

Accomplishment in Desire

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So good afternoon, everybody. Good afternoon here. Can you hear me all right? Audible. And good afternoon or good evening or good morning or whatever time of day it is to those of you who are in the Zoom room, the Zoom meditation hall. So you've made it through a whole morning and afternoon of practice.

And as Kirsten mentioned this morning, often the first and second days, maybe even, no, we'll just say the first day, can be kind of challenging. And so I hope you've been really kind to yourselves during the day. Often there's sleepiness or restlessness or both. The mind just wants to keep doing what it likes to do, which is come up with things to think about. And it can be kind of challenging. But, you know, it's just part of the practice.

And being kind to yourself and just recognizing that this too shall pass is really a good way to approach it. Take care of yourself. So every day, this week, at this time, at four o'clock Pacific time, we'll be looking at one of the qualities that the Buddha suggested would be really beneficial to practice well, to become successful in, to accomplish. That's the language in the Sutta, in the Suttas, the Sun Series, the series of short Suttas that we're working with this week. It compares these qualities to the dawn, you know, the light that illuminates the day that is to come. And they're called forerunners, as Kirsten actually read that part of the Sutta last night.

Forerunners of the Eightfold Path. And the implication is that developing them fully, that is, becoming accomplished in them, supports us when we walk this path, when we walk the spiritual path that we're walking. And it supports our ability to really engage in a full way. So we're going to be looking at these qualities one by one. And they're all really useful individually in our practice, but it's also really good, I think, to see the ways in which each of them supports the development of the others. And that's true of so many, so many of the healthy

ways of, excuse me, of thinking or acting, healthy attitudes, that the Dharma asks us to to cultivate.

There's a symbiotic relationship between the individual qualities or actions described in kind of all the Buddhist lists, I think. I sometimes think of the whole of the Dharma as a kind of Indra's net, if you're familiar with that image. An infinite net of jewels where each jewel in the net reflects all the others and is reflected in them. So it's like they're all implied in each other. And some of the qualities in this Sun Series list will be familiar to you if you've been around the this insight meditation scene I'm practicing for very long. Spiritual friendship and diligence or heedfulness, wise attention, working with views, *diṭṭhi*, views.

But as Kirsten mentioned, a couple of them might seem a little bit odd for us to, as qualities to become proficient in, you know, to accomplish. And one is, one of those is self, *atta*, self. You know, doesn't Buddhism say, there is no self, or if there is a self we should move beyond it in some way, isn't there? So we'll learn about that. And desire, you know, we're supposed to become successful in desire. And that's what I'm going to talk about this afternoon.

Desire usually gets a pretty bad rap in Buddhism. It seems like there are a lot of people, including a lot of Buddhists, who have the idea that completely eradicating desire is a goal of our practice, a goal of the path, that we should aim toward a kind of permanently neutral state of mind, neutral attitude to everything that's going on in our lives, as though we shouldn't have any preferences at all. But of course it's not possible or desirable, I use that word intentionally, to live our lives without desire. We wouldn't bother to eat, we wouldn't bother to get dressed or go to school or go to work or take care of ourselves or our families or do pretty much anything if there wasn't an inclination in the mind toward doing those things, a desire. We wouldn't be here in this room or in the mini rooms that our Zoom retreatants are in, practicing together during this week. And we hear, you know, we hear very often in Dharma talks, if we've heard a lot of Dharma talks, that craving leads to *dukkha*.

Dukkha, the Pāli word that we usually translate as suffering, sometimes stress. I think suffering is a pretty good translation. And there's a really strong case for craving leading to *dukkha*. And of course craving is a kind of desire. But there are desires and then there are desires. And the Pāli word for desire in this series is different from the word for craving.

Kirsten mentioned this word last night. It's *chanda*. C-H-A-N-D-A is how it's transliterated. *Chanda*. And it can refer both to desires that are healthy and desires that are not so healthy. And living our lives, I'm sure we've all been influenced by both kinds of desires.

But craving is different. Craving is always associated with *dukkha*, and I'll get to that differ-

ence in a little bit. So the Sun Series encourages us to become successful or accomplished in desires that are healthy. And I think not just ordinary healthy desires, like taking care of our families if we have them, more health, you know, having work that we like, that satisfies us, having a roof that doesn't leak when it rains. Deeper desires, desires that come from the same place within us where concern and care for others lives. Where our deepest aspirations come from.

