What Do We Really Want?

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Good evening. Welcome.

I remember this was quite something, a few years ago, maybe a few decades ago, I don't know, when someone said, "Oh, Buddhism. Yeah, that seems a little ridiculous." I asked, "Why?" He said, "Oh, because they say that desire is the source of suffering, but that means you can't desire to not have suffering. It just seems ridiculous." I thought, "Oh, okay." Well, we didn't really have the conversation go further, but somehow it really stuck with me—this idea that this person had assumed. Because, right, we hear the Four Noble Truths[1] foundational teaching, and sometimes the Second Noble Truth is understood as, well, maybe I'll just say the First Noble Truth: there is suffering. There is dukkha[2]. Dukkha is this word that gets translated as suffering, but it means such a wide range of things. Nobody's going to deny that there is suffering. Nobody is going to deny that there's difficulties. Of course, all of us experience this.

And then we could say part of what the Buddha offered is what sometimes gets said as the Second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering. Like what's underneath it? What's creating all this suffering? And sometimes we can find this in the early Buddhist literature and it gets interpreted different ways. Sometimes it can be said desire is the cause of suffering. But then if you really think about it, you can think like, okay, well maybe some desires cause suffering, but do all of them, including the desire to want to be free from suffering? Is that causing suffering too?

So I'd like to talk a little bit about this this evening, this idea of desire, and maybe flesh it out a little bit, unpack it. I won't cover everything in this talk. It's such a rich topic, with so many different aspects to explore. But I'll start with maybe this little vignette. This has happened to me and perhaps it's happened to you, where maybe you wanted something for a long time. You really wanted it, and then finally you got it. You attained it, achieved it, received it, you got it, and then you discover, "Oh, this didn't make me quite as happy as I thought it was." I really wanted it, I did, but now that I have it, it's disappointing. It's not making me happy like I wished." Maybe it's this long-awaited vacation. Maybe it's finishing schooling or another big giant project. Maybe it's having the kids finally launched. Maybe it's having the grandkids over more often. Whatever it is, there's this way in which desires don't live up to their promises so often.

But that doesn't stop us from desiring, from continuing to desire. We just desire something else. "Oh, that might not have been the right one. I'll desire something else." Psychologists know about this; they talk about it as the hedonic treadmill.

But there's also sometimes something even more unusual, or more nuanced, or maybe not as commonly discussed that happens. And that is, maybe we want something deeply, and we never get it, and yet we learn something from the wanting itself. It turns out to have been supportive, this desire. It brought something valuable into our lives. An example might be this wanting to make a difference in someone's life. Maybe someone you know, maybe a family member or friend, is having some difficulties and you have this desire, this wish to help them, to support them in some kind of way, and you hope that your efforts will make a difference for this person, or maybe for a group of people. So you offer your time, you offer your attention, you offer some resources, maybe material resources, but then their circumstances don't change in the way that you had hoped despite your offering and supporting. And then looking back, you realize, "Oh, even though it didn't have the desired outcome, I didn't actually help in the way that I was hoping to, something important happened." And maybe you don't recognize it at that time, but maybe you realize you learned something about generosity. Maybe you learned about just this movement of wanting to support others, and learning how, independent of what the outcome is, just that movement of wanting to support others itself feels nourishing, feels supportive. Sometimes it can feel like a relief to let go of some of the self-centeredness that we can have, and instead be evaluating what might be helpful for this other individual or this group of people.

Or maybe we learned a capacity to remain present with difficulty. Maybe we learned a capacity to remain present with what's uncomfortable. There's somebody that is struggling, we feel like we can help, and what we offer doesn't help, and they are still struggling. Can we be okay with that? Somebody we care about is struggling. Maybe that's something that we learned, this greater capacity: "Oh yeah, they're still struggling, and maybe I'm okay with that in a way that I wasn't before. I'm honoring what's happening with them without demanding that it's a problem that has to be fixed."

So we could say that desire is actually more complicated, more nuanced than we might assume. Wanting is throughout our lives. Of course it is. It's a big part of human experience, and in our modern society, it really gets emphasized. Of course it does. Even today while I was thinking about this talk, I found myself—it's so funny—on Amazon thinking, "Okay, I need to buy that thing. Which one should I get?" And it's so funny, I was just feeling like, "Oh yeah, here's that desire, just right on Amazon." Just clickity-click-click, and it's so easy. It's quite something how we've all done this. There are so many wants, from ordinary pleasures—I want to have ice cream—to something more, our deepest aspirations.

