

The Desire to End All Desires

March 14, 2019

A while back, I saw a video where a Buddhist teacher was being interviewed. And she was saying that the purpose of the practice is to realize there's nothing to be gained beyond what you have right now. So, learn how simply to accept what is right now, and you'll be okay.

The interviewer asked her, "Isn't that defeatist?" And the teacher said, "Only if you think about it," which is a horrible way to live—not being able to think. And when you do think, you're thinking that there's nothing better than what you've got right now. It *is* a defeatist way of thinking.

The Buddha was anything but defeatist. Think about it. He gave six years of his life to austerities, trying to find a way to happiness. That didn't work, so he tried other things. Finally, he came across the path. If he had simply accepted the way things were, he wouldn't even have left his home. He just would have stayed where he was, accepting the fact that all of his happiness, all of his pleasures were going to have to die, and somehow making himself okay with that.

But he refused. As he said later, discontent was one of the secrets to his awakening. But it wasn't just a general discontent. It was discontent with the skillfulness of his own actions, realizing that the problem in life—the fact that he wasn't gaining happiness—could not be blamed on things outside. It had to be blamed on his own actions. But actions are things that can be changed, which is what he tried to do.

Where do you start when you change your actions? You start with your mind because your mind is what's making the decisions. This is why, when we meditate, we focus on the mind in the present moment. Now, you can't focus directly on the mind as you start out, so you focus on something that's really close: the breath. You do what you can to get the mind to stay with the breath. Sometimes you need to use a meditation word; sometimes you use counting.

Ajaan Lee has an interesting method of counting. He says you start counting the breaths one through 10, and then one through nine, one through eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one. By that time, the mind should be settled down, so you stay with zero. No more counting. If it's not settled down, you start with 10 again.

The point is that you do what you can to get the mind to settle down. He also recommends making the breath as comfortable as possible. Find what rhythm of breathing feels good: in long, out long; or in long, out short; in short, out long; or

in short, out short. And that's just the beginning. You can also try heavy or light, fast or slow, deep or shallow. There's a lot to experiment with. The purpose of the experiment, of course, is to try to find what helps the mind to settle down. The desire for concentration is not a bad thing.

We chanted just now on the factor of right effort: generating desire to give rise to what is skillful, and generating desire to maintain what is skillful and have it develop. This is all part of the path. When the Buddha said that craving was the cause of suffering, many people think that he meant all kinds of craving and all kinds of desire are bad. But that's not what he said. He specified three kinds of craving as causing suffering. But he also assigned the desire to be skillful and the desire to avoid unskillful behavior to the factor of right effort in the path.

There's a passage where Ven. Ananda is being questioned by a brahman. The brahman has come to see Ananda in the park where he's staying and asks him, "What is the purpose of this path you follow?" And Ananda says, "One of the purposes is to put an end to desire." The brahman asks, "How do you do that?" Then Ananda explains a set of teachings that are called the bases for success: concentration based on desire, concentration based on persistence, concentration based on intent, and concentration based on your powers of analysis.

The brahman says, "That's impossible. How can you use desire to get rid of desire?"

And Ananda asks him, "Before you came to the park, did you have desire to come to the park?"

"Well, yes."

"Now that you're here, where is the desire?"

"It's gone."

"In the same way, you use desire to put an end to desire—if you do it right."

And that qualification, "if you do it right" is important because, actually, all things we experience are rooted in desire. The mind is a desiring thing. It has a purpose. The problem is that it has many purposes. Sometimes they're at cross-purposes with one another. And sometimes they're aimed at the wrong things.

So the Buddha's not saying that you abandon desire. He's simply saying: Learn how to direct it. In that list of the bases of success—concentration based on desire, based on persistence, based on intent, and based on your powers of analysis—the first three kinds of concentration are really one. After all, right effort consists of desire, persistence, and intent. All of them have to be present for concentration to happen. It's simply a matter of which one is predominant. And so your desire should be focused on the persistence—in other words, focused on doing things.

All too often, one of the reasons we don't get where we want in the meditation is because we focus our thoughts too much on where we want to go, and not on what we have to do to get there. We sit here thinking about how much we want the mind to be quiet. If it's not quiet, we get frustrated. But you have to realize that the fact that you have to want to get it quiet means that it's not quiet to begin with. So you learn how to focus on the breath even when the mind isn't quiet.

