

Generating Desire

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We go through life propelled by our desires. Sometimes we get what we want and we're satisfied for a while, and then we're not, and so we generate more desires. We take it for granted that that's simply the way things have to be. Some of us think that, well, maybe if we get a lot of things, they'll make up for the lack of other things. So people amass things—amass power, amass wealth—thinking that a little wealth didn't satisfy but maybe a lot of wealth will; or a few things didn't satisfy but maybe a lot will; or one partner didn't satisfy so maybe a lot of partners will.

But that wasn't the Buddha's approach. He wanted to find something that left no need for further desire. But then he also discovered that he really had to desire it to find it.

There's a passage where, after he gained his awakening, he said, "All things are rooted in desire." "Thing": The word here is *dhammas*, and that can mean both good and bad things. Everything you experience, he said, is rooted in desire someplace. After all, when you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think about things, you're not simply a passive recipient. You're out there looking for things to sense, looking for pleasures, looking for some satisfaction. That active side is rooted in desire.

But then nibbana, the Buddha said, is the ending of all dhammas. It's the one thing that's not rooted in desire. But to get there requires desire.

This is why desire's one of the bases for success. The image that Ven. Ananda gives is of going to a park. To get there, you first need to have the desire to go, seeing that it's worth the effort. But then when you get to the park, the desire's gone.

Now imagine a park that would be so totally satisfactory you wouldn't desire anything else in life. That would be nibbana. But such a satisfaction seems so far away and so improbable, and the path seems so hard, that we find ourselves saying, "Well, maybe I'll put up with x or put up with y , and that'll be good enough for me." In this way, we sell ourselves short. We have the potential to find something that puts us beyond the need for desire, and yet we go around desiring and looking for other things. The Buddha called those other things the objects of an ignoble search. The noble search is the search for what's deathless.

So you have to ask yourself, "How much do you want it?"

This is where motivation comes in. We talk about heedfulness as a kind of motivation: “One who sees danger and respects being heedful,” as is in the chant just now. The phrase, “seeing danger,” is one of those fanciful etymologies that come from the Commentary: They take the word *bhikkhu* and they cut it into two syllables and they decide, from the meaning of each syllable, that it means “one who sees danger.” It’s fanciful, but it is appropriate as an educational etymology, in other words, an explanation that tries to get a fruitful meaning out of the word regardless of whether it’s etymologically true. When you hear the word *bhikkhu*, it’s useful to think, “someone who sees danger.”

Because that’s precisely what the Buddha was: someone who saw danger. He had all kinds of wealth, all kinds of sensual pleasures, the potential for all kinds of power, but he saw danger in all these things. You get used to them and you’re going to lose them. And when you lose them, what happens then? You fall. And you don’t just suffer when you fall. You take out your suffering on others, which will make you fall even further. Seeing the danger in that, he said, “I’ve got to find something else.”

So when you look at your own desires of what you want in life, ask yourself: Do you see danger in what you desire?

This evening I was reading a passage by Ajaan Chah where he said when he ordained first as a novice he didn’t see any danger in life, he didn’t really understand what ordaining was all about. But then as he became a monk and started studying, he began to realize that there’s danger in all kinds of things, especially the things that are really attractive. He said it was like seeing the best kind of banana they have in Thailand, *kluai naam waa*, but realizing that there’s poison in it. No matter how much you like that particular kind of banana, knowing that there’s poison there, you avoid it.

So when you find yourself wanting something that’s going to let you down, remind yourself of the poison. The same if you find yourself indulging in some sort of addictive behavior, whether it’s substance abuse or emotion abuse—in other words, letting yourself stew in emotions that are really not productive but you get some sort of satisfaction out of them: self-pity, resentment, or whatever it may be. Look for the poison and then remind yourself that it is possible to get past that, it is possible to get the mind in a state where it doesn’t like that anymore, doesn’t need it anymore. And try to cultivate a desire for a safe place. As the Buddha says, see renunciation as rest. See that by letting go of the things that you’ve been thirsting for and craving for, there’s a greater sense of well-being and security.

Now, this doesn't mean, of course, that you give up all desires. You have to *desire* that state of well-being, but you have to approach it wisely. How do you get there? Focus on the causes, and see the path as something doable.

You might tell yourself, "I can't manage this path. I won't be able to get to the end." But think about this: When you develop the path, you're going to change as a person. The path will turn you into someone who is capable of reaching that goal. So try to put that in your mental calculation. As for the part of the mind that asks, "This particular course of action, is it worthwhile or not?" tell yourself that it may require a lot of effort, but if it repays really well, maybe it's worth doing. And if you tell yourself, "I don't have the energy to put all that effort in," well, that's one of the reasons we practice the path, because it gives you more energy as you develop it.

So do your best to remind yourself that this is a really worthwhile goal, something that lies beyond anything in our culture. Because that's another big problem in our culture: thinking that there's nothing to us aside from how we've been shaped by our culture. We live in a land of wrong view that tells us that this kind of path isn't worth it, that it's not really real, or that people who follow it are losers or deluded. And the media is so oppressive these days: People carry a little bit of the media around in their pockets and subject themselves to it constantly.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, people in general are disturbed by people who are more heedful than they are. They don't want to be told that there are dangers where they're finding pleasure, so they're going to dismiss you. You have to ask yourself, "Am I going to allow myself to be blinded by their blindness?" You have to wish them well, but you also have to say, "I have to resist that particular influence."

And it's not just a matter of living in a country that hasn't been shaped by Buddhism. Even in Asia, where there are countries shaped by Buddhism, people who practice have a hard time getting their families and friends to see that it's a good thing. They say, "Do a moderate amount of practice"—which is the middle way of the defilements. They say, "Well, do it a little bit but don't take it too seriously."

So the practice is always going to be countercultural. This is why, as Ajaan Mun said, you have to replace the culture you were raised in with the culture of the noble ones. This is what everybody in the practice has to do: to adopt new values, to adopt a new vision of what is possible in life.

It's through thinking in these ways that the desire to follow the path can get you on the right track. After all, the path, like everything else, is rooted in desire, and you have to keep nurturing that desire. And although we have Dhamma talks

and books and everything to help you, you're the one who has to read them and apply them and say, "This really does apply to me, and I really do want it."

Think of the Buddha. He wanted this really strongly. He wanted it so strongly that he was willing to try anything, even six years of self-torture. Fortunately, we don't have to follow that particular path. But you're not going to get rid of the need of desire just by telling yourself, "Well, I'm just going to stop desiring." You have to focus your desire on the right place: on the causes that lead to a result that's really satisfactory. The end of desire is not simply a decision to stop desiring, or to give up or be apathetic. The end of desire is reaching something so totally satisfactory that you don't need anything else.

That's the success to which these bases of success are aimed.