Yet we don't always fully understand what it is that we're wanting, and maybe we don't always fully understand what's actually going to bring happiness. These often get conflated, right? This idea, "I want this," and then there's a secret little saying underneath, "because I believe it'll be a lasting source of happiness."

So Buddhist practice, we could say, offers this more nuanced approach to desire than, "Oh, it's a source of suffering. It's the Second Noble Truth, and therefore if there's a desire, we have to get rid of it." That's too simplistic and often has a moralistic quality to it, that we have to get rid of desire. Practice is pointing to something more. Practice is pointing to something more nuanced.

I could say, for example, maybe you see something in a shop or you imagine something that you believe a friend would absolutely love, and you purchase it. You buy it not because you need anything, and not because you want to give it to your friend so that your friend will appreciate you or anything like that. It's just because it would make you so happy to see their delight. Sometimes it's just so nice to give a small little gift to somebody, something simple. Maybe it's complicated, but you have this desire for something, and this can cultivate a sense of generosity. The more we do these types of things, the easier it is to become generous.

So, rather than treating all desires as something that we should abandon or just be present for, we can maybe explore two questions here: What am I really wanting? And what's worthwhile wanting? What do I really want? And what's worthwhile? These are two different questions, but they can help support this recognition, a different way to be with desire.

When we want something, our attention tends to go towards the object, that particular thing that we want to obtain or that particular experience we want to have, and we often are imagining what it will be like when we finally get it. And this often isn't explicit. It's kind of implicit in our minds. When we recognize that we want something, and then we are kind of quietly imagining what it will be like when we have that, we notice that there's something that often can kind of relax inside. "Ah, yeah, as soon as that happens, it's going to be great." This again is not explicit. These aren't the words that are in the mind, but there's this way that we kind of have this—it's a way it takes us out of the present moment into this imaginary state which is going to be better somehow as soon as that experience is achieved. It's fascinating. Just the experience of wanting can feel like it's... we could desire the desire in some way, because wanting something has this implicit promise of something better, and just that idea of something better feels good.

But then when we realize, after we've imagined, "Oh yeah, it's going to be so great when I buy this new shampoo, it's going to solve all my hair problems," whatever it might be, right? These simple things that we might have. But maybe there's this way that desiring something reveals something we haven't recognized before. If we explore this—"okay, well, what's underneath

this?” Wanting one's hair to be a certain way, or to stop being a certain way. But then what's underneath that? Just a desire to maybe be like when we were younger, have more vitality, maybe feel like we'll have more attractiveness, or something like this. Or maybe there's a wish that we would want some appreciation for having done some generous act for somebody else. And underneath this act of appreciation, we may want to know that what we do matters, that our efforts matter, and that we've contributed something worthwhile, and that we want to feel like what we care about makes a difference. So this desire for appreciation for what we have done, what we have offered, this desire for appreciation for our effort, for our work, may include this sincere love of supporting others, the sincere love of contributing to supporting others or contributing to an effort that's being made. So this doesn't make this wish for appreciation wrong. It doesn't make this wish for appreciation superficial. It simply means that what matters to us may be larger than the particular thing that we're hoping for. There may be something deeper underneath it, maybe bigger than what we're imagining. Often we're focusing on the object or the experience, but it can really help to understand ourselves more when we allow ourselves to feel into the desire, feel into what it feels like to actually have the desire, and to maybe feel into what's underneath it, what's fueling it. Because sometimes desire reveals something that could be helpful for us to recognize, helpful for us to know about ourselves.

