

Learning from Desire

February 12, 2019

That phrase in the chant just now, “Those who don’t discern suffering”: It sounds strange. You’d think that everybody discerns suffering. Babies know suffering. They know enough to cry. Even common animals know when they’re in pain. But that’s not what the Buddha’s referring to. There are the kinds of suffering we all know about, and he lists them when he talks about the noble truth of suffering: aging, illness, death. He adds birth, which may be a surprise to some, but of course, people who’ve been through childbirth know that there’s a lot of pain, both for the mother and for the child. There’s the pain of being separated from what you love, having to live with what you don’t love, not getting what you want. All these are things we know.

But then the Buddha says something unexpected. He says, “When you boil it all down, it’s the five clinging-aggregates.” To see that, he says, is to discern suffering.

We also need to see suffering’s cause, which he says is the craving that leads to becoming.

How are we going to see these things?

By meditating: first, getting the mind to see what these aggregates are and how we cling to them; and then second, seeing, when there’s a state of becoming, what kind of desire leads there. Because with the aggregates, you’ve got what? You’ve got the form of the body. Okay, we’re going to focus on that as we breathe. We breathe in, breathe out, focusing on the breath. Then there’s feeling—the different feelings of pain there may be in the body—but we’re also trying to develop a feeling of pleasure by the way we breathe and the way we focus on the breath. Perception: the labels we apply to things, the images we hold in mind, the ways we communicate from one part of the mind to another with images and words. And so we have perceptions about the breath: Where is the breath flowing? When the breath comes in, where does it come in? How do you know a sensation of breath?

Then there’s fabrication, the intention to do this and that, along with the inner conversation we engage in: what the Buddha calls directed thought and evaluation. So we’re thinking about the breath and evaluating whether the breath is good enough to settle down with; and if it’s not, what to do to change it and how to change it. You can change the breath in ways that are not skillful—for instance, putting a lot of squeeze on it. But that makes it uncomfortable. You have to learn just the right touch. All this is part of that inner conversation. And then

there's the conversation about how to take that sense of well-being that comes with the breath and then getting the best use of it by letting it spread through the body.

And finally there's consciousness, which is the awareness of all these things.

So all five aggregates are right there in the concentration.

And the question is, how are you going to get the mind into concentration without clinging? And the answer is, you're not. You're going to need to cling, but you're going to cling for the purpose of understanding. It's the same with desire, the same with craving: You need to employ these things in order to get the mind into concentration. And as you employ them, you get to know them well. I've known people who say, "Well, if you try to get the mind into concentration, or you want to get the mind into concentration, then it's desire and clinging and craving; and there's going to be a sense of self. And we all know the Buddha says there shouldn't be a sense of self." But that's short-circuiting the path right there. The Buddha's path is strategic. We're using things that eventually we're going to let go of. And we're going to be able to let go of them because we use them. In other words, using them skillfully is how we learn about them.

That issue with the craving that leads to becoming: On the one hand, you've got the craving to get the mind into concentration, which is a state of becoming. On the other hand, there'll be other cravings to go someplace else, other states of becoming. As the mind loses interest in the concentration, loses interest in the breath, it'll go someplace—either to another thought-world or into a world of drowsiness.

A drowsy state, too, is a state of becoming. It's based on the desire to have some rest. All too often we come to the meditation feeling really tired, and all we can think of is how much we'd like to get the mind just to be quiet for a while and not have to think about anything, not have to do any work. So as soon as there's a sense of ease and well-being, we wallow in it and we get drowsy or we drift into delusion concentration. So there's the desire there—the desire not to have to deal with anything. That, too, leads to a state of becoming.

Then of course there are the more obvious states of becoming where you think of someplace else and your mind goes there. That's becoming and birth on the subtle level. Here again, the question is: Why would you want to go there? And part of the reason is that you're just getting bored with the breath. You want some entertainment. But there may be other desires involved as well. And you're going to learn about them as you keep bringing the mind back to the breath. Otherwise, you go from one thought-world to another thought-world to another one, like a hobo hopping trains, and you end up who knows where. If you're asked to trace

how you got there, often it requires a real feat of memory. Things seem to modulate, as they do in music from one key to another key, getting further and further away from the tonic. If you don't have a clear desire to be with the breath, you're just going to wander off in these other becomings.

So you're learning about desire very clearly, and the desire is what causes you to learn in general. Ajaan Lee makes this point. It's because of our desire that we practice. It's because of our desire that we try to get the mind to settle down. It's because of our desire that we try to understand things. You look at how the Buddha taught. He didn't set out a view of the world right away. He set out a task. He said: Here's a problem and here's a way to approach the problem. Then you learn about the mind in the course of trying to solve the problem.

