

2011-11-13 Investigating Desire

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SPEAKERS

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Last week I gave a talk about intention. And intention, I see is kind of a fat in the family of desires. And I thought I would talk a little bit today about desires. And, in general, I think in the general popular my view of Buddhism, kind of a caricature of Buddhism, it would be that Buddhism teaches that desires are bad. And the point of Buddhism is to become free of all desires. And I think it's a terrible caricature. Because to do away with all desires, probably just makes you depressed. The desires are intrinsic to being a human being. There would be no human and no human humanists wouldn't exist without desire. There's so much so that perhaps rather than calling ourselves human beings, we should be called human desire links. Because of its role, and but because it's so intrinsic and so deeply embedded to what it means to be human beings to have desires, it's very important, very worthwhile to look into what what it is to have desire, what is desires, how does desires work for us. And I think that's a task that not a lot of people do in a deep way. Too many there's too many ways in which the desires operating ins go unexamined, and unconscious, unquestioned. And part of the task of mindfulness, part of the task of developing insight is to have insight into how our desires work, the nature of those desires, the costs, the problems with desires, and also the benefits are desires. They so rather than kind of Starting off with the idea that tires are bad, I think the beginning place in Buddhism would be desire should be investigated, to be understood more deeply. And it has to be a personal investigation. You can't really read a book or listen to a Dharma talk and think now I got it. Because it's really a matter of reading the book and you understanding how it works for you. And I think for different people, desires operate different ways. And so are different ways they're understood. And so if you're not careful, if you kind of make general statements about desires, like this, then it might be true for you but might not true for other people. So it really, you know, study ourselves, find out what's going on for you. So I'll offer some thoughts or some perspectives or some ideas about investigating desire today, and then, you know, maybe that gives you some perspective to study yourself. So, I think it's helpful to look at the words Desire as an umbrella term, it's like the name of a family. It's a family name. Or, you know, in, in the classification of animals and plants they have, you know, there's How does it go their species is genus. Fabric family in the species. Here we go.

So anyway, so the word the word desire is more like you know, maybe like the genus or the family or the order and then there's all these different kinds of species of desire. And so, we have to look at all the different kind of species and kind of understand the different different kinds to have a categorical idea about desire, you know, just is too abstract because so many different types the word desire, so you know, it's a umbrella term. So we have so for example, so when I look at desire use the word I kind of like to divide desires into two general types, those desires that fit under the genus name of craving. And those that fit or the genus name of, of aspiration. And, and we, you know, there's a fork we come in, we go through our life and we're always at a fork. And the question is what kind of desire is going to operate at any given fork that we find ourselves in? Do we operate under something like craving or

drive or drivenness or clinging? neediness or do we? Do we operate by what I like to call aspiration, aspiration. I like this word because it comes from the word breath to breathe, and aspirate, you know, to have a easy, relaxed breath, to be at ease in this life. And then to allow motivations, motivations and tensions to come from some of the depth of our life, when we're relaxed, I think is a beautiful thing. And I think some of the best qualities of human being come out when we're relaxed, and we breathing easily. And so there's aspiration, which is quite beautiful to live a life of, of aspiration, is to live a life I like to think of it as some of our deepest intention are coming from our goodness. So we can look at these two geniuses, and try to understand both of them and their role in our life. So there's this side of craving, which Buddhism sometimes doesn't use, the user has a lot of words like craving. But one of the most powerful or significant words in Buddhism in this regard is thirst. And so, the thirst the word is tunda. thirst is defined or described as the condition which gives birth to our suffering. And you can quit, you could quit, you want to question that and have some doubts about it. That's okay. That's part of your investigation. But, but you can say it the other way too, that in Buddhism, if you if you're thirsting, if you're craving if you're clinging, then you will suffer. You can debate whether you're suffering on whether all your suffering comes from craving. But Buddhism says you can't really debate whether all your craving produces suffering because craving itself is involved. Suffering involves some kind of distress, some kind of pain, contraction tension, because craving or thirsting involves a kind of driven this kind of tightening around where there's an urge inside This that kind of has pressure in it, that often leads to frustration like you got it. This has to happen. You could have a wish for to drink, you can feel thirsty and it kind of easy way you or you could crave alcohol. And you're not necessarily thirsty for more liquid when you're craving alcohol. But that's, you know, when you're thirsting for alcohol, alcohol, I think we often then kind of see that's shifting now over to addiction, one of the species or subspecies. And that often has a, you know, huge territorial range. The So, part of the investigation of desire is to look at those desires, which bring about discomfort. And what's the nature of that discover what's the nature of those desires that have a downside to them? And so there's a number of downsides. To living a life or having a lot of craving or thirsting or clinging around our desires, one of them is that it produces tension. And that tension can be physical tension can be kind of connected to emotions, it can also be connected to our minds and our thinking. Our thinking can get quite tense when we really focused and intent on something with creating