There's a meditation teacher who tells this story about hearing that there's this ancient Indian text that talks about particular meditation practices. I don't know what the exact text was and I don't know how ancient, so I don't really know the details of this text, but he tells the story of hearing about this book. I don't know if it was translated into English or not, but he had this idea like, "Okay, if I just get this book then my meditation will be better. It'll make sense these experiences that I'm having. I'll understand how to do this." So there's this way of like, he goes to all the bookstores when he's on vacation. He goes to bookstores in different countries trying to find this book, thinking that it's just going to answer his questions about his meditation practice. He never finds it until decades later. He was like, "Oh, here's this book." And then, of course, by then he didn't really have the same interest in it, but he recognized that his desire had really expressed something that he hadn't quite recognized at the time: this deep wish for his meditation to be more clear, or for his meditation to be unfolding in some way that there was a journey or there was a map or there was a path, something that would help understand his experiences and help point the direction to go. But then he recognized that he found his own way. He wanted some reassurance. He wanted a map or a journey. But something valuable happened by not getting what he wanted. He found his own way, and he gained confidence in doing that.

So desire can matter beyond whether or not we obtain the object. If we obtain it, we might discover that it doesn't support the happiness we had assumed, that we had projected onto it.

But the desire might also really cultivate or support some devotion, some love, some energy, some commitment that we have. For example, for perhaps this Dharma teacher's meditation practice. So, not only did he discover that he didn't need this book, but just maybe this idea of the book supported his wish for meditation to mature and unfold and continue to develop. So something important may develop through the longing itself. It may support a commitment or love or devotion to something.

So understanding what we want isn't the same as knowing what is worth pursuing. Even though we might gain something from recognizing this desire, it might support our practice in some way, that's not to say that everything we desire will be skillful and helpful and lead to greater happiness. Looking more deeply into desire can really help us find what actually leads to more freedom, what leads to more suffering. So how do we discern which desires are worth cultivating? Because the Buddha didn't teach us to simply stop wanting. He didn't say that all desires are terrible and you shouldn't have them. He pointed towards developing those desires which lead towards greater freedom. So how can we discern, how can we determine which desires lead towards greater freedom? Because not all of them lead in the same direction, and we could even say that the Buddhist path itself does depend on desire.

So the question is which desires we choose to strengthen and where do they lead? And to answer this question, we examine the consequences of the desires we have. And some of these will be obvious. We can look at short-term consequences. Does it cause harm to ourselves or others? This is obvious. We all know this. We don't need Buddhism to teach us this. We can also consider the longer-term consequences. We also know this: a skillful response may initially require effort and some discomfort, but it has this longer-term consequence that is what we're looking for. So that can be skillful. So that's a second thing: longer-term consequences.

But here's something that we might not consider when we're evaluating which desires to pursue. This is something that the Buddhist teachings really point to. And that is, what habits are we strengthening when we're cultivating certain desires, when we are continually pursuing certain desires? Because each time we act on a desire, we are reinforcing a familiar way of responding, and this familiar way of responding may not be so helpful for us. We don't always consider this—that repeatedly acting on resentment, we might think, "Okay, that's unskillful at the time because it doesn't resolve conflicts and we feel more agitated when we're acting with resentment." But it's also reinforcing that tendency towards resentment, for example. It's reinforcing a particular way of showing up in the world. So, we're not only deciding what to do in this situation, we're also cultivating what to do in the next situation. What we do now shapes what we'll do in the future. Of course, it does. And this is part of the skillful part of working with desire. Not only does it cause harm or not cause harm, but what does it cultivate in us? What does it create the conditions for more and more?

So even if the object of desire is reasonable—wanting to support others, wanting to bring more peace or freedom into the world—the way we pursue it can also be skillful or unskillful. There's a way in which we can be dismissive of everything or angry towards everything that's getting in the way of what we want. So even though what we want may be really skillful and it might lead to some long-term benefits, the way in which we are pursuing it can actually be cultivating things that are unskillful. Ignoring, being dismissive, being angry towards everything that appears to be an obstacle to what we're desiring.

So one way that we can, in this discernment of which desires to cultivate, one way that we can use as a North Star is our aspiration for greater freedom, our aspiration for greater peace, our aspiration for greater ease. We can stay close to that, stay connected to that, and learn to recognize which desires contribute to suffering and which desires support freedom. And this feeling of whether it is suffering or freedom, sometimes it's like a somatic experience. Is it something that we feel like we have to get tight and contracted, or is it something that allows the heart to breathe, allows some ease, some openness in the mind and the body? Because practice involves not only learning what to let go of, but also learning what is worth wanting, rather than immediate comfort or the ending of some dissatisfaction.