And that's the translation that I like for this word *chanda* in this context. Aspiration. To aspire to something implies to me that it's something that's worth achieving. It's something that's worth going after. It's something kind of important. And there's a, in the word itself, there's a kind of a sense of opening to potential that feels really good to me, worth paying attention to.

Gil, this morning, Gil talked about keeping our practice moist, you know, not dried out. And aspiration has that quality for me of moistness, you know, it absorbs what's good. Other ways of translating *chanda* include, oh I forgot to turn on the recording. Oh well. There we go. Other ways of translating *chanda* include zeal, enthusiasm, inspiration.

Inspiration, I like that. Inspiration and aspiration. They both have a whole body connotation for me. Both words, of course, they're rooted in the Latin root for to breathe. *Spirare*, to breathe. And with inspiration, you know, we're breathing something in, sort of filling ourselves up, something that nourishes, something that feeds us.

And with aspiration, we're breathing towards something. And I like to think of it as something worth breathing towards. And, you know, the English words spirit and spiritual, they have this same root, the Latin root for breathing. And I really love the idea of our spiritual life being associated with the breath, with the vitality and intimacy of our lived life. So I started out in the talk using the word desire instead of aspiration because I had a feeling that the idea of becoming accomplished in desire might kind of get your attention a little bit. I hope it did anyway.

And it also seems useful really to start out by really pointing out that not all desire has to be a problem in our practice, that healthy desires have a role in our path, a big role even. So in order to become accomplished in desire, which is what this particular teaching is asking of us, I think it makes sense to distinguish between this healthy desires and craving, the flavor of desire that's always associated with *dukkha*, with suffering. And then once that difference is clear, the difference between *chanda* and *taṇhā*, the word for craving, then it's useful to look at the desires, the *chanda* that comes up and that shows up in our lives, and discern the difference between the ones that are beneficial, the ones that are aspirational, and those

which aren't so healthy. So that's my plan for talking about these. So first off, how is *chanda* different from craving?

Anytime that I want to understand some mental state or emotion or attitude that I'm experiencing, the first thing I do is I look to the body. I pay close attention to what's going on somatically, and I think that's where I get the best information about what's really going on in my heart and mind. And I can tell when I'm in the grip of craving by being really attentive to what the desire feels like in my body, as well as in my mind, my mind and heart. With craving there's always a sense of constriction somewhere in the body, often in my chest, sometimes in the throat. Maybe even in my arms, as though there's a kind of urge to move forward, to grasp something. And craving always has a quality of a kind of neediness in the mind.

That's my experience of it. Sometimes it's very subtle, but sometimes it comes as almost a compulsion. So, in addition to the bodily tightness, which is always there for me, even if it's subtle, there's contraction in my attention, so that all that seems to matter in the moment is what it is that I'm craving, what I want. There's a kind of clamping down, a sense of being driven. There's no ease, there's no calm when there's craving. On the other hand, with sort of ordinary, everyday *chanda*, like the desire to make breakfast or brush my teeth, there's no contraction, there's no compulsive feeling.

I'm not being driven. It's more like I'm making a choice, just moving in the direction of what seems sensible and useful right at the time. And when there is that sense of aspiration, you know, when the desire comes from a deeper place, there's also a sense of opening to possibility. Opening, the opposite of clamping down. So that tight, constricted, needy quality of craving, it can be pretty obvious. It can be pretty easy to identify when the craving is something really strong, like sexual lust can be.

Or if there's addiction, you know, the need for the thing that we're addicted to, it can be overpowering, whether that's a substance or some activity like, you know, shopping, even, for some people. Gambling. Lots of different things. There can be the sense, I need to have this, or I need for this to happen. That sense that we don't have a choice, that the craving is in charge. There's a quote from Mick Jagger, of all people, that I often think of in this regard.

He once said, too much is never enough. Too much is never enough. And that just feels to me like the essence of craving and of the *dukkha* of it as well. That sense of it not being enough. Just recently I read a quote from John D. Rockefeller, you know, the founder of Standard Oil Company and the kind of patriarch of the whole Rockefeller dynasty of wealth and power in this country. And when he was asked one time how much money was enough, he said, a little more, a little more.

