

Desires Have Their Reasons

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“All dhammas are rooted in desire.” It’s a fascinating statement, and one that’s all too often overlooked. What it means is that everything you experience starts with desire. The mind is not simply on the passive side of things. It’s more on the active side. It’s out looking for things. Or you could say the heart is out hunting for things.

The Buddhist tradition doesn’t make a distinction between mind and heart. What this means is that your desires have their reasons—which is to say the heart has its reasons. Your desires are out looking for something because they think something is worth looking for.

A lot of our initial reasons are pretty raw. You’re hungry. You need something to erase the pain of the hunger. And then as you get more and more experience, you have more and more reasons for why you’re looking for something in particular. What kind of hunger, whether it’s physical or mental, are you trying to assuage? This has its good and its bad side. The bad side, of course, is that hunger is often blind, or at least, its eyesight is blurry. You may think something is satisfying, but it’s not really. And you don’t look at the long term consequences of what you’re doing.

A lot of our desires are focused on a very narrow perception of things— blocking out huge areas of our experience. We take it for granted that there’s going to be a lot of stress and a lot of pain in our search for pleasure, and we learn how to turn a blind eye to it. But the Buddha’s basically saying, “No, don’t. Step back from your desires.” And fortunately, because we have so many different desires, we can step back. If you had just one desire, you’d just keep going and going and going and going, running along with it.

But the mind has been around long enough to realize there are a lot of different things worth wanting. This is where you get to the good side. Because your desires have their reasons, you can actually reason with some of them. When you can point out that what they want is not really worth it, that the effort put into looking for something entails way more pain than it does gratification, and if you offer an alternative, the mind will desire the better alternative. This is why we can train our minds. And this is what the Buddha’s teachings are for: learning to train our desires. Ultimately, as Ananda once told that brahman, the Buddha wants to take us to a point where we can finally be beyond desire, because wherever the desire is, there’s always a sense of lack. It’s built into the desire.

The Buddha wants to take us to a place where there’s no longer any sense of lack; where there’s nothing lacking. But to get there, you have to cultivate your skillful desires. That question, “What, when I do it, will lead to long term welfare and happiness?” is basically giving guidance to your desires. One, it’s telling you that there is such a thing as long term happiness. The belief that the teaching on inconstancy means that things just come and go and come and

go so nothing's really lasting, it's just like waves coming in off the ocean, and so because you know a wave will come, well, it's going to go, so don't get upset about the waves, even the waves you don't like: That's not the Buddha's approach. He's basically saying there are long term types of happiness. And they're worth trying to satisfy.

But there's also long term pain, so you want to be very careful about how you act. That realization is the beginning of heedfulness. And it includes the realization that your actions are going to make a difference. That's also an important part of the discernment. Actions have their consequences. And you have your choice as to what to do.

The four noble truths give even more guidance. They point out the kind of desires that are not worth following: desires for sensuality, desires for becoming; desires for non-becoming. For instance, with becoming: You want to become a certain person in a certain world. And up to an extent, that's useful. But then you're going to reach the limitations of becoming.

As the Buddha discovered, if you want to destroy the kind of becoming you've got, you immediately take on a new becoming, that of the destroyer. So you need a path that takes you through that conflict and avoids both sides, desire for becoming and desire for non-becoming. That's what the noble eightfold path is all about. But that, too, has desire, built into right effort. And there will be a type of becoming involved with that desire: the desire to act skillfully, to give rise to skillful qualities that aren't there yet; to maintain them and develop them when they are; the desire not to allow unskillful things to arise and to abandon them if they do. So the path is basically guidance for your desires.

An important part of the path, of course, is concentration, which is what we're working on right now. We're trying to put the mind in a position where it's got a good desire, a desire that allows it to see clearly. Most of our desires rush past things. Well, here's a desire to settle down, just be very still, so you can see these movements of the mind. The ajaans talk about them a lot. Luang Puu Dune talks about how the mind goes flowing out. That's the cause of suffering. Ajaan Lee identifies these outflows with the effluents. There's a desire that arises in the mind and then goes flowing out to meet up with an object. And then the mind changes, based on the desires it follows. The world around it changes as well. You can see, for instance, that if someone gambles a little bit, it's no big deal. But when they start gambling more and more and more, they become a different person—and the world they live in becomes a different world, too.

As for positive desires, you can start meditating a little bit and it doesn't make much of a difference. But if you really dedicate yourself to it, you become a new person. People you used to like to hang out with, you don't particularly find that interesting anymore. And other people you were not interested in before suddenly become more interesting. You want to be able to see this. Getting the mind settled in right here gives you a good place to see it because you've got something good to stay with right here.

This way, when the option comes up to go someplace else, you can say, "Wait a minute. What am I going to lose if I leave this?" Otherwise, if you're in a bad situation and someone comes along and says, "Hey, come and join me," you're not too picky about the questions you ask because you're not happy where you are. So you're willing to say, "Well, whatever," which sometimes can be fortunate and sometimes, often, is not. But if you're in a good position and someone comes along and says, "Hey, let's go down to the garbage dump." You say, "No, I've just been there before. I've got a better place to stay now."