So on the one hand, it is good to know about things like dependent co-arising and the Buddha's analysis of the different stages through which the mind goes as it creates suffering. But you're really going to get to know those stages as you decide that you want to do what's required to put an end to suffering, in which case they're not just academic subjects, something you read about the Buddha's theory of the mind or whatever.

He provides these analyses because he wanted to put an end to suffering, and this is what he learned about the mind in the course of doing that. So when he started to teach, he would start by saying: Here's the problem, which is suffering, and here's the solution. These are the steps: things you've got to do, the duties with regard to the different noble truths—comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation. And then as you pursue that desire to put an end to suffering by performing these duties, you begin to see: This is how the mind does this; this is how the mind does that.

So you want to make sure that your desire to get the mind to settle down is strong, but not so strong that you can think of nothing else aside from how much you want it to settle down. You want the desire to be just strong enough and well focused enough to motivate you to do what needs to be done.

As you tackle these problems that the Buddha proposes, where do you see clinging, where do you see craving? Which kinds of clinging and craving will be your friends for the time being and which do you have to let go of as soon as possible? These are questions you'll be able to answer for yourself because you want to. Otherwise, whatever comes up just comes up, we just accept it as it is, and it doesn't go anywhere. Or it may go someplace, but it may not necessarily be the place we want to go. But when you decide that you really do want to get the mind to settle down, you really do want it to be clear and alert, that's when you have the opportunity to learn about the mind.

I've mentioned that story that Ajaan Chah likes to tell about going to the market to buy a banana and then coming back with it. Someone asks you, "Why are you carrying the banana?" You say, "Because I'm going to eat it." Then they ask you, "Why are you carrying the peel? Are you going to eat that too?" And then Ajaan Chah poses the question, "With what are you going to answer them?" And before he gives you the answer, the *what*, he gives you the *how*: You answer through desire. You have to want to come up with a good answer. That's the only way it'll come.

In the same way, it's okay to want to do the concentration. It's okay to want to understand the mind. And it's through starting with the wanting that you're going to learn things. This is why Ajaan Lee, when he talks about the different mental qualities that go into the practice of mindfulness—ardency, alertness, and mindfulness—assigns discernment to the ardency. If you read the commentaries, they'll assign discernment to what they call clear comprehension of the three characteristics, which is their interpretation of alertness. But ardency, the desire to do this well: That's where the discernment really comes from.

So as you try to figure out, as the mind wanders off, why it's wandering off, that's when you learn. When the mind is getting sleepy and drowsy, why is it going for the sleepiness and drowsiness? What's the desire there? After all, there are ways of dealing with sleepiness and drowsiness, and you'll discover them if you want to. You give the mind work to do. But sometimes part of the mind says, "Look, I really want to rest." So you give it some time to rest, but you have to keep it alert. Then, when it's rested in a way that's alert, you can tell it, "Okay, now you've got to get to work. You've got to learn how to stir up your energy, stir up the desire." In the Buddha's terms, this is called generating the desire to want to get past what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful. And as you deal with desire in this way, you're going to learn a lot about the mind.

As you try to solve the problem of suffering, you're going to learn unexpected things about the mind. The important thing is that you adopt the Buddha's strategy, because as he said, the desires or cravings that lead to suffering include not only craving for becoming but also craving for non-becoming. In other words, you've got a state of becoming and you don't like it, so you want to destroy it. That, too, can lead to suffering.

But it's not as if there's no way out of this conundrum. There is a way, but it's a strategic way that employs craving, employs clinging, and employs desire. You get the mind into a state of concentration, which is a state of becoming, and then use that as a basis for understanding other states of becoming, other cravings, other desires. That's how the problem gets solved on one level. Then you can turn that

same mode of analysis onto the concentration itself. But don't do that until you've taken care of a lot of other distractions.

This is one of the reasons why the forest ajaans, when they teach meditation, don't lay out the map right from the very beginning. They say, "Do this, and then when you've done that, come back and we'll talk about the next step." So even though we may have read about the different levels of jhana and stages of insight, put those memories of what you've read aside for the time being and tackle the problem that's right here: How do you get the mind to settle down? How do you get it past its distractions? How do you get it past drowsiness? Take an interest in these problems, and they'll give you the sensitivity and the understanding of the mind that you're going to need to tackle bigger problems.

So focus your desires right here to get the mind to settle down. And that'll open up a lot of unexpected things in the mind.