

The Pursuit of Excellence

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One of the strangest ideas about the Dhamma is that it's all about being accepting and non-judgmental. This comes from getting things backwards. We understand that things are inconstant and impermanent, and there's also the desire for happiness. If you put the inconstancy first, then that means you have to learn how to scale back your desire for happiness, to realize that whatever you may want is going to be inconstant, and learn how to be okay with that.

But that's got things backwards. When the Buddha taught inconstancy, it was basically a judgment. Anything inconstant is stressful. Anything stressful is not worthy of being held on to as you or yours—because it wouldn't make you happy. Your desire for happiness comes first. And that, the Buddha says, should be honored.

That's what he did in his life. He wanted a happiness that wasn't subject to aging, illness, death, sorrow, or anything negative at all. He set out to find it, and he found it. So the story of his life tells us that the desire for happiness should be taken seriously, and it should be honored.

Now, we're not talking here about simple hedonism, where you just pursue pleasures. Whatever pleasure captures your fancy, you run for it—that's not what the Buddha's talking about. You take your desire for happiness seriously. You think about it, and you realize that you want a happiness that's long-term. For it to be long-term, it can't depend on anyone's suffering. So you have to take other people's happiness into consideration as well. And you're going to have to be really careful about how you act, to make sure that what you do is actually conducive to happiness, that it doesn't harm anyone.

These are the principles underlying the basic qualities of the Buddha: his wisdom, his compassion, his purity. That's one of the messages of the teaching: that you develop wisdom, compassion, and purity by being mature in your pursuit of happiness. You look at the rest of the Buddha's life as he was pursuing happiness, and you realize he was passing judgment. He would do something and then pass judgment on it: "Is this conducive to true happiness? Is this what I want? If it's not, what should I change?" He was passing judgment with a purpose, to change his actions, improve his actions. He was basically pursuing excellence.

When, later on, he gave a list of epithets for nibbana—"nibbana" actually being one of the epithets for the goal—it came down to five categories:

One is that it's a type of consciousness. There's an awareness, but it's an awareness without an object. The image the Buddha gives is of a light beam. He asks the monks, "Suppose there's a house with a window on the east wall. When the sun rises, the sunbeams go through the window on the eastern wall. Where do they land?" The monks reply, "They land on the western wall." "What if there's no western wall?" "They land on the ground." "What if there's no ground?" Back in those days, they thought that the earth was supported by water, so the monks reply, "It lands on water." "What if there's no water?" "Then it doesn't land." The image is of a light beam that doesn't land. When it doesn't land, you can't see it because it's not reflecting off anything, but it's bright in and of itself. So there's consciousness in nibbana.

There's also freedom. That comment we had today that the idea of being outside of space of time sounded as if you were being frozen—that's like saying, you're in a frozen moment in time. But that's not getting out of time. That's being trapped in time. "Outside of space and time" means you're totally free.

Another quality is bliss. It's total, unadulterated happiness.

Another quality is truth. In other words, it doesn't change on you. It's not deceptive.

And finally, the fifth quality is excellence: It's the ultimate. It's beyond.

So as we follow the Buddha, we're following excellence in our pursuit of happiness. Nowadays, when they talk about the pursuit of excellence, it's usually either in terms of sport or in terms of making fancy watches. But that's a very limited idea of excellence. You devote all your energies to mastering a game, or you put all your energy into making something that tells accurate time, but there are so many more worthwhile things to be doing. The Buddha found the most worthwhile excellence to pursue, which is a happiness that's harmless and never disappoints.

But as many people have noted, the descriptions we have of that happiness sometimes don't sound all that inviting. One of the first discussion groups I led when I came back here to the States, on the four noble truths, went through four noble truths in order: one, two, three, four. We got to the third noble truth and talked about nibbana. Then we got to the fourth noble truth and we ended up talking about jhana. Everybody in the group said jhana sounded a lot more appealing than nibbana.

Maybe the words are more appealing, or the mental images we have are more appealing, but when you've really mastered jhana and started contemplating it, you begin to realize that it has its drawbacks. To begin with, you can get really addicted to the pleasure. It feels really, really good. But you also realize that in

order to maintain that pleasure, that sense of stillness, you have to work hard. It requires an unending effort. When that fact hits you, that's when you think: "Maybe something unfabricated would be better." When the opening comes, you go for it, and you realize it *is* much better.