So, the Buddha's giving you a good place to stay. And because it's still, you can see the little movements in the mind, the ones that start out seeming kind of innocent but then take on a different cast when you follow them. It's like that movie, "The Gremlins." Those little fuzzy things, they look so nice. And they can eat you up. Or, as in one of the few science fiction stories I read, these astronauts are going through a solar system. They've got a meter on their rocket ship that tells them: Are the inhabitants of this planet friendly or unfriendly? So they approach one planet and the meter is indicating that the inhabitants are very friendly. As they get closer and closer to the surface, the friendliness meter keeps going higher and higher and higher. Finally, they land. These little furry things come running around, climbing up on the side of the rocket. And the meter is saying, "Extremely friendly," to the point where it's pegging out. So the astronauts open up the doors and the furry things come in and they ate them all up.

In other words, things that seem friendly may be friendly because they want to take advantage of you. So you've got to watch out for these little things in the mind that seem so innocent and friendly. And that's what concentration enables you to do: to see the little movements.

When you've had enough experience, you begin to see how what seems innocent to begin with is not always so innocent as it develops. Like the little soft fuzzy vines in one of the suttas. A seed has landed next to a tree. And the tree deva is kind of concerned. And the other devas come around and are even more concerned. But then they try to comfort the tree deva. They say, "Well, maybe it's not going to grow. Maybe a peacock will eat it. Maybe it's not even a seed." The deva, however, sees that it is a seed and nothing eats it. It starts growing and wrapping its tender tendrils around the tree. The deva wonders, "Why were they so adamant in comforting me? It's soft and tender, this vine coming around the tree." Of course, the vine grows and grows and grows and finally strangles the tree. That's when the deva realizes, "Oh, this is why my friends were so apprehensive."

So when you've had experience with vines like that, you want to be in a position where you know, "Okay. This is what the first signs are like. You've got to get rid of it." Concentration enables you to see that.

And because you're well fed with the concentration, you can reason with your less skillful desires. It's because they have their reasons that you can reason with them. There was that old split in ancient philosophy. Plato taught that desires had no reason at all. They were pure id,

pure want, and reason had to beat them down. But the Stoics said, “No, your desires have their reasons. This is why you can actually train them.” In this case, Buddhism sides with the Stoics. Your desires have their reasons, because they all want happiness. It’s just that some of them are not all that skillful and not all that clear-sighted or far-sighted. When you make the clear-sighted members of the mind more powerful, they can start understanding the tricks of the unskillful desires and reason with them.

And so as the Buddha said, you want to be able to see things as they arise; as they pass away; to see what sparks them—because all too often what sparks them is something totally irrelevant. But you’ve made the connection. You feel this little funny feeling in your hand, this little funny feeling in the heart area or the stomach area, and you go for something right away: a particular line of thought, a particular type of action. And it’s totally random that you’ve made that connection. So you want to see the randomness and the arbitrariness of that, because that weakens the sense that this is inevitable.

Then you look at the desire passing away. Why? Sometimes the mind just loses interest. Something else comes in. You forget. As you watch this, you begin to see that these things driving your life are really arbitrary. You begin to grow disillusioned with them. Then you look for the allure. Why is it that you go for these things? Then you can compare the allure with the drawbacks, and see that the allure is pretty small and pretty blind; or the drawbacks can be pretty huge. That’s when you want to look for the escape. In some cases, concentration will be the escape. It’ll give you the chance to find a better thing to do, a better thing to go for than what you’ve been going for in the past. And through concentration, then you can develop even deeper levels of dispassion for your old desires, for an even better escape.

So you’re basically teaching your desires to have better reasons. You’re teaching your heart to have better reasons. And working with the breath is a really good way of doing this. Not only does it provide you with a state of concentration, but it also helps you see how sometimes your desires highjack the energy in your body—put a squeeze on your nerves, as they say in Thailand—to make you do things that part of you knows are not all that skillful. But now you can resist the squeeze. You can fill out the breath energy in the body and by doing so, you’ve deprived your desires of one of their more underhanded tricks.

So allow yourself to desire concentration. Allow yourself to desire the practice because that’s desire on the good side. After all, when the Buddha said that dhammas are rooted in desire, he meant not only unskillful dhammas, but also skillful ones.

The one thing that’s *not* rooted in desire is nibbana. That lies outside. That’s the ending of all dhammas. But to get there requires desire. It requires, as Ananda says in another sutta, it requires conceit: seeing that other people have done this. They’re human beings. I’m a human being. They can do it. Why can’t I? Because that, of course, is another one of the tricks that your unskillful desires play: They say, “Well, other people may be able to do it, but you’re not

capable.” So don’t believe that. You are capable. The Buddha didn’t teach anything that human beings can’t do.

You have it within yourself. Here’s the opportunity. He talked about these currents flowing out of the mind as being like an ocean. Here’s a lifesaver in the ocean for you. The ocean, of course, comes from your own currents flowing out, flowing out. But, as the Buddha said, there is a shore beyond these currents. And he’s offering you a raft to take you over. The effort to go across, of course, requires a certain amount of desire. But once you’ve gotten to the other side, you don’t need those desires anymore. That’s when it gets really good. There’s nothing lacking anymore.