frustration itself, I think or this is kind of also when not so far from perhaps fear. And I read recently that when they are neuro scans of the brain, that the this the parts of the brain that lights up when the desires are the same part that lights up when there's fear, which raises the interesting question and what's the connection between desire and fear? But so craving itself does you know we'll have demand or this driven Yes, that's pushing us is easy easily produce frustration. can't produce fear. If we don't get what we want. There's also craving can produce alienation disconnect, living on the surface of our life. Because when we're kind of in the throes and caught up in craving, desire pushed around by it, we often live in like we have blinders on. And some of the desires that people are really attached to clinging to sometimes don't really represent something that satisfies or meets the deepest parts of our lives. Sometimes it does. But so for example, you know, some of the various things people can be addicted to society which has a huge addiction issues. Maybe it's been true in all of you all societies, but I think that this often leads to kind of alienation and a separation where from others from feeling connected to others. to oneself really well, sometimes the pursuit of desire for pleasure. pleasures only kind of surface surface deep, and doesn't go as deep into us as happiness for example. So if our desires our pursuit of pleasure, it often doesn't go that deep or if or for the desire for status, you know, to be the hottest person on your block. You know, it's you know, it's that's nice, but it's not that doesn't go that deep perhaps. And so, so, you know, to be caught in the net of craving of clinging can lead to kind of alienation separation disconnect. The

also to be caught in the net of desire and clinging can lead to a lot of poor judgment. And so many people have made huge mistakes in their lives, acting on a seemingly innocent desire or an a compulsive desire or desire that was unexamined or on thought about. And later they say what was I thinking? And you know, there can be all kinds of problems that could arise because of it. So it's interesting to look at the some of our desires as desires that have more compulsion behind them, or we're feel driven by them and feel the lack of freedom. They're there, you know, that there's something inside of us is driving us it pushing us to act, sometimes even against our best judgment. It's just sometimes they come with a strong strong drives or they're sometimes because these desires are connected sometimes to our biology. And so it's quite fascinating to study, where do desires where it is, or any desires come from, and which come from our biology or from some deepens non reasoned place within us. In some of it is quite maybe beautiful, the non reason forms of desire to kind of step back and stop looking at craving. The It seems that some people, if they are children, a set of studies with children like this, but if you leave people alone and let them prove you're relaxed, and give them buffet full of different kinds of food, there's it start can be a strong tendency to choose those foods that that satisfy the new new material nutritional needs that a person has. So like pregnant women, it's very clear sometimes you know, there's strong desire for certain kinds of food, maybe because they have certain deficiencies because of the pregnancy or something. Sometimes can be strong, there's kind of a inner feeling or sense that this is the kind of food that I need right now. Sometimes it's accurate sometimes it's not but but but you know, they can they can be this This feeling inside. And so the desire for certain foods might be prompted by some deeper biological understanding of what's needed. And so it might not be a reason, you might not understand the reasons for it, but you feel this urge. And there's some wisdom to it. And then you know that there's biological urges, like, there's a wonderful and powerful and dangerous biological urge to have children. You know, and that's gotten so far thus far, you know, down through the centuries, we've all somehow that urge is somehow brought us here today. And so it certainly has its place. But it's can be so powerful. That urge, you know, it's not exactly a reason, you know, I mean, I remember when I was 14, and, you know, I didn't really have any reasoned understanding for some of the things I did I just like, you know, it's like the horse was out of the barn, it was it was galloping. And, and it was unexamined. They're just this is what the hormones were telling me to do. And so, how many of our desires are unreason? How many of them are some people say on rational I like the word unreason. And they come from these deeper places within us, urges within us. The fact that they arise from biology sometimes, does that mean that they should be that they're justified, justified and that they should be acted on? Probably not, but what I think they should be, I feel they should be respected. Rather than kind of being dismissive of desire. I think that it's desires, you know, are kind of like a force of nature. And there's certain kind of respect and reverence that you can have for it. Sometimes the kind of respect and reverence you might have for watching a beautiful sunset, or going up to Yosemite and seeing, you know, in the summer and seeing you know, that beautiful waterfalls and Half Dome and things, and sometimes it's a kind of reverence and respect, that's, you should have not for a sunset, this beautiful Yosemite in the summer, or maybe Yosemite in the winter during Gale storms. You know, it's beautiful and powerful and awe inspiring, but you better be careful. So to have, you know, this respect, deep respect and reverence for desire, I think is a beautiful thing. But then there has to be the wisdom to know what to do.