There's just no stopping place when there's craving. And addictions are like that, of course. Alcohol, other substances, smoking of one kind or another, gambling, sex, shopping, things I mentioned before. For a lot of people today, you know, our electronic devices are a huge source of craving. And if you left your phone with the managers yesterday to be locked up, you know, maybe it was a response to recognizing that you might be feeling that kind of craving during the retreat. And those of you who kept your devices, I imagine you might occasionally feel that kind of urgency, that real strong desire to pick them up, to open them up, to turn them on.

And I hope you're refraining from doing that. You promised you would when you applied for the retreat. And if you're finding that difficult, you know, there's still the option of having it locked up. You can turn it in to the managers anytime. And those sitting the retreat at home, you're kind of doubly tested because you have to use a computer or some other device in order to connect to the retreat. And whether you're here or at home and feeling a craving to use your devices, you know, I invite you to spend some time really feeling into the desire, feeling the lack of ease, feeling if there's that contraction, that constriction that I find so characteristic of craving.

That feeling itself is *dukkha*. My experience is craving is *dukkha*. It's very useful to get to know the *dukkha* of craving, to get to know it well. I have a really strong sense about all kinds of *dukkha* that we don't give up any of our unhealthy tendencies until we've really felt the pain of them, until we've really, really experienced the *dukkha* that's inherent in them. So getting to know what craving feels like is a really important part of our practice. And of course, you can bring up any struggles with your devices, you can bring up any struggles with those things during your practice discussions with us.

So anytime I feel that sense of neediness, of constriction in my desire for anything, then I know I really need to look more closely at what's going on. I recognize there's craving. And on the other hand, when there's a feeling of a spaciousness, a kind of uplifted feeling in desire, around a desire that shows up, then I feel like I can trust that more. I read a monastic teacher's description of another difference between wholesome *chanda* and craving when I was preparing for this talk. And this teacher said that *chanda* is desire for an action, a desire to act, desire for an action, desire to act, whereas craving is focused on the object rather than an action. It's focused on the object, on what it wants.

And that kind of points to that sense of opening up to something that I associate with aspiration, with healthy desires and aspiration. And all healthy desires aren't really aspirations. I don't think I'll get to that. Sometimes, of course, in our practice we crave particular experi-

ences in our meditation. Spaciousness, calm, deep *samādhī*. And then the craving that we are feeling for those experiences, it flavors our effort in practice.

It makes our effort tight, kind of straining, dry, like Gil was talking about this morning, like he was describing this morning. We can kind of bear down with our attention on the moment, sort of squeezing it, squeeze the life out of it, really. Trying to squeeze it into the shape that we're looking for. You know, what we're looking for is pretty much the opposite of something squeezed and straining. So straining after spaciousness and calm is just a contradiction in terms. Aspiration can have a lightness to it.

We can aspire to, well, we can, I'll talk about that later. There's a classic image probably most of you have seen from Buddhist mythology of the hungry ghosts. These beings in a kind of hell realm with enormous bellies and then really tiny little mouths. Mouths almost like straws and they're never able to fulfill their hunger. They're never able to fill their bellies. They're straining so hard to get something through that tiny little opening.

And those mouths are kind of like, it seems to me, what happens in our mind when there's strong craving. Gets tight, it gets small. It doesn't allow us to experience the fullness of our lives. And craving can be, it can also be more subtle. I'll sometimes at home open the fridge door and they'll see a bar of dark chocolate with hazelnuts. It sits right at eye level when I open the fridge door.

It's always there. And my throat might get a little tight in anticipation. I want a piece. But when I'm mindful of what's going on inside me, I can feel the subtle contraction in my whole being in the wanting, you know. The kind of leaning forward, that wanting to grasp. And I've come to experience that leaning forward as unpleasant.

I feel the *dukkha* in it. I feel the suffering in it. And almost always, I think pretty much always, I think my husband can probably confirm that, I feel that and I don't pick up the chocolate. Not giving in to the craving. As soon as I close the fridge door, it usually disappears. It came and it went when I didn't obey its command.

