

A Passion for the Path

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When the Buddha first explained the four noble truths, he also explained that each truth had a duty. Suffering was to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation was to be realized, and the path was to be developed. At another point in his career, he explained “comprehension” a little bit further: He said that you comprehend suffering to the point of dispassion. That’s what it means to comprehend it: You develop dispassion for it. It sounds strange: dispassion for suffering. We don’t usually think that we’re passionate about suffering, but as he pointed out, we suffer because of five clinging aggregates, and there’s passion right there in the clinging.

We cling to our body, our form, our sense of the body felt from the inside and other forms we see outside. We cling to our feelings, our perceptions, our thought fabrications, our consciousness. It’s because we cling to these things that we suffer. That’s what suffering is—and we’re passionate about it until we comprehend what’s going on.—in other words, we understand them to the point that we realize that they’re really not worth the passion that goes into them—and that’s how suffering ends. But this doesn’t mean that we sit around trying to be dispassionate about everything all at once. After all, there are four truths, and there are other duties that go with the other truths, especially the duty to practice, the duty to develop the path, and that requires a certain amount of passion. You have to learn how to motivate yourself to do this, to give rise to passion for the path.

In every case, our motivation may not be pure as we begin, but as we become more and more self-observant, as concentration gets stronger, and our discernment gets more precise, we begin to see that there are things we’re holding onto that are causing us to suffer and if we don’t let them go, there are going to be problems. What that means is that there are things associated with the path in the beginning stages that we begin to realize don’t have to be there as we get further along on the path. We’re carrying extra suffering into the path. We don’t need to, but that’s what a lot of the actual development of the path is. It’s like going on a trip and deciding that you’re going to take lots and lots of luggage, to make sure every possible problem is covered. Then, of course, lugging all that luggage around becomes a problem itself. It’s a real burden. You have to learn how to stop and take things out of luggage, and sometimes you have to throw whole trunks away.

The path is part of our process of stripping things down. That’s the scary part sometimes. We look at the path and say, “I’m going to have to give up this, I’m going to have to give up that, and gee, I don’t think I’ll be able to do that and maybe I can go back and do something else better.” Actually, you’re not asked to give anything up until you see it as suffering, develop some dispassion for it, and realize you don’t really need it. A lot of our suffering comes from thinking we can’t live without things that are actually burdensome. When you develop the path, you provide yourself with an alternative source of food, an alternative nourishment. There’s a sense of well-being that comes when you can look at your actions and see that you haven’t harmed anybody; a sense of well-being that comes from getting the mind to settle down and be still; the well-being that comes when you begin to discern things in the mind that are really unnecessary, you can drop them, and there’s a sense of lightness.

Instead of having a whole set of cutlery and a whole box of tools, you learn that you’ve got one tool that you’re really skillful at and you can use in all sorts of different ways. That means you don’t have to lug the other tools around any more. You can put them aside.

But in the beginning, you need the full set, part of which means that you have to motivate yourself to be passionate about the path, using whatever ways of thinking you find help get you on the path.

The Buddha recommends, first of all, being heedful: realizing that if you don’t develop good qualities of the mind, there’s going to be a lot of extra suffering down the line. One of the reasons why the Buddha has you contemplate aging, illness, and death is that these dangers are lying ahead of all of us—you and everyone else. As with aging: You look at your body and say, “I don’t see what in here is going to age, it seems to be going perfectly fine”—but then it just does it. It starts showing its tendency to age without asking anyone’s permission. What’s actually happening is that the body has been aging all along. It’s simply that its repair powers have been good. But as you get older those repair powers begin to break down. Things don’t get repaired as well as they used to and, bit by bit by bit, they go.

You may have seen that video online, where they take a picture of a young woman and they take comparative

pictures of other members of her family over time to see how they age, and then they can figure out how she's going to age. As you watch the video, at first nothing seems to be happening. Slight, slight, slight changes happen, but they're very slow, but then, as you get toward the end, the changes get faster, and faster, and faster as things break down more quickly. This lies in wait for all of us.