So on one hand, there's this these, this you know, genus of desires that Buddhism will call thirst or craving or have clinging as part of it, that and the strong versions of it becomes addiction or compulsion obsessions. On the other hand, there is desires that which like to call aspiration, which you know maybe comes from desires which are beneficial for us in some deep way like so compassion, for example, is a desire in Buddhism that you have compassion is a desire to alleviate suffering. It's celebrated in Buddhism as a really beautiful and profound desire. The desire for liberation, the desire to be free of suffering is a beautiful desire. What kind of other kind of beautiful desires are there? Perhaps

the desire for security and safety is a healthy desire to have the desire for self esteem, certain kind of inner personal dignity. Integrity is a beautiful desire to have desire for peace and well being. The desire to be supportive of our community to leave the world a better place is a beautiful desire to have and you know, some of these desires operate. in a big way, some of them are really, really small. I mean, if you come out of your house in the morning, and your neighbor comes out of her house in the morning, and you would like to know how she is, how are you? That's a desire. You know, we don't want to do away with that kind of desire, the desire for knowledge, the desire to be connected or know someone else, I think can be beautiful things. But all beautiful desires, all wonderful desires are desires that we can cling to. So the fact that something has a beautiful purpose doesn't mean that we're out of the woods of suffering. Because how you hold your desires is a really important issue. And this is one of the places to explore is not to Why are you desiring? And then? And then you know, is it justified or not justified to have this desire? Do I deserve this desire or not? But rather, how do you relate to having that desire? Is it a desire that you feel you feel compulsion and absolute need that has to be fulfilled? Or do you hold it lightly so that you have a desire and if it happens, great if it's easy to make it happen, great. If it doesn't happen, it doesn't really change. Your ease your inner sense of peace and well being you can just as easily with or without it. And so that, you know, the task of Buddhism is not to do away with desire, but to help free us from the compulsions we might have in relationship to our desires. That kind of way which we relate to desires that we relate. So to set up for frustration. It's a setup for suffering and pain. So even when there's beautiful desires or well reasoned desires, we're confident that we're not causing harm to other people and living on those desires, we could still relate to that desire very tightly in a very constricted way. So, then part of what we do in investigating desire is try to understand how am I relating to desires and what am I and vesting in my desires? Why am I relating to desires, what am I trying to get out of having these desires? So, there can be the desire for example, to you know simply simply the desire to understand your neighborhood better be curious, how's your neighbor doing? You ask how you're doing? And you can then you can look, why am I asking this? Why am I asking this? Maybe you're asking because you want to use the leaf blower and you would like to use it when your neighbor is not home. Or maybe you want to use the leaf blower and last time you use it your neighbor yelled at you in a ferocious way. And so you're afraid of the neighbor. And you don't want to use it, you know, neighbors gonna be home. So you're asking out of fear? Or maybe you're asking because you really want to ask your neighbors, all your neighbors how they are because you wouldn't be recognized as a saint of your neighborhood. Or perhaps, you know, or perhaps you're asking because you can get the latest gossip. And then you can tell your other neighbor.

