

The Desire for Freedom

October 10, 2022

Tonight is the ends of the rains retreat. For many of us, this has been a period of three months in which we've accelerated our practice: meditated more, been stricter with ourselves about our speech, say, or our actions. Now's the time to evaluate the ways in which we heightened our practice for the past three months. What have the results been? Have we learned something new that we can continue doing and not just drop at the end of the three months? Because if our goodness depends on the calendar, it's not all-around.

Ajaan Mun used to say that we should make the practice in the shape of a —in other words, all-around, all around the year, all around the day. Or in Ajaan Fuang's terms, we have to make the practice timeless. It doesn't depend on the time of the day. It doesn't depend on the season of the year. Every time is a practice time. Every time is a time to develop skillful qualities in the mind and abandon unskillful ones. We're not just here for the ceremony or the custom. Think about the Buddha—he wasn't the sort of the person who was impressed with customs and ceremonies, except for the ones that really would help in solving real problems.

He saw the problems of aging, illness, and death. He saw the way in which beings have to feed on one another. It gave rise to a strong sense of *samvega*. It's a word that's hard to translate. Literally, it means "terror," but it also means dismay, a sense of urgency. The urgency comes from a desire to get out—the desire for freedom. He didn't simply look at the world and say, "Well, this is the way the world is, so I've got to learn how to accept it." He saw that we're struggling over limited resources. Even the people who win the battles end up dying anyhow. Everything gets laid claim to. If you want to find happiness in the world, you have to push somebody else out of the way. Seeing this didn't simply make him sad that that was the way things were. It inspired in him a desire for freedom. He wanted to get away from all that. That's what gave rise to the sense of *samvega*. Otherwise, it would have been just simply a mild depression.

But *samvega* requires the desire for freedom: You really are terrorized by the way things are and you see the seriousness of the situation, so you want to find a way out. That's why he left home. He realized that he'd been looking down on old people and sick people and dead people, but then one day it hit him: Someday he was going to be old, sick, someday he was going to die, too. How could he look down on people who are old or sick or dead? And how could he continue looking

for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die? He decided that that kind of search was an ignoble search. He wanted to find something noble, something that didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die. It was an audacious desire. But we have to remember that that was the kind of person he was: audacious. The Dhamma we have now comes from that kind of person.

The Buddha didn't teach simply the way to manage suffering. The third noble truth is the *cessation* of suffering—total. That's what he was able to find, and he found it because he didn't let himself rest content with anything less. His samvega was coupled with pasada—confidence that there had to be a way out. He didn't have any guarantees, of course. But the reason he left home was because he felt there must be a way out and he realized that if he was going to find it, he wasn't going to find it in the house. He went off into the wilderness.

The wilderness is a place where you set aside the customs of domestic life and can really look at what's important in life. It's a place where you can get away from the distractions of lay life.

So you're going to find some peace of mind, but then in that peace of mind, you have to ask yourself, what's really important in life? When you give up on the baits of the world, okay, what's left? We see the sincerity of his quest and his confidence that there had to be a way out. And he tried many different ways. None of them worked, even when he tried the way that was widely regarded as the ultimate way, which is self-torture. Yet when that didn't work, he didn't give up. He had that sense of confidence: There's got to be a way out. And finally he was able to find it, starting with right concentration. This is why he said at one point that right concentration is the heart of the path. The other factors are its requisites or its supports.

So what we're doing right now: We're not just going through the custom of having an evening sit, being quiet for a little while and then dropping it and going back to our regular concerns. It should be part of an ongoing training, a training in which we look after our thoughts and our words and our deeds in all circumstances.

You read of the various students of the Buddha who gained awakening. Some of them were doing it while they were meditating. Others were doing it at random times. The sensitivity and inner reflection they had developed as they meditated weren't limited just to the meditation. They tried to carry that sensitivity into their lives to watch their actions, watch their words, watch their thoughts. They were able to catch sight of the ways in which they were causing themselves unnecessary suffering and they were able to drop the causes. In the case of one

nun, it was while she was pulling the wick out of an oil lamp. There are stories of people gaining awakening on their alms round.

So as you go through the day, remember the seriousness with which the Buddha took this issue. It was serious enough to leave home. The sense of *samvega* was that strong, but his confidence was also strong. So he kept looking, looking for the way out. He didn't have an idea—well, he maybe had some ideas, but he didn't really know that there was going to be a way out. Still, the desire for freedom made him look for the way and to try every possibility.

So as we practice, we want to make sure it's not just a ceremony or a custom that we push things a little bit harder on the rains retreat and then we slack off for the rest of the year. We take on extra practices during the rains retreat so that we can try them out to see: Are we ready for heightening our practice? If we find that the state of the mind is better, the mind is more calm, it sees things more clearly, then we should keep up that practice. Don't say, "Well, I'll come back to it again next year," because we don't know if there's going to be a next year. We don't even know if there's going to be tomorrow.

The Buddha has us reflect: A lot can be done in the space of one breath. Maybe that's all you have left. You don't think, "Well, I don't have that many breaths left, so I might as well rest from the work." You just keep working all the way up to the very last breath. And even as the breath stops, you have to make sure that the state of your mind stays strong and that you maintain your confidence even as the body is going away. That's the earnestness with which we should practice.

After all, our teacher was in earnest. His desire for freedom was earnest. It's what turned *samvega* into *pasada*. It could have simply been, as I said, a low-key depression but it carried on through the *samvega* to *pasada*, the confidence that there's got to be a way out. Without the desire, there wouldn't have been that confidence. We human beings are funny people. A lot of our confidence that something is possible comes from our *desire* that it be possible. In some cases, it doesn't pan out, but in the Buddha's case it did. That's why we remember him. That's why we remember his teachings, why we try to keep putting them into practice. They're as new today as they were in his time, in the sense that they're always present-moment practices.

So we should learn how to cultivate that same desire for freedom. After all, it is one of the bases for success. You learn how to hone it in so that it's focused on the potential causes as the Buddha has laid them out. This is where we have the advantage that he didn't have: We've got the teachings laying these things out for us. We've got the reports of all the noble disciples that, Yes, what the Buddha taught is true. It is possible to find the deathless—that the idea of a noble search is

not just a vain idea. It stretches our capabilities as human beings but it doesn't stretch them beyond what they can do.

So make sure that your desire for freedom doesn't end with the rains retreat, that it keeps going and keeps motivating your practice for whatever you can do, whatever you can maintain—to do it simply better. This means focusing in on the potential causes: mindfulness, ardency, alertness, or as the Buddha said in other cases, heedfulness, ardency, and resolution. Try to keep these qualities going all the time, fired by your desire for freedom.

All too often we hear that desire is bad. Craving is the cause of suffering, and there are three kinds of craving that cause suffering; but there's also the desire that's part of right effort. As the Buddha said, all phenomena—skillful and unskillful—are rooted in desire. It's simply a question of learning how to make your desires skillful. What the Buddha shows us is that the desire for total freedom is a skillful desire. That's good news. But don't leave it just as good news. Let it also inspire you to cultivate that desire as well.