So maybe there's this way, instead of this idea that with desires we sometimes feel like, "Oh yeah, okay, if I'm doing the Buddhist thing I should immediately abandon it," or, "If I'm just following my impulse I'm just going to pursue it." Maybe we can recognize what's underneath or what's bigger as part of the desire and learn something about ourselves. And maybe we can use these opportunities of desire to help discern what does lead to greater freedom. What is worthwhile cultivating? Does following this desire cultivate something that does support my wish for freedom? So looking more deeply into desire can reveal something valuable that we might otherwise overlook. And discernment helps us choose what to nourish, what to cultivate, what to pursue, in this movement towards greater freedom.

So much of our lives is spent trying to get what we want. And Buddhist practice offers another possibility. Rather than just getting what we want, can we use this frequent arising of desires and opportunity to understand ourselves better? Practice discernment. Cultivate what leads to greater freedom. Cultivate what leads to greater peace and ease.

I think I'll stop there. Thank you. Are there any comments or questions?

Q&A

Questioner 1: Thank you. So I was thinking about different kinds of desires, and there are some that sort of support me and then achieve them and then they have some value. Others turn out to be sort of ridiculous and evaporate. Like I had a strong desire as a teenager for an Alfa Romeo. I don't have a desire for the Alfa Romeo anymore. It's sort of gone. That desire is gone.

And that's fine. So I dealt with that kind of desire, and also the ones which are sort of supporting my life. But there is another kind, and that's what confuses me. There are some desires which I consider to be unattainable, and these are the ones that sort of stuck, and I put them out of my mind and I don't think of them for years. For whatever reason I don't think of them for years, but they come back and they are just as, as you said, somatic, constricting as they ever were. First of all, is that a distinction worth making between various kinds of desires? And how do I deal with the ones that are unattainable?

Diana Clark: Mhm. I think it can be worthwhile for the ones that are unattainable to maybe feel into why they're still there for all these years, and is there something underneath it? Like what's fueling it? Just, of course, I don't know. I'm just going to make some stuff up. Maybe there's a wish to feel loved in a way that we might want, or maybe there's a wish to be able to do some things that we were able to do when our body was different than it is now, or something like this. And can we tap into that? So recognizing that, and that will often be very uncomfortable actually, because we'll recognize, "Oh, I want this thing because I want to go hiking, but now I'm no longer able to go hiking. I have a bad knee and a bad hip and whatever." And can we feel the grief of not being able to have that? And allow the grief to be felt. Not getting into overwhelm. We have to be resourced when we do this. But there's a way in which, if we kind of acknowledge the emotions that are underneath it, then it allows the grief to turn into something else, like poignancy or a connection to there's so many other beings who can't go hiking who really want to. Or maybe there's a way in which it feels supportive in some kind of way, and then the fuel underneath for this desire that's unattainable softens, and then the discomfort associated with it softens as well. How does this sound?

Questioner 1: I can see that that could happen. Of course, one can wait forever whether or not the softening is going to happen, where grief is going to convert this into something that one can deal with, but I suppose that's how it works, that one can't be sure.

Diana Clark: So you're pointing to the dukkha of wanting something that won't happen. Is that right?

Questioner 1: That's right. That's right. Something that it's clear to me—I may be wrong about this of course—that it cannot happen, but that's my feeling that it cannot happen. And I understand if grieving about it might be helpful. Yeah.

Diana Clark: Just acknowledging the loss, the grief. And this is often precisely what we don't want to do. That's why it's the doorway, because it's not what we want to do. It's fascinating.

Questioner 1: Thank you.

Diana Clark: Right behind you.

Questioner 2: Thank you for the talk. I feel it was a great exploration of desire and maybe I'm being slightly nitpicky, but can you also comment on the other definition of the Second Noble Truth, the clinging and craving one? Because I feel like desire is not really the cause of suffering, like the clinging and craving or the drivenness is. So yeah, like the exploration around the drivenness. Maybe we never get what we want, but if we tap into just the clinging and the craving and the drivenness of the desire, just keep feeling that, might help. Yeah.

Diana Clark: It might, so for us to feel the discomfort of the clinging might be supportive.

Questioner 2: Yeah.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Yeah. So it's not the objects that we desire, it's our relationship to those objects. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you.