You know, there's all there's a lot, a lot of reasons why, you know, the desires aren't necessarily innocent. There can be desires behind the desires, there's motivations behind what we're trying to do. And that's why in Buddhism, the emphasis one, the emphasis Buddhism is to look at the intention, the intent, not just look at what we're desiring, because desire itself sometimes is the is the is the front man for deeper intentions. So sometimes And some you know if someone asks you, or tells you I want something. The beautiful question can be for what purpose? For what, what's your intent and wanting, wanting that thing. And that's a way of kind of exploring more deeply, rather than just taking the surface of what's going on. So aspiration, I think, for me, comes from breathing, the word breathing to, like respiration. And so can Is there a kind of place or a way that desires can arise within us where they arise from someplace that we think is valuable or beautiful? A place of ease and peacefulness, a place where we're how we find our way through our life and get our needs met? Get our you know, get take care of his life we live the desires to do that. Do not limit us Do not press straight us does not constrict us. But rather those desires arise out of a sense of freedom with a sense of freedom. We can take it or leave it. And it's possible to be very motivated, extremely motivated and do a lot of hard work. And at the same time, hold the intent, the aspiration very likely, it's possible to have tremendous sense of purpose to accomplish something, and not be attached to the outcome. And it's possible to be attached.

And so part of the part of what we do in Buddhism is to look how am I holding this and do I need is it required to hold on tightly? Is it required to, you know, to look to keep looking. So then part of this investigation into desire is also to learn how do we hold desire, how do we relate to it, but how do we bring our mindfulness and practice to desire so that desire are, we can be wise and free with our desires. Because to have desires which have compulsion with them, there's very little freedom. So what does it mean to have the heart free and still have wishes. So, it takes a lot of mindfulness. And, and so part of the role of, of this practice here is to look at desires. But it's hard just to look. What helps a lot with strong desires is to feel it in your body, to drop down and feel what's going on physically, when there's compulsion, desire, to feel what's going on physically when there's aspiration, to not be blinded by the object of the desire. What are the functions of mindfulness practice is to help us stay grounded in our subjects. experience will easily happen when there's a desire. Desire involves wanting something. And because it's a, it has an object to our desire, sometimes we get blinded by the object of what we want. And we lose touch with our subjective experience when we're having the desire. And so part of the function of mindfulness is to come back and feel the subjective experience, how am I right now, as I'm having the desire, because if you can feel your subjective experience, then you have access to a lot more wisdom about what's really going on. Very simply, part of that wisdom is you can notice the cost to you for having that desire. You can notice the effect that it has on you. And it's possible to notice that desire has a deleterious effect. And if you really feel that you'll feel you know what I want not worth it. Because it's the you know, amount of stress them having or you can feel How beautiful it is to have desire This seems to arise and some easy like a, like a beautiful fountain of, of wishing that is, you know just is there in a free light floating way. And if the circumstances are appropriate, it's beautiful to act on it or not. So part of the function of mindfulness has come into our body so that we can feel the subjective aspect of what it's like to have a desire. So we learned a lot from that.

Another very important part of mindfulness, as we kind of stay in the subjective experience means we stay in the present moment. The subjective experience is always in the present moment. And the present moment is the only place where you can choose what to do. If you really want to have some choice choice only happens in the present moment. Unless you're in the present moment, the less you have access to your capacity to choose to make a choice. And so mindfulness helps put us in the present moment. And then one of the great capacities, great choices that hopefully you can make, that represents your freedom and not your oppression is the choice not to act on a desire. If you have to have that, that's one of the really significant choices we can make. You might not be able to choose what desires come up. But you can choose whether you act on the desire not whether you pick it up, whether you allow it to kind of course through you and drive you and push you. And so part of the function of mindfulness system he teach you how to let go of the compulsions, let go of the drive, so that the desires can maybe be there, but we're not invested in it. We're not identified with it. We're not attached to it. Some people get very upset about this idea because the idea of not being attached to desire sounds like, you know, like, then there's nothing. Yeah, what are you doing? How are you gonna, you're not gonna act, you're not gonna want anything. And I'm suggesting that it's different than that I'm suggesting that you can still have desire when there's no attachment. But if there's no attachment, then you can be, you have much more opportunities for you to be wise about how you act on the desire. If there's attachment, there's probably not going to be much as much opportunity for you to be wise, reasoned, to be considered to be heartfelt in exploring the nature of this desire. So mindfulness helps us to be out to see the cost, see where it's coming from subjectively. It helps us to see and study desires more carefully, and helps put us in a place of choice. Or it helps show us where we have no choice where we're lost our free And then when we see where there's no freedom, then we can be inspired to practice, we can be hopefully inspired have the aspiration, to find a way to live freely to discover a kind of inner freedom, to have the heart set free and not contracted, not driven. And it's one