And in contrast, someone might offer me a piece of chocolate. I like chocolate, and I'm happy to receive it, and I'm happy to eat it, but there isn't that sense that this is the thing I have to have right now. In my experience, there is always that contraction, that constriction around craving. The thing we crave becomes kind of big in the mind. We don't see around it. That the Pāli word *taṇhā*, that is translated as craving, literally means thirst.

You've probably heard that before. And my sense of that is that it's a kind of insatiable thirst. It's a thirst that's never going to be satisfied, just like those hungry ghosts are never going

to be satisfied. But with *chanda*, there's more of a choice. It's not a compulsion. That's the difference, I think, between *chanda* and craving, at least in my experience.

Chanda, there's some examples. You know, just the simple desire to get out of bed in the morning. There's *chanda* there. There's an inclination just to move, to get up, to go about the day. To eat breakfast maybe a little bit later. Maybe, for me, there might be a little craving that shows up around coffee.

Oh yeah, there's a kind of that gotta have it feeling. It's subtle, but I can feel it. But then the rest of breakfast. You know, yeah, I want to eat it, I enjoy it. My husband makes breakfast for us every morning. And whatever he chooses to make is just fine.

There's simple desire, just simple *chanda*. And those desires, those kinds of desires, are not a problem. But they're also not the kind of desire that the Buddha was pointing to when he encouraged us to become accomplished in *chanda*. And then of course there are those desires that aren't just simple and sensible, things that are not so healthy. Desire for sensual pleasure is one of the hindrances, something that gets in the way of our peace, our composure. And, you know, maybe there's a desire for a big house or a fancy car or some piece of clothing that's really special.

Maybe a luxurious meal. Some desire that's related to how I see myself or that gives me some kind of status or some kind of extra comfort in my life that defines me in some way. There may not be actual craving, might not have that sense of constriction inherent, but it can feel like, if I did have that thing, or that relationship, or that activity, it would say something about me, or I'd be happier, I'd feel more successful in my life. And for a lot of people, of course, trying to fulfill those kinds of desires becomes the central focus of life. Our culture really encourages that approach to life. Getting stuff, finding the perfect partner, the perfect job.

The idea that things outside of ourselves are the key to being happy. That kind of pervades the culture we live in. And I think a lot of us come to Buddhist practice in the first place because we've seen that following those kinds of desires in life doesn't actually bring happiness. It might give us some temporary satisfaction, but there's always that desire for a little more, or a little something different maybe. There's always more to want. What was great last year, isn't working so well now.

That terrific job came with a toxic culture. That lovely car costs a lot to maintain. It just doesn't end. There's always room for improvement. And as we practice mindfulness and become more sensitive to what's going on in our minds, you know, we'll very likely notice that desires are just popping up all the time. We're kind of sitting innocently in meditation,

just paying attention to our breath or some other aspect of what's going on.

And then, oh, there's a really strong urge to scratch and itch. Or there's a train of thought that might be kind of fun to follow. And then there's a desire for that train of thought to please stop pestering me. Then there's an urge to move, a desire for the bell to ring. They just don't stop desires. And after a while, you know, the effect of all this grasping at one thing and pushing away another thing becomes clearer and clearer.

We start to see how often we're just kind of yanked around by desires, even little desires, like what happens when I see that bar of chocolate in the fridge. Desires are inexhaustible. Inexhaustible. And the kind of desires that focus on acquiring things and acquiring experiences and status, on basing our contentment on satisfying desires for those things, those desires are also exhausting. And when that becomes clear to us, really clear to us, I think we start to get the idea that we don't actually have to give a lot of weight or validity to those kinds of desires. We don't have to obey their commands.

I remember as a child and hearing, as a parent also hearing out in the neighborhood kids say this to each other, one child will be trying to get another one to do something and the one who's being asked to do something or required to do something says, you're not the boss of me. You're not the boss of me. And we can say that to our desires. You're not the boss. We can watch them show up, maybe we can even smile at them, you know, and say, no thanks, not going there. We just develop more and more discernment about which desires are worth listening to, worth following, and which aren't.

And there are, as I mentioned before, there are desires, the desires to take care of our families if we have them, to take care of our health, to be good neighbors, to volunteer for organizations like IRC that serve others, organizations that serve the earth. They're all kinds of really wholesome activities that we can have a desire to engage in. And they add to our satisfaction of life, and they benefit others and the world. And those are really wholesome desires. They can be a problem if we cling to them, of course. Anytime we cling, there will be *dukkha*.