Questioner 3: About a third of the way through the talk, you mentioned how sometimes we have a thought of a future and we go into that place. And what I wanted to ask about, sometimes if I feel pessimistic about a situation, I'll have a thought like, "Oh wait, maybe this in the future can happen," and then just that little thought, it changes my attitude, it makes me optimistic. It's not really reliable, but it's just kind of interesting. I don't know if it's like a desire, but it's kind of a related phenomena.

Diana Clark: Yeah, I heard this from Joseph Goldstein[3] a number of years ago and it really stuck with me, this idea of hope and fear. So, we're kind of like, "Oh, hope. Oh yeah, maybe this thing will happen in the future. Oh, but it might not happen, too. Oh, maybe this thing is going to happen. It's going to be great. I can't wait for this to happen. Oh, no. What if this doesn't happen?" So, this hope and fear, hope and fear that we're just going around and around exchanging them. So that's kind of like the flip side of the—I'm using the word hope for what you described. So I don't know, this is just something that I'm offering. Is this helpful, Daniel? Is this what you're...

Questioner 3: Yeah. Yeah. That's the kind of thing.

Diana Clark: Yeah. Yeah. We kind of get stuck at it. And so what we can be is just be with the experience of like, "Oh yeah, this is uncomfortable. There's thoughts that take me to a different experience, and that different experience feels differently." [Laughter]

Questioner 3: I guess one aspect that's kind of interesting though is it makes me think like, "Oh, there's really not anything external, like somehow there's some mechanics within the body-mind system that can instantly change this negative experience into a less painful one in certain circumstances."

Diana Clark: So just by thoughts, right? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But truth, it's all thoughts. [Laughter] Yeah. Right. So we can create different experiences, right? But they can't reliably do this, right? Yeah. Yeah. Thank you.

Questioner 4: Okay, I'm going to be brave and do this. Hi everyone. My name is Caroline. This is my second time here and I'm really happy I came. And I feel like I also came at the right time because your talk that you just gave, Diana, was exactly what I needed. I have so many thoughts. Wow. Where do I start? Well, first of all, thank you. That was so insightful. And I really thought about ways that I could apply it to my personal life. I think over the course of this past year, I've become such a—my mind is always at 100 miles per hour. Part of it is due to the fact that I do work in healthcare. I am a provider. It's schedule after schedule, appointment after appointment. So, I cannot slow down and my mind cannot slow down. And if I'm going out getting lunch, I'm like, why is the In-N-Out line taking so long? Or like [Laughter] like this morning the person at the car wash messed up the machine and I was like, "Oh my gosh." And I just thought to myself, and it wasn't until this week really when I talked to my mentor who also used to go to IMC, the LA branch. But yeah, she told me like remember to slow down and take deep breaths. And I realized that's what I have to do. But I was wondering what other ways could I implement slowing down and not being so rash and fast and just take things easy. Because I asked Buddha for a sign this past week and it was to come to IMC. But I think another sign was to just slow down because I went to tennis last week and I forgot my racket and I was like, "Oh my gosh, I have to go back and get my racket." And then [Laughter] like I realized, okay, just slow down, like focus on the road. And I don't know when I became like this, but that's why I'm here because I want to be more mindful.

Diana Clark: So it's a process, right? So here's one thing that I will just recommend or offer or something like this. Feel your feet on the ground.

Questioner 4: Oh my gosh. Yeah. They're never on the ground. Not even at work, guys. [Laughter]

Diana Clark: It's just a way to literally get a little bit more grounded. And it's very tangible. Like we could just feel our feet on the ground. If you're sitting, feel the pressure of the chair against the body. So, walking, sitting, or sometimes if you're doing a lot of moving, you could feel the clothing moving against your skin or something like that. That's just a way to kind of come back to the present moment and it interrupts all the thinking, thinking, thinking. So it won't immediately make the thinking go away, but it disrupts some of the momentum that the thinking has like "I got to do this and I got to do" and the distractedness, right? Just to be repeatedly coming back to the present moment experience, something tangible that you can actually feel.

Questioner 4: Okay, I'll start with that. Thank you. That's really realistic advice that I can start with.

Diana Clark: Yes. Thank you. You're welcome. And then this will