Then there's illness. Every part of the body has illnesses associated with it. The ear leaves you open to eye diseases, the ear leaves you open to ear diseases, and so on down through every part of the body.

And, of course, death. The fact that you're born means that there's going to be death. You have to ask yourself: Are you ready for these things? When the body starts breaking down, are you going to suffer or are you not going to suffer? Can you change the fact of aging and death? No. But you can change the qualities of your mind. So develop good qualities of mind. That will enable you not to suffer. That's one of the rewards of the path.

That's one way of motivating yourself to develop a sense of enthusiasm for the path: that this is the one way out, the one way that's going to keep you from suffering from these inevitable things.

Another motivation is compassion: one, compassion for yourself; two, compassion for others. The more you're able to take care of your quality of the mind, the less burden you'll be on yourself, and the less burden you'll be on others.

You've probably seen this in people as they get old and sick. They start thrashing around. They either get really nasty to the people around them or start bemoaning their fate—all of which makes things more difficult for people looking after them. Whereas if you're in control so that the mind doesn't get upset with the changes in the body, that's a gift to yourself and to other people as well.

Another motivation is pride: the sense of pride that comes with mastering the path. This is a healthy sense of pride. Most of us are concerned with the pride that comes from lording it over other people, seeing that we're better than they are. But this is not a matter of being better than anybody else. This is simply a matter of learning to master your own mind.

So whatever emotion you find is helpful to motivate you, it's part of the path. It may be part of the luggage that you're carrying right now that you are going to be able to drop at some point. But if it's useful now, carry it with you.

Remember: We're not just sitting here trying to clone dispassion. We're trying to figure out which things are helpful and we encourage ourselves to have a passion for them. As the Buddha said, you try to delight in developing skillful qualities and to delight in abandoning unskillful ones. Now, delight, of course, is something you're going to put aside eventually. But for right now, it may be part of the luggage you need, so carry it with you. The path is something you have to fabricate, and fabrication comes from passion. So look at right view and right resolve and all the other factors of the path as things you want to get passionate about. You want to do these things really well.

Because what do we have as human beings? We've got this life. And as the Buddha pointed out, there are two kinds of searches to which you can devote your life: the search that's noble and the search that's not noble. The not-noble search is looking for happiness in things that are going to age, grow old, and die—which means that you spend all your life working, working, working, trying to get something, and then it just slips through your fingers. You die; they die. That kind of life leaves nothing behind but a bad after taste. The noble search, though, is one that looks for something that doesn't age, doesn't grow old, doesn't die. So even though you're going to lose this body and lose all the qualities of the mind, you won't lose the one thing that doesn't die. You're going to lose the things you're going to lose anyhow, but if you can get this one thing—the deathless—that makes all the difference in the world.

The Buddha talks about cessation as part of the attainment. It's interesting: cessation/attainment. What he means is that greed, aversion, and delusion cease. Your passion for fabrication ceases at that point, because it's done the work it needs to do. But that doesn't mean there's nothing left. There is the awareness of awakening, and when you hit it, you realize that it really is the end of suffering. At that point you've thrown away all your baggage, but you've got something much more valuable that you don't have to lug around. It's just there.

So. Take what you need for the journey and if you find that things are getting a little heavy, ask yourself, "What are you holding onto that's weighing you down?" When you've ferreted it out, it's in your best interest to let it go. Learn to develop some dispassion for things like that. They may be old things that you feel nostalgia for, old things that you feel that you can't imagine how you can live without. But if they're weighing you down, they're unnecessary, because the mind doesn't need to be weighed down. That's something that's hard for us to think about. We may have a sense that our minds carry a weight, but we often just accept it. We don't know what it would be like not to have

that weight, but the Buddha said that it is possible. One of the images of the arahants is that they're like birds that fly, with nothing to weigh them down at all.