But I think this sun series is talking about desire that's even more wholesome than these kind of everyday, lovely, wholesome desires. The desire that we're encouraged to accomplish, to become successful in, the kind that really supports walking the path to its end, is desire that's onward leading. Onward leading. Maybe that phrase onward leading is unfamiliar to you. It's my absolute favorite phrase from the Dharma. And what it points to is that the Dharma has a natural quality of leading us in the direction of greater happiness, greater freedom in the mind and heart, greater peace.

That it leads us towards liberation. That's a direction I want to go. I hope you do too. I want to be led in that direction. So desires that are onward leading, those are the ones I think of as the deepest aspirations, the ones that we're being encouraged to accomplish, to become fully, fully powerful in, fully skilled in. *Chanda* brings us to practice and moves us to pay attention to our moment-to-moment experience in our meditation practice, in our mindfulness practice.

It's there in our intention to come and listen to Dharma talks or to meet with our teachers, to sit all day in a room with a group of people or in a virtual room if we're sitting the retreat from home. But what's our deepest aspiration? What's your deepest aspiration? Your deepest aspiration for your life? You know, what moves you to sit on your meditation seat? What brings you on retreat to spend a week sitting and walking and being willing to be present to everything that arises in your body, in your mind, in your heart.

What's your deepest motivation for all that? There are lots of possible beautiful aspirations behind that kind of activity. For some it might be the desire for full liberation, for complete freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion. For some, maybe, you know, to have an open, undefended heart. To be more generous. For some, maybe to have just more peace of mind, less anxiety, a more satisfying inner life.

To let go of judging others or judging ourselves. To love people more. To become harmless. A place of safety for others. Lots of possibilities. A lot more than I just listed.

The texts speak of the desire for liberation itself, the desire to follow the path of practice as *dhmma-chanda* in Pāli. So it's often translated as the longing for the Dhamma, for the Dharma, and for what the Dharma leads to. So we see the promise of the path and practice and it inspires us and we want to follow it. Ajahn Suchito, a British monk and respected teacher, has called this aspiration a psychological yes. It's an enthusiastic yes, I think, really embracing a possibility. I think it's really important to maintain a connection with our deepest aspirations for our lives.

It can lift our hearts and it supports our determination to keep going. It's possible for our meditation practice sometimes to be, you know, just another thing we do to every day, a kind of healthy habit, like exercising or eating well, and to lose track of the potential of our practice to, you know, to take us to deep peace, to freedom of heart and mind that we can really count on. We can rely on. Last night when I introduced the refuges, I spoke a little about how inspired I am by the possibility of liberation that this path promises. And also by the example of the Buddha who, you know, he had such confidence that he'd found a way to the end of suffering that he was willing to wander around northern India for forty years. Just

teaching what he'd come to understand to other people freely right up to the day he died.

Kind of amazing. And I connect with that. That really close feeling I have for the refuges before I sit for meditation every day and when I'm on retreat several times a day I consciously connect with my most heartfelt aspirations for practice and I sincerely repeat a vow to myself. And every time I do that, I'm inspired by that. It connects me to my aspiration. It connects me to my heart.

And at the end of each sit, as I bow after the bell rings, then I connect again the goodness of my effort to my aspiration. And those are ways, those are ways that really work for me to staying connected to why I practice so that my motivation can stay fresh. It can be moist in my heart and my mind. There are ways of saying yes, that kind of yes that Ajahn Suchito spoke of. So taking the refuges, for a lot of people that's another way of connecting to our aspirations. We can find our own relationship to each one of them, you know, looking for what inspires us.

Individually, in the Buddha, in the Dharma, in the Sangha. You know, what inspires you about these, or about practice in general, about the promise of practice, might be very different from what inspires me. We need to find our own sources of inspiration, of aspiration. Everybody's different. And practicing because it's good for us, you know, from some sense of should. It's not going to see us through, I don't think.

It has to be important to us. It has to come from within. And that's where aspiration comes from. When I first started writing this talk I was really focused on covering all the aspects of desire that might be useful to hear about. My connection to the topic was more conceptual. It wasn't really personal.

