

## *Skillful Desire*

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When the Buddha describes suffering and stress, he starts with some things that we're all used to, we're all very familiar with: aging, illness, death, separation, not getting what you want. His explanation of the last point is interesting. He says that, as people who are born in this world, we don't want aging, we don't want illness, we don't want separation, we don't want death. But these things are not to be gotten by wanting. You can't simply just want them not to happen. Once you've been born, they'll happen for sure.

But there's another place where he says, "All things are rooted in desire, all phenomena are rooted in desire." The word for thing or phenomenon here—*dhamma*—can be mean good or bad things. It can even include the path. The only thing that's beyond the category of *dhamma* is nibbana. So the path is based on desire, and whatever else our desire or whatever else our motivations for following the path, we're here because we do want to get beyond aging, illness, death, and separation.

That desire may be a form of suffering, but it's also our motivation for getting on the path. We choose the path because we realize that simply wanting an escape from these things is not going to make it happen. But we take that desire, we focus it properly, and that's how we give rise to the path. As when you're getting the mind concentrated right now: There has to be the desire to do it. It's not going to happen on its own. But simply wanting it to happen is not going to make it happen, either.

You have to take that desire and focus it on the right steps. Try to breathe in a way that's comfortable. Find a spot in the body where it's easiest to remain focused on the breath. Watch over your breath so that it stays comfortable at that spot. When the sense of comfort seems relatively steady, you expand it. Think of it seeping through all the nerves and blood vessels in the body, as far as you can go. And then see if you can maintain that sense of expanded ease.

What you're doing here is that you're taking your desire and you're combining it with skill. As with every skill, that fact that you develop it comes from having preferences: We prefer lack of suffering over suffering, lack of harm over harm. It's inevitable that we're going to have preferences and desires around the path. And to develop the path requires a certain amount of clinging. You have to hold onto this.

We all know that image of the raft: You use the raft to cross the river and, once you've gotten to the other side of the river, you don't carry the raft with you. You leave it there in case someone else might need it. But while you're crossing the river, you've got to hold on. If you don't, you get swept away.

Sometimes you hear of people getting all tied up in knots thinking, "Well, I shouldn't have any preferences or I shouldn't have any clinging in the path." The *whole path* is motivated by preferences, and there has to be an element of clinging, an element of desire,

if you're going to stick with it. These things are a necessary part of the path—but they are just a part. The path has to include more. We don't sit here simply with the clinging and the desire. We're trying to figure out what's the best way to put them to use. We don't mix up cause and effect.

Trying to practice without desire is like saying, "Well, I understand that when people are full, they don't eat. So I'll get myself full by not eating." It doesn't work that way. To get to that state of fullness, you have to eat. Once you've reached fullness, okay, then you don't have to force yourself not to eat. There's no desire to eat anymore. And it's the same with the path. The practice of concentration is our food to give us energy along the path. You have to fix your food well, and then the path will take you where you want to go.

Otherwise, we live in this world and, as the chant says, we're a slave to craving. Wherever our cravings pull us, there we go. The image they give in Thailand is of a water buffalo with a ring in its nose. You tie a rope to the ring, pull on the rope, and you can pull the buffalo in any direction you want. Its nose hurts so much when you pull that it's got to follow. The same with our craving: It pulls us along, so we have to figure out which of our cravings and desires are ones that are worth following. Learn how to give in to those, and to cut the rope pulling you in the wrong directions.

There will be a certain amount of stress as we follow the path. It's not an easy path all of the time. It's not hard all the time. You have to be ready for whatever comes up. When they talk about the great way being not difficult for those with no preferences, what it means is that whatever comes up, you're ready for it. You don't complain and say, "I'd rather have a smooth, easy path right now. Why am I having this setback? Why do I have to work so hard?"

The mind is a complex thing. You may be making progress in one area and falling back in another—and it's normal. There are times when you have to push yourself hard, and a part of the mind puts up a lot of resistance. Well, if you don't face up to that resistance and learn how to work your way through it, you never make any progress. Other times when it's easy, okay, take advantage of it when it's easy.

And one of the skills we're developing along the path is this ability to give yourself the nourishment you need so that when things get hard, you've got the strength to draw on. When they're easy, you stockpile things for the next time it's going to be hard. In other words, you really work on your concentration. Don't get complacent—so that when the time comes and you need that extra energy, it's there.

So this type of clinging, this kind of desire is a really useful part of the path.

And remember that even equanimity is something that has to be fabricated. It, too, is based on desire. It means several things. One, when you meet up with something that's difficult, you remain equanimous. You don't get upset about it. You just do what needs to be done. When there are areas where you can't do anything, you learn how to treat those with equanimity, too, so that you don't waste your energy, energy that you could otherwise devote to areas where you *could* make a difference.

So even equanimity involves clinging, even equanimity involves desire. It's simply a

matter of learning how to use these things skillfully.

That's how you stay on the path. If you get off the path, you've got just more aging, more illness, more death, waiting for you over and over and over again, more separation over and over again. You have to ask yourself: "Haven't you had enough?"

If you want a way out, as the Buddha said, you can't get it simply by wishing but if you take that desire to get out and then focus in it on a path that actually works, you'll get the results you want. And this is what the Buddha's offered to us: a path that works.

As he says, the normal reaction to suffering and stress is, on the one hand, bewilderment, and on the other, a search for someone who might know the way out. He's offering to be that someone, showing us the path as a way of ending that bewilderment and giving our search the proper direction to make it a noble search.

So you don't just content yourself with makeshift things, a makeshift happiness. You focus on finding a happiness that can really last, that you can truly depend on. Now that's not something you make. The path is made up out of things that are fabricated. "Fabrication," here, means that you take what you've got and work with it. You're not making up things totally out of thin air. You've got some good potentials already. You learn how to maximize those potentials, look after them, so they grow.

It's like looking after a tree. You've discovered that in your field you may have some weeds, so you get rid of the weeds. But you've also got some valuable saplings growing, saplings that when they grow into trees can give you wood, trees that can give you fruit. So you look after the saplings. You don't try to pull on them to make them grow faster, because that would kill them. But you nourish them—keep the weeds away, make sure everything is nicely watered—and the trees will grow on their own.

That's how the path develops. There are some things you do and there are some things that come about as a result of what you've done. To see which is which requires that you experiment, try various approaches. You may find yourself pulling on a few trees. Well, those trees are going to die. The next time you find a good tree, don't pull on. Learn how to nurture it.

Over time, you get a sense of what really works, what you've got to do and what will happen as a result, so that you're not just sitting here with the desire or the wish not to suffer. You're taking that desire, that wish, and putting it to good use. At the same time, you're not playing a game of pretending you don't have these desires in hopes that lack of desire will get you to the goal. If you didn't really want to find peace of mind, you wouldn't be here. You'd be off someplace else. And if you lie to yourself about not having that desire, how are you going to understand any of your desires? What's needed is simply learning how to approach your desires and wishes in a mature way.

That's how we get what we truly want. The heart's true desire is for a happiness that's reliable, a well-being that's reliable, something you can really depend on, something that's harmless—something that doesn't age, grow ill, or die. And, as the Buddha said, there *is* a path to just those things. So do your best to follow it with skill, because it really does pay off.