There may be thoughts running around through the mind on many different levels. But you make up your mind to stay with the breath regardless of those other thoughts and you pay them no attention. You don't have to snuff them out. You don't have to chase them down and kill them. You just don't pay them any attention. It's like someone over in the other in the other corner of the room talking while you've got work to do in this corner of the room. If you spend all your time thinking about how you don't want them to be talking, you're never going to get your work done. You focus your attention on your work and don't pay them any mind. Your work gets done.

So it's a matter of learning how to focus your desires in the right place, on the right actions. Focus your desire on really being intent on what you're doing, paying careful attention. When people get bored with their concentration, it's because they're not paying careful attention. Everything you need to know for awakening, everything you need to know for ultimate happiness, is happening right here. How can it be boring? It's simply that you're not paying careful enough attention to what you're doing that gets in the way of happiness.

Then finally, there's concentration based on your powers of analysis. Even that is in right effort, because for the mind to settle down you have to be able to distinguish between what's skillful and what's not. And here you have to figure out, when the mind doesn't settle down, what are you doing wrong? What can you change?

This is how the Buddha himself gained awakening. He didn't have any guide to teach him. It was simply that, as he said, he would maintain his attitude of discontent with his level of skill. If he hadn't yet reached the end of suffering, he'd have to keep developing more skill until he did. So how do you develop that discontent until you reach a level of skill that should truly make you content? You observe what you're doing, seeing what you're doing wrong and asking yourself, "Is there some other way of doing it?"

For instance, if you're focused on the breath in the nose and you don't seem to be getting anywhere, change the point of your focus. Or you can look at the way you perceive the breath. What image do you have in your mind when you think about breath? For most of us, the first thing we think about is the air coming in

and out through the nose. But the Buddha talks about what they call “wind energy” in the different parts of the body. In Thai, the word for wind and breath is the same. So they talk about breath energies in the body. You find this also in Sanskrit. *Prana* is breath, which is close to *apana*, the Pali word for breathing. And as they say, *prana* runs throughout the body.

So relate your in-and-out breath to the breath throughout the body, the sense of energy throughout the body, the flow of energy throughout the body. And try to develop a whole-body awareness. Ask yourself, within the context of that whole-body awareness, what kind of breathing feels good? When the breathing feels good, can you make that breath or that sense of feeling good spread through the body so that you feel like you’re being bathed in breath energy?

Change the image of your relationship to the breath. You’re not in one part of the body, looking at the breath someplace else. You’re allowing yourself to be bathed all around by breath energy. What kind of breath energy would feel good that way?

Use your ingenuity. After all, this is how Ajaan Lee found this method. He was stuck off in the forest. He’d walked in to a place in the forest and was going to spend the rains retreat there. Three days, it took him to walk there. And soon after he arrived, he had a heart attack. There were no medicines around, no doctors. If he was going to get out of there alive, he was going to have to walk out. The food wasn’t good. So what did he have? He had his breath. So he figured out how to breathe in a way that would help him recover from his heart attack. It involved breathing and working with the breath energies throughout the body. His ingenuity was what saved his life and helped him find a really useful way of meditating and teaching meditation. So use your ingenuity as well.

Meditation is an active process, which means that you have to actively get involved in what you’re doing so that you can see clearly what you’re doing. This is why we get the mind into concentration: so that we can see our actions as they’re happening. We see what lies behind them—what motivates them—and we see where they lead. It’s in this way that we develop skill and can bring the level of our skill to a place where we can properly be content with it. As Ananda said, the point here is ultimately to get to a point where you don’t have to have any desires.

It’s not as if you’re snuffing out your desires. You’re taking yourself to a place where there’s no need for desire. The happiness you’ve found is that satisfactory. But to get there, don’t simply let yourself be satisfied with the way things are. Learn how to be content with things outside that you can’t change, where the situation is good enough to practice. But don’t rest content with the level of skill you’ve developed. Always keep looking for ways to make it better, better, better.

When you focus your desire there, it becomes an integral part of getting to the point where you don't need desire anymore.