And I recognized that I was leaving the heart out of it. An aspiration, in my experience, it comes from my heart, what I think of as my heart, the place where all the beautiful qualities arise from. Generosity, wisdom, kindness, all those, love. And wherever that place is in you, you know, I encourage you just stay connected to that. That's what keeps our aspiration alive. That's what keeps it saying, yes.

And along with *dhamma-chanda*, this aspiration to follow the Dharma path, there comes kind of organically, I think, a related desire to act in ways that lead in that direction, that are in alignment with the Dharma. So a related desire in Pāli is *kusala-chanda*. *Kusala* is a word that means skillful or wholesome. It's another word that I find really inspiring. So we can look at the desires that arise in our minds and we can discern whether they're skillful or not, wholesome or not, by looking at what motivates them. Do they arise out of unwholesome

motivations?

Greed, hatred, and delusion in brief? Or all the kinds of different variations of those? Or do they arise from a beneficial motivation? A desire to be generous, to be kind, to be helpful? A desire to wake up? A desire that leads us onward, that we can aspire toward?

If we aspire to become liberated, if we aspire, if we breathe towards it, to become completely free of greed, hatred, and delusion in all the ways that they show up in our lives, then it makes a lot of sense to start acting in a way that kind of expresses those qualities. The absence of greed, hatred, and delusion. And that's skillful, wholesome activity. It's what ethical development is all about. So we gradually move away from harming others and harming ourselves, from deceiving ourselves or others, from all kinds of varieties of self-centeredness. We move toward harmlessness, towards truthfulness and kindness and generosity.

We aspire to let go of craving. These desires move us into the flow of the Dharma, you know, the current that is onward leading. Our wholesome aspirations, they're things that can support us in every area of our practice. Anytime we make an effort to cultivate some beautiful quality, it can be there. Aspiration, fueling our effort. It's the motivator for practicing the wise efforts, you know, the sixth factor of the Eightfold Path, which is what this series is the precursor to, the Eightfold Path.

The sixth factor of the Eightfold Path is wise effort, which asks us to cultivate and strengthen beautiful qualities of mind and to prevent the arising of or to abandon the ones that aren't so healthy. This quality of *chanda* shows up in many Dharma teachings as a support for our growth, for deepening, for progress on the path. And as I mentioned in the beginning, the other qualities that we'll be talking about this week are supports for and are supported by our aspirations. Like with so many of the other lists in the Dharma, there's just this symbiosis between the six that we're talking about. And I think that will become clear as the week goes on. Ajahn Sumedho, kind of the most senior, I think, Western monastic teacher in the Theravādan tradition, sometimes says, desire is the natural energy of this realm, the human realm, the world we live in.

It's natural, you know, it's built into our biology, our neurology. And we can put it to good use or we can put it to use that's not so good. So we use this wholesome desire, this *dhamma-chanda*, it has the power to gradually weaken the pull of craving, the pull of the unhealthy desires. And eventually to uproot craving entirely. When we follow the aspiration to practice, you know, the aspiration to engage in what the Buddha called skillful or wholesome, to become more kind, more generous, more wise, there's like deep satisfaction in that. It's a kind of desire that is really worth following, a desire to be grateful for, not to judge, to be grateful

for.

It's inspiring. It fills us up. That's what I have to say about desire for this evening. And thank you very much for your attention. And we have a couple of announcements. One is that we'll begin having practice discussions tomorrow.

And half of you will be seen tomorrow, and the other half will be seen on Wednesday. And there's a sign-up sheet down on the doors to the dining room, and they're there now. And so we ask you to sign up in one slot. You sign up in one slot, and what that does is it covers two meetings. So you'll be signing up to meet with two of the teachers. Two out of three of the teachers.

So you choose one slot on either Tuesday or Wednesday to sign up for and that will give you two meetings. And then on the final day of the retreat, if you'd like to meet with the teacher you didn't meet with in those two meetings or meet with one that you already met with. Again, you'll have that opportunity probably. But for tonight, it would be really great if you could sign up by, what time should people sign up? By 7.45, it would be really great. And then remember also this evening at 7.15 we'll have the fireside chat.

It's informal gathering here where people who are new or newish to practice, people who have questions about the day or about the practice in general will have an opportunity to meet with us and just go over whatever is making you curious. I think that's all the announcements. And I thank you very much for your attention and have a lovely evening of practice.