of the most beautiful things to experience in this life is a mind a heart, which is really free of any kind of attachment or clinging to any kind desire whatsoever. Rather than being a diminished life, it's an enhanced life. And one of the because there's a greater sense of well being greater sense of peace, in that freedom. And one of the great desires healthy aspirations to have is the desire for well being peaceful, stable, open, relaxed sense of well being. which some people you know, call different things but one of the things I like to call it refer to it as as integrity to Feel that we're integral, whole, complete, that we're not fragmented or divided against ourselves or divided against this world, to be in the world in a whole relaxed, open full way with and so the best of our desires can inform. We live our life. We can't live our life without desires. But we can live our lives without clinging to desire. And I think that's one of the huge tasks of mindfulness practice is to show us and teach us that capacity. So maybe that gives you enough kind of ideas, maybe too many of something that you can explore on your own now, and that's really my hope and wish for you, in my intention of giving this talk is to give you some kind of material, so you leave today

inspire to spend the week Exploring and thinking about the nature of your desires and your relationship to desires and the different kinds of desires. So you can do a, me a classification tree. And, and, you know, put them all together maybe maybe, you know, guilt guilt didn't have it right when he just said there's no two classes, you know, you know, the craving class and aspiration class, maybe you have more classes in your ecology. And so how would you classify them? How would you understand your desires and what your relationship is to them? And what are the what are the effects on you? What are the consequences and the costs for you on acting on these different kinds of desires that you can have? So I don't really encourage you, I hope that that's the result of today is you'll think about it some and one of the great things to do I think is also is to go find some friends, wise people you know, and also total stress dangers that you can talk to them about this issue of desire. That's what do you know about desire? What's your What do you thought about it? And, and so can they still be involved in conversations to kind of pull out and, and, you know, explore it more fully that way. Each of you have fun with your desires. So we have a couple of minutes before the end. If anybody has any questions about this, you'd like to ask, I'd be happy to try to answer.

Thank you. Um, I get a beautiful image of this way of being with desire and holding it lightly. And then I'm trying to apply it to a real world situation. I find my greatest strength is in my passions for things. Right now, as you know, it's starting this new school. And the passion gives me the energy to do it even when I'm tired and to just wake up in the morning and go for it. But I don't know whether that's a contracting thing or an expansive thing. I don't know where that fits. I don't know if that's healthy or not, can you help me understand? No.

The only way I can help you maybe understand more than I've tried to do in this giving this talk is to put a mirror on you and help you to look more deeply at yourself. To really understand what's going on in your body and your heart and your mind. Meditation is a great mirror. So it's beautiful to have a strong passion for something and be really want to do something and so you know you're holding is likely it When you sit down to meditate, you can put it aside but if it kind of follows you everywhere you go and driven se then you know you're probably probably somewhat attached

Thank you so that means I have my good weeks and my bad weeks

Thank you

so this is a group of people had doesn't make up for Carla doesn't really have any issues or questions around desire. Maybe you're not a desire type people. Not really relevant.

Thank you girl for your talking. I'm struggling with sleepiness right now because my desire is in conflict with my neighbor's desire. And he seems to be making lots of noises. And so I think that's really my struggle with, you know, trying to work with my own desire for peace and quiet my house versus verses and acceptance and you know, and then working with when they my desires are in conflict with other desires basically.

