possibly be what the verse means. It was just too simple, too obvious. Well, it may be obvious, but it's really not the way people live. We want to win at chess and keep all our pieces. We want our major desires and we want our little desires; we don't want to have to give anything up that we want. It's when we realize we *do* have to give certain things up, and we have to prioritize, that we begin to bring some knowledge to our desires.

The Buddha said it's a several-step process. First, you realize that you need some training from other people who are more experienced in what brings true happiness than you are. And you have to look for the right people. You find someone who seems reliable and you have to watch that person for a good while. Ask yourself if there's anything in this person that would make this person want to claim knowledge of things he or she didn't know. Would this person ever get anyone else to do something that was not in that other person's best interest?

It takes a while to observe a person to be able to judge this. But if you're truly serious about trying to find true happiness, you have to be responsible about who you choose to hang out with, who you choose to listen to, and who you choose as your friends. You see so many cases of people finding out that their teachers are unreliable. But when you ask them what led up to the revelation, it turns out that there were warning signs they chose to ignore.

So there's a certain responsibility placed on the student to try to find a good teacher. Then you spend time with the teacher. You have a sense that the teacher is trustworthy, and you listen to what the teacher has to say. You think it over. And when it makes sense, that's when the Buddha says you begin to have a desire to do the practice because the example of the teachers shows you that it is possible to find true happiness, a higher happiness than what you already have. That gives you some impetus to want to make some changes in your behavior. Then you listen to the teachings, and they have to make sense. A really good teaching opens up your perspective on what true happiness is so that you're willing to let go of lesser things.

This is why the Buddha defined ignorance as ignorance of the four noble truths—not ignorance of the three characteristics, ignorance of the four noble truths—because they talk about desire. There's the unskillful desire that causes suffering. Then there's the skillful desire in the noble eightfold path, under the factor of right effort, that leads to the end of suffering. And the skillful desire wants to develop all skillful qualities in the mind and abandon all unskillful qualities. That's the kind of desire you want to encourage.

But the four noble truths also set out a possibility that it is possible to find an ultimate happiness that's unchanging and true—total freedom. That is a human possibility. And the four noble truths set that out clearly. They don't say, for instance, that you simply have to accept the fact that there's going to be change in life, so just accept the change. Or things are impermanent and stressful; accept the impermanence and stress. Things are not self; accept that they're not self and just content yourself with that. That's not what they say.

The four noble truths say that ultimate happiness is possible, and it can be gained through human effort. And the proper way to respond to that is to see it as a challenge. Here's a possibility that you can do. Do you want to accept that challenge? If so, look at the other things you've been doing in life that would get in the way. Can you learn how to say No to them?

As the Buddha said, a measure of your wisdom is when there are things you like to do, but you know are going to lead to suffering or harm, and you can say no to them. Things you may not like to do, but you know are going to lead to long-term welfare and happiness: Teach yourself how to want to do those things. In this way, you're training your desires. And you want to train them in a direction of a happiness that's really reliable because it is possible. It can be done. There are people who've found it—good people, reliable people.

Now, you can't see their happiness. Ajaan Maha Boowa said that if you could take nibbana out and show it to everybody, that's the only thing anybody would

ever want. Everything else in the world would pale by comparison. But you can't see someone else's experience of it. But you look at the people who seem to have found it, and they seem to be good people. That's the beginning of conviction. It's not knowledge, but it's conviction, the conviction that gives force to your desire to want to practice more.

Otherwise, it might seem that nobody in the world is really awakened, or the best anybody can do is just accept things as they are and not try to make any changes. Then what kind of effort would you want to put out? It would be very discouraging. There'd be no reason to make any effort at all, no desire to make any effort at all, and you'd be stuck where you are in a situation that's really not acceptable.

When the Buddha talks about accepting things, it's not accepting just where you are and staying there. It's accepting that you have responsibility for shaping your life and accepting that things could be better if you trained yourself. That way, if you're going to look for the cause of suffering, you have to look inside.

That's another message from the four noble truths. Again, it's a message that we may not like to hear. We like to blame our suffering on other people. But think about it. If your suffering comes from other people, what are you going to do? Are you going to change them? And how many people in the world would you have to change? There'd be no end to it. But as the Buddha points out, suffering comes from our ignorant craving. And that's something we can do something about.

Ignorance may be long-lasting—as the Buddha said, you can't trace back in time to find the point where ignorance began—but it doesn't have any right to lay claim to you. Ajaan Suwat's image is of taking a light into a place that's been dark for who knows how long. The darkness can't say, "We've been here ever since time began, so this light has no right to chase us away." As soon as there's light, the darkness has to go. As soon as there's knowledge, your ignorance goes.

Regardless of how ignorant you've been in the past, it's something you can change. The four noble truths set a high standard, but they also promise a lot. They provide a path we can follow, and it leads to true happiness—ultimate, unchanging, unlimited happiness. And when you think about that, then whatever is required in the path doesn't seem so onerous. It doesn't seem so scary. It doesn't seem so large. The happiness we want is much larger than what we have; we have to keep that in mind at all times.

So when you find yourself getting lazy, ask yourself if this is the best you can do. Is this how you show your desire for true happiness, by making excuses for your laziness? Try to encourage the internal chatter that the Buddha talked about when he cited the reasons for laziness and the reasons for being diligent. The

outside situations are always the same. You may say, “I’ve been travelling a lot,” or “I’ve been sick,” or “I didn’t get much to eat this morning,” and make that excuse for not practicing. But you can also say, “I was travelling a lot. I didn’t have a chance while I was travelling to practice, but now I have the chance.” “I’ve been sick. I didn’t have the chance when I was sick, but now I have the chance to practice.” “When I don’t eat much, the body’s light. It’s not weighed down by all that food—a good time to practice.”

It’s how you talk to yourself that’s going to make all the difference. That’s where you see wisdom in action. So try to get some wise voices in your internal conversation. Inform them with the four noble truths, and teach them to train your desires so that they really do lead to the happiness you want—or, as the Buddha says, a better happiness than your desires can imagine.

But at the very least, the desires that try to imagine that kind of happiness: Encourage those. And then make sure those desires actually do take control of your actions so that, in accepting what really does lead to happiness, you can do what’s needed to get there.