

Frustrated Desires

January 13, 2005

When the Buddha defines the noble truth of suffering and stress, one of his examples was frustrated desires: not getting what is wanted. He tells you to comprehend that—the fact of not getting what you wanted—or to put it in modern terminologies, learning from your frustrated desires. This is the one point where Buddhism and psychotherapy are very similar. Psychotherapists will have you look at a frustrated desire and see what you can learn from it.

But the Buddha has different lessons than you normally learn from your frustrated desires, because he has a different understanding of the potential for desire, of the potential of what's actually possible, what kind of happiness is possible, what kind of happiness can be attained by human effort. When he explains the phrase “not getting what is wanted,” he gives the example of being subject to birth, yet not wanting to be born, but that's not to be gained by just not wanting; being subject to aging and not wanting to age, but that's not to be gotten by wanting. Being subject to illness or subject to death, and yet you don't want to be ill, you don't want to die: That kind of thing, he says, is not to be gained just by wanting.

At that point, the psychotherapists would agree, but then they would say, well, because you have to age, grow ill and die, you just have to learn to accept that as part of the reality principle. Then there's Buddhist psychotherapy, where they say you have to learn to live with the fact that not all of your desires are going to be fulfilled, so learn to be calm, learn to be equanimous about that. See that your desires are basically okay, but that the possibility of fulfillment is pretty limited. Learn not to get worked up about it. Be equanimous.

But that kind of equanimity is what the Buddha calls householder equanimity—realizing that you can't get the kind of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations you'd always want, so you learn to have equanimity when things don't go the way you want them to go. Notice, though, that householder equanimity is a limited kind of equanimity. It's not the kind of equanimity that the Buddha encouraged. He goes back and he looks at the formula—there is someone subject to, say, death, not wanting to die—and he focuses on the first part. Can you make yourself *not* subject to death? Can you make yourself *not* subject to birth, aging, illness and death? Where are the germs of these things? Can you get rid of them?

Well, the germs of these things lie in the mind, so that's where you attack them. That's his approach. He discovered in his practice that it is possible to take

yourself beyond aging, illness, and death. That's why the equanimity he teaches is something very different. It's the equanimity that comes from finally reaching the deathless. You look back at what you were once subject to: You're now no longer subject to death, and there's a sense of equanimity. It's a much less limiting equanimity than the one we usually hear about.

So think about this as you come up with any frustrated desires in life. The Buddha says to remember the lessons he wants you to learn. One is that desire is not a large monolithic thing. We have our desires—plural—and some of them are more skillful than others. Take advantage of that fact. Use skillful thoughts and desires to overcome unskillful ones. In other words, wean yourself away from unskillful ones. One way is by having a sense that it is possible to go beyond aging, illness, and death. But it's also important that the path give you some confirmation along the way.

This is why the practice of jhana is such an important part of the path. In fact, in one sutta, the Buddha defines the noble eightfold path as basically noble right concentration and its seven requisites. In other words, concentration is the heart of the path. The other factors of the path are things that help make it right. It's difficult to wean yourself away from ordinary desires unless you can find some sort of satisfaction someplace else, because basically what desire is, on the one hand, is dissatisfaction with what you have, along with a sense that there's a potential for greater satisfaction. That sense of that potential can stay alive only if you find some evidence of it, if you find something that is more satisfying.

This is why we try to develop a sense of well-being with the breath, a sense of well-being just in this sense of the form of the body. This is not a sensual pleasure. As the Buddha says, this kind of pleasure is blameless. It's based simply on inhabiting your body, learning from the breath, learning which ways of breathing feel good, which ways really don't feel good, which ways of concentrating the mind give a true sense of well-being, which ones give a more distorted or skewed sense. That's something you have to learn through trial and error.

Again, you're learning from your frustrated desires. You sit down and you try to concentrate the mind and you find it immediately goes off someplace else. One lesson you could learn from that is that you've got a goal to have a quiet mind, and if you try to focus on the goal, you are going to get frustrated. So don't have a goal about a quiet mind, just let it naturally settle down on its own, if it's going to. But again, that's not what the Buddha taught. That's not the lesson he wanted you to learn. He said, look at what you're doing, what you're identifying with, because that's how we deal with the issue of being someone subject to aging, illness, and death. Look at what you're identifying with. You're identifying with things that

age, grow ill, and die, so of course, you're going to be subject to aging, illness, and death. If you learn not to identify, then the mind isn't be defined by those things. It's freed. That's the kind of lesson he wants you to learn.

It's the same with concentration: What are you going to identify with? Usually you identify with whatever thought comes to your mind. Or sounds come from outside, they disturb you, and you identify with the hearer of the sounds, you identify with the function of hearing, or you identify with the function of thinking, of being disturbed. Some little stirring comes into your awareness, and you want to look into it: What's that about? Open it up a little bit, and it turns out to be a thought.

Then you start weaving that thought into larger and larger realities. What started out as simply an impetus from your past karma suddenly becomes something your present karma is entangled in. Then you drop your concentration. You've forgotten it totally; you don't know where it was. Then you suddenly remember. It's as if you've gone into another world for the time being.

What you're doing is that you're identifying with these other activities, activities that pull you away from the breath. You have to learn how to identify more with the process of meditating, being a meditator. Sometimes you hear that that kind of thinking just creates one more form of self, and it does, but it's a useful form of self to be the meditator. Ask yourself, when something comes up in the mind: What would a skillful meditator do with this? Try to use your ingenuity for getting around old habits, old patterns in the mind, so that you learn the right lessons from the practice of concentration. In other words, you learn that you can develop the mindfulness, you can develop the alertness, that makes your concentration more solid. They give you a center of well-being.

So you find your skillful desires really are more satisfying than the unskillful ones that you left behind. The Buddha understood this principle very well. We have to find a certain amount of gratification in the path. Otherwise, it gets too dry. We give up and go back to our old ways. But if you can learn the proper lessons from your frustration, seeing what it is you're doing that's not quite right, where you're identifying, where you're getting snagged on things that you don't really need to be snagged on, then you realize that it's not necessary.

This is probably one of the Buddha's most important messages: that the suffering we go through is not necessary. He's not teaching us to accept it, to be resigned to the fact that we're going to have desires that will never be fulfilled. That's like living a life of quiet desperation, calm desperation, equanimous desperation, but it's still desperate, because there's the sense that things could be better but somehow they're not getting better. He doesn't leave you there. He says

that that state of being is not necessary. There is a path of practice that leads out, that leads to the deathless, so that the wish not to have to age, grow ill, and die can be fulfilled—simply that you have to be willing to learn from your mistakes, willing to learn from your frustrated desires, trying to learn the right lessons.

Some people go through life never learning anything at all. This is why a psychotherapist has to dig up childhood patterns. You learn something in your childhood, then you don't learn anything anymore. The child is where people had to deal with frustration and it's often the level from which people deal with frustration as they grow older. They don't learn.

So whenever you meet up with frustration in your practice, asked yourself: What kind of lesson would the Buddha have you learn from this? What kind of lesson is helpful and will go all the way to the goal? If you look in those terms, you find that the path is a lot easier to sort out.