So I think that question there but in that looking at this kind of issue, perhaps it's helpful just to drop this word desire, because of how abstract it is, you know, it's this huge you know, umbrella term and then try to understand more particularly, what kind of desire is it? Is it you know, is it a wish and aspiration does it arise out of Need Is it is it connected to your biology, you know that you need it. more sleep. And this is actually a problem for you not to get enough and does it come out of, you know, you know, is it you know, what's it connected to and look more deeply for you. I think it's probably it's connected to many things within you. And so sometimes there can be a healthy need to get enough sleep, if that's what's going on. And, and that can be a healthy thing to want more sleep and not be disturbed to sleep disturbed, but it can also at the same time be connected to maybe some unnecessary attachments. So for example, it could be that you want more sleep, which you need, but part of wanting more sleep is that so that you can go out and spend time with your friends without looking like you're dragging? because then they'll judge you negatively. And so how you look you know, you know, looking good is so important right in our society. So you want to look good and you How can you look good if you don't, you don't get enough sleep, so and so then you know, all kinds of social issues. creeping in. And then there's issues of self righteousness that come in when our neighbors make a lot of noise, you know how, you know our sense of justice. And so then there's a desire rising out of, and our, you know, and desires, even though we call it desire. hostility and aversion is a form of desire. Right, So what is it? What form does it take? And then part of a part of that is, you know, just differentiating between needs and wants. And that, you know, we have needs, and then the question is how do we pursue our needs and appropriate way for ourselves so, we don't suffer in the pursuit of it, and how do we pursue our needs in a way that, you know, in a way that works or is appropriate with the people around us? So, how do you know, is there some way of talking with your neighbors some way of sharing your need your situation with your neighbor, some way of finding a way that both of you can coexist? And it might be, you know, sometimes it's not that the issue of the noise might not be really the real issue. The real issue is how do two human beings relate to each other? Do they relate to each other with respect or not? And perhaps, you know, the issue of the noise is a cover or, you know, is a surface thing for something deeper, which is, you know, there's not, you know, a decent, ordinary respect that human beings should give each other is not occurring, this person is completely dismissive of the fact that there's a neighbor. And that's the kind of so you know, the deeper issue and what might be where you're more, you know, caught sometimes than the noise. So, I don't know if this is helpful, but just you know, there's so much to explore, and it's worth exploring, and if you have the luxury, and if you don't have the luxury to talk to the property manager.

Okay, so Oh, if you type in a question, it depends how long the answer might be. Guess is up to me. So

yeah, on the subject of stadia talked about falling under the state of silence. One thing I'm curious about one thing I'm curious about is, when you're physically fatigued, the mind tends to get flooded with negative thoughts and emotions. And I'm just curious what what kind of thought was the adjective negative thoughts and emotions when you physically fit eat? Yes. I'm just curious if you can shed some light on that.

Well, I think stress is a is often stress is uncomfortable. And when we're uncomfortable, it tends to, I don't know it just discomfort tends to produce impatience, aversion, hostility, frustration. And so those things are often produce negative thoughts and emotions you further things like that. One of the great parts of training in Buddhist monasteries is the discomforts that are part of that training. And one of them, one of them is sometimes not getting enough sleep. Now it's important to get enough sleep. But I found that also very useful to practice in situations where we're quite uncomfortable. So I can really see these things and how my mind works and find a way to be fatigued, to feel uncomfortable without it. Creating negative feelings and thoughts. If you're always shying away from being uncomfortable, then you might not do the inner work to really understand how to relate to this stuff differently. One of the things that I mean this is a no jumping little bit but in that craving and clinging, especially like addiction, keeps us kind of on the surface of life and feels not so deeply connected. There's something that often feels I believe feels uncomfortable about that and that's discomfort, sometimes will be a catalyst for wanting more. And so there's sometimes gonna be this loop, or self reinforcing kind of pattern. Where, like addictions, search for pleasure. Isn't that deep, it's kind of it kind of leaves leaves us kind of unsatisfied. The lack of satisfaction. If someone doesn't know any other way of getting satisfied, will will prompt them with more sensual pleasure more drinking more drugs more something which makes them even more satisfied. And then they produce more of it. And it just becomes more and more until they spiral out. Anyway, so it's a good question, and my answer wasn't what the question deserved. So we'll leave it for that now. Hopefully you're not frustrated.

So sorry. Anyway, so there is this tea. You're welcome to stay and hang out. It's very nice to hang out this. And this nice weather. You can take your tea and your snacks outside and if you want and some of you who are new here today, and so you're welcome. You're very welcome to stay. And if those of you who have been here before come regularly, notice that if someone around here seems kind of new or you think is new or you know say hello to them, welcome them. Thank you