Think of Ajaan Maha Boowa comparing the state of the luminous mind that at first he thought was awakening to the actual experience of awakening. He said—excuse me—it's like a pile of shit: the luminous mind, compared to awakening. So when you get there, your sensitivity toward happiness, your sensitivity to what's involved in fabricating a life, fabricating experience, gets so acute that you really do see that this is the ideal alternative: the unfabricated. Until then, there's a tendency in the mind to say, "Well, I can imagine something I'd prefer."

But look at all your imaginings. We've been led around by our imaginings for how long? We don't know how long. There have been countless eons that we've been going around and around and around, led by our desire to think up this, think up that: "I can imagine something better than this. I can imagine something better than that." There's this tendency in the mind to keep flowing out. The Buddha called that *āsava*. We're so addicted to our imaginings that the idea of a pleasure that doesn't require that we do anything sounds very disorienting. A pleasure that doesn't require feeding sounds very dissimilar to our ideas of happiness, which all depend on feeding in one way or another.

So from the outside, nibbana may not sound all that good. But the Buddha said again and again: If you think that there's going to be any disappointment or any sense of dissatisfaction at all in nibbana, that's wrong view.

So in the meantime, what do we do? We follow the four noble truths in refining our powers of judgment, because the four noble truths themselves are standards for judgment. Wherever there's suffering, you've got to look for its cause, because it's something you want to get past. You want to bring about the end of suffering. It's not something to just note or to continue playing with.

Of course, the Buddha's analysis of suffering—the five clinging-aggregates—when you actually think about what it means, goes against the grain. It's saying that we cling to the things we want to see as ours, want to see as us, because we like them. Yet the Buddha's saying that that's suffering. So we have to try to comprehend what he means when he says that.

He tells us that we have to abandon our cravings, but we like our cravings an awful lot. As he said, wherever we go, we go with craving as our companion. So he tries to wean us away from that harmful companionship by describing the pleasures of the path, especially the pleasures of concentration. Try to make *these* your friends.

What you're doing is that you're taking some desires and you're making them part of the path: the desire to be skillful, the desire to find a happiness that's not subject to the drawbacks of sensuality. So you're continuing to foster some desires. You're continuing to flow toward the concentration. But as you get more and more used to it, you realize: "Okay, this is a better pleasure." A value judgment, but a good one.

You find that there are layers as you peel them away. That, too, is a value judgment: You begin to realize that some states of concentration are more solid, more expansive, more peaceful than others, and so you go for them. This is what lifts your sights as to what's possible in terms of happiness and pleasure. All too many of us are afraid of this pleasure because we've enjoyed pleasures in the past and then been really disappointed by them. Or we've gotten really heedless as we enjoyed the pleasure, and we've suddenly found ourselves in danger. So there's that part of the mind that has some trepidation around pleasure.

But when you find a more reliable pleasure like this—and it really is more reliable—after a while, you begin to let go of your fear of it. Then you find that you can really enjoy it. There's still a little bit of heedlessness possible with the concentration as you just hang out, but it's a lot better than hanging out with your normal pleasures: the pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and sensual fantasies. So here, again, you're making a value judgment.

We're not here just to rest content with whatever we've got. As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was that he was *discontent* with regard to skillful qualities, to say nothing of unskillful qualities. Anything that was unskillful in his mind, he would drop it. As for what was skillful, he said: "If there's anything more I can do, anything that I have to master that I haven't mastered yet, I'll go for it." That pursuit of excellence was what enabled him to find the Dhamma.

This is a pursuit of excellence that really is satisfying. You see people pursuing excellence in sport, but then they get too old to play the game and so the latter part of their lives is a real disappointment. They get really good at one thing, and then they can't do it anymore.

But in terms of the meditation here, you can keep on doing this until your last breath, and it's still possible to achieve great things. There are stories in the Canon of people who gained awakening at death. One of the Buddha's relatives became a stream enterer at death, and when the Buddha happened to mention that that was what he'd attained, his other relatives were upset. They said, "Well, if *he* can do it, then *anybody* can do it."

That's actually good news. This is something you can keep on pursuing and pursuing. There may be some setbacks, but you can keep at it. And if you're

observant, use your ingenuity—or as the Buddha would say, if you commit to it and keep on reflecting again and again—you find that there are better and better levels of practice you can accomplish. And you see they really are better, so you go for the best that you can manage. This is one area where going for the best will never disappoint.

So hold in mind the fact that the goal, nibbana, really is excellent. And even though you don't focus on the goal—the strategy of having a path is that you focus on each step of the path—be confident that the path is leading you to a place so good that you can't even imagine how good it is. It's that special. And it's way better than anything else.