

The Truth of Desires

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One of the reasons we try to get the mind in concentration is because it allows us to see the intentions that don't want to be in concentration. If we don't set up this intention that we're going to stay here with a breath, one intention, one thought, one perception flows into another, and another, and another. The boundaries get very vague. Our intentions can hide other intentions very easily. But once you've made up your mind you want to stay right here, then anything else that doesn't fit in with right here has to be thrown out.

Sometimes it's discouraging, seeing how many other intentions come in and have to be thrown out. But you're learning something important. There are these intentions—what the Buddha calls fabrications—and desires that slosh around in the mind and that we don't know much about. Because we're ignorant of them, they can influence us, skewing our perception of reality or the perceptions that we want to adopt. Things may seem true because they fit in with a particular desire, and if we don't know the desire, we can't be sure about how true those things are.

So we're here to learn about our desires. When the Buddha talks about sensory perception, things don't just start with the fact that something comes in and hits the eye. The mind is already primed to look at things in a certain way—based on the way you think, based on the way you perceive things, based on your desires, based on the feelings you have in the body.

Scientists have been starting to show how much your intestinal system actually runs your brain. If the intestinal system feels bad, then you're going to see things in a certain way. If it feels good, you're going to see them in another way—and that's just that one system. It's a big one.

But all too often, we're unconscious of what's happening. As we meditate, we're here to sort it out. Our desire is to learn about them. See which ones are actually operating when we choose a perception or a way of thinking. That requires a certain amount of stability, because there are a lot of desires in the mind that are hidden for good reason. Either we're embarrassed about what they are, or else we've realized that they're impossible. But part of the mind still wants to hold on to them anyhow. If you don't have a good solid place in the mind to watch these things, to see them as something separate, then it's hard to admit to them.

So you still the mind, you give the mind a good sense of well-being through the way that you breathe, through the way you relate to yourself, so that when these desires come up, you can see them clearly. If you see that something is impossible,

you realize it's impossible. You're more likely to realize it's impossible because you're coming from a better place.

So the Buddha has us accept not only that we can get the mind into concentration and that it's a good thing to try to get the mind to stay with one thing. He also says to take as a working hypothesis the fact that it is possible to find true happiness, a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that doesn't cause any harm. Hold that as your standard. If you don't believe that that kind of happiness is possible, you'll tell yourself, "I'll content myself with something less." It seems reasonable.

Think of all the people who argued with the young Buddha-to-be, telling him that his desire for awakening was impossible. Their arguments are very reasonable. They kept pointing to people in the past, saying this great king or that great sage saw that this was impossible. The Buddha said, "Then, in that case, those people weren't really noble." In the early stage of his quest, he wanted to find if such a thing as the deathless really was possible. He felt that it was worth giving his life to the quest to find out.

One of the meanings of his awakening is that, yes, it is possible. Through our own efforts we can find true happiness.

So think of that as a desire for something possible. Then you can use that as your measuring stick for other desires. Notice that the aim is true happiness. It's not arriving at the ultimate truth, although you do arrive at an ultimate truth. But to get there, you have to figure out: What's the ultimate happiness? Whatever is true for the sake of that ultimate happiness, you take that as true.

That's another working hypothesis: Anything that tells you that that kind of happiness is not possible, you say, "That's false." Then you watch your desires, and see what visions of truth they have. Now you've got a measuring stick.

This is an important way of understanding our perceptions of reality, or other ways we think about reality: What desires do they serve? And do we really want to follow those desires?

First you have to know what those desires are. Again, that's why we try to get the mind still and get it to ask the right questions. One good line of questioning is exactly this: "What's the desire that underlies that perception or my willingness to take on that perception?" This requires a fair amount of patience, and a lot of honesty—because these desires are used to operating in the shadows.

They're like corrupt government officials. I understand officials have been complaining recently. They say, "People don't have any sympathy for us. We're doing a lot of hard work here, making decisions based on information they can't know." And the question is, why can't we know? Why is this all being kept secret?

That's how the mind works. It's a crafty politician; your desires are crafty politicians. And as with any crafty politician, it is possible to find them out, but it takes a lot of patience, a lot of persistence, and a willingness on your part to not identify with everything that comes up in the mind. In other words, just because the desire is there doesn't mean it's one you want to really pursue—if you really look at it. So try to get the mind still so that you can see these things, and give it a sense of well-being in that stillness. That way, it's easier to say No to a desire and not get upset about the fact that you have desires that you don't like, or at least you don't like to admit to yourself.

Think of the mind as a large group of people. Some of them have had power for a long time; others are trying to assume power. You're trying to get your desire for true happiness to assume power. The ones who have been operating through the past are not going to give up power easily. But if you have the well-being and the clarity of concentration on your side, you've got an important ally. You've got the wisdom of the Buddha's four noble truths on your side. That's an important ally, too.

Notice that those truths are truths about cause and effect, what's possible and what's not possible: truths about things that are very close to your mind, truths about suffering, what the cause is, and what's the desire behind this suffering. The Buddha lists the possible desires. What are the desires that get you out? There are lists of skillful desires as well: the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities that are there, and not to let them arise if they're not there; the desire to give rise to skillful qualities, and then once they're there, the desire to maintain them. These are truths about desire and the effects of desires.

That's something we can observe. Sometimes our perceptions about the world outside are hard to judge as to whether they're really accurate or not, and how much reliable information we have. But we can know our desires. We can get a sense of which ones are skillful and which ones are not. When you find yourself adopting a perception or an idea of reality that's based on an unskillful desire, that's enough reason to say No to it. Even though it insists that it's true, you have to be able to say No to it because it's serving the purposes of something unskillful inside. Whereas the perceptions that serve the purpose of what is skillful inside: You can accept those as provisional truths for the time being. As you get to know your desires better, you can begin to ferret out the desires that seem to be skillful but ultimately are not.

This is the process we all have to go through as we practice. We can't be impatient and say, "I want nothing but true desires and true perceptions right from the beginning." We're feeling our way. But we're feeling our way not blindly

and not in total darkness. The more light we can shine into the issue of what in the mind is skillful and what's not, the more we'll be able to choose our perceptions of reality and deal not only with issues in the mind but also issues outside in a way that's more and more trustworthy. We're moving toward something that's ultimately trustworthy. On the path, we're not quite there yet, but we're moving in the right direction.

So an important aspect of the practice is to get to know your desires. Put yourself in a position where you can judge them. Wisely. Fairly. But firmly. And that'll straighten out a lot of other issues in the mind right there.