

Craving & Desire on the Path

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There's a paradox in the Buddha's teachings, where on the one hand he says that admirable friendship is the whole of the holy life, the entirety of the practice. On the other hand, he says he's simply one who points out the way; it's up to us to follow the way.

The sense in which admirable friendship is the whole doesn't mean that it takes care of everything—just that it's a necessary prerequisite. As the Buddha said, without him, where would we be? We wouldn't know anything about the path. We wouldn't even know that there was such a path.

You read all of the strange beliefs that were held in his time, and if it weren't for the Buddha, those would be still around. And many strange beliefs still *are* around. But the path is available still.

The fact that it's been made available by the Buddha and all the other admirable friends between the Buddha and us: That's what makes it possible for us to practice. So we should have a sense of gratitude for them. But at the same time, we have to realize: They can't do the work for us. After all, suffering is an inside job. It's something that we're *doing* to ourselves, and the end of suffering is going to require a skill so that we can stop doing the suffering.

In the Buddha's analysis, the causes leading up to suffering all come from ignorance, *avijjā*. The opposite of ignorance, *vijjā*, has two meanings in Pali: One, it means knowledge, and two, it means skill.

That second meaning is really important because the four noble truths have duties appropriate to each: Suffering is to be comprehended, its cause is to be abandoned, its cessation is to be realized, and the path to its cessation has to be developed. Each of those duties is going to involve skill.

Nobody else can make us skillful. They can point out the way, as the Buddha did. They can show us how things are done, but they can't take their skill and put it in our hands or in our hearts. That's something we have to do, and we have to cultivate the desire to do that.

That's why, in right effort, the phrase "generating desire" is so important. All things, the Buddha said, are rooted in desire. Suffering is rooted in desire, but the path is also rooted in desire. So desire is not a bad thing. It's simply a question of knowing which kind of desires to encourage, and which ones not to encourage.

And the desire for awakening also is not a bad thing. All too often you hear people say that the desire for awakening is the one thing that gets in the way of our awakening and seeing our true awakened nature. Which ties you in a knot. You want awakening, but you're not supposed to want it. You'd think that you would benefit from it, but then there's not supposed to be any you. That kind of thinking, as I said, gets you all tied up.

The Buddha was very frank: You need desire in order to develop the path—in order to get to the end of desire. That's why desire is not only part of right effort, but it's also the first of the bases of success.

There's a passage where Ven. Ānanda makes this really clear. A brahman comes to see him and asks, "What does this path that you're practicing lead to?" And Ānanda says, "One of the things it leads to is the end of desire." "And what is this path of practice?" Ānanda lists the four bases for success, starting with desire. The brahman says, "Wait a minute, you can't end desire with desire." But then Ānanda gives an analogy to show that you can.

He asks the brahman, "Before you came to this park where I'm staying, did you have the desire to come?" "Yes." "That's why you came. But now that you're here, where's that desire?" "Well, it's gone. I don't need it anymore." "In the same way, you pick up the desire to follow the path, and it will take you to a point where you don't need it anymore." Think of the image of the raft, or the image of the relay chariots: They take you to where you want to go, and then you put them aside.

Ānanda also has a passage where he talks about craving as being part of the motivating energy for the path. As he says, this body comes into existence through craving. You're going to be putting an end to craving, but to get there you have to use craving. In this case, he expresses it as, "You see that other people have gained awakening, and you have the desire within yourself, 'I, too, would like to have awakening.'" That's craving for becoming: "I want to be awakened."

Here again, we're often told that that thought will skew your practice. You're

starting with wrong view, that there's a you who will benefit somehow. But again, Ānanda doesn't talk in those ways. He's very frank: "You need to have that kind of craving. The desire to be awakened is a legitimate desire to develop."

Of course, you develop skillfully. You ask yourself, "What are the causes?" Well, there's the path. So you focus on developing the path. You don't just sit there hoping to realize the cessation without the path, or think that you can somehow clone awakening without going through the path. The path is a series of strategies. It borrows elements of the first and the second noble truth.

This is paradoxical, because all too often we're told that the path and the goal are the same thing. In other words, you get to the third noble truth by doing the third noble truth, or that somehow the fourth noble truth *is* the third noble truth—but that's not the case at all.

The fourth noble truth borrows elements from the first. We cling to the aggregates, and you use the aggregates on the path.

You focus on the breath, developing a feeling of ease using a perception of the breath to hold you in place. You fabricate the processes of directed thought and evaluation to settle in, and you're aware of all these things. Well, that's the five aggregates right there—creating right concentration.

Then there are four forms of clinging around the aggregates. One of them you don't use, which is clinging to sensuality. But then there's clinging to habits and practices, clinging to views, clinging to doctrines of the self.

So you hold on to the precepts. That's a good set of habits to have. You hold on to the practice of concentration, which is a good practice to have. You hold on to right view. You hold on to your sense of yourself as being someone who's competent to do this and who will benefit from doing it. That covers three kinds of clinging.

As for what the path borrows from the second noble truth: Out of the three kinds of craving, again, you drop craving for sensuality, but the other two are useful. You want to put an end to the *you* who is suffering, the *you* who is creating suffering, the *you* who wants to keep on traveling through *samsāra*. That would count as craving for non-becoming. As craving for becoming, you want to become awakened.

Okay, you use that desire as a motive force for the practice. As you get closer and closer to the goal, you begin to realize you don't need that anymore. That's when you can let it go.

So instead of equating the fourth noble truth to the third, we actually borrow elements of the first and the second in the fourth noble truth. The third noble truth, though, is something totally other. The path requires passion, but the third noble truth is total dispassion.

You start out developing dispassion for the first and second noble truths. And then, after developing passion for the fourth, you finally turn around and develop dispassion for that. That's how you get to the third.

So we make use of what we've got. Think again of that image of the raft going across the river. What's the raft made of? It's not made of the other side, where you're trying to go. It's made out of twigs and branches on *this* side, the side where you already are. It's kind of makeshift, but you do your best to tie it together well.

In other words, you make use of what you've got, and that will include desire, that will include craving. Learn how to foster the skillful forms of desire, the skillful forms of craving, and that'll help get you across.

So it's your own desire that's going to get you across, as your desire motivates you to learn to become more and more skillful. You think about what the Buddha taught about cause and effect, path and goal, so you focus your desires in the right place.

So, on the one hand, the holy life is totally dependent on the Buddha. On the other hand, it's rooted in your own desire like every other dhamma. This may sound paradoxical, but as you get a sense of the path, you see that it all makes sense.

And the Buddha was wise in the way that Ajaan Lee would define wisdom: the sort of wisdom that can take almost anything and get good use out of it. The Buddha had no use for sensual craving, no use for sensual clinging, but the other forms of craving and clinging, he found a use for. It's up to us to figure out how to use those things in a skillful way.

So, we get inspiration from the Buddha, and that's the sense in which the entirety of the path depends on him. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here; we wouldn't

have any idea that there was a path.

But we also have to depend on ourselves. It's simply a matter of learning how to identify which things within ourselves will be helpful on the path. And don't be surprised to find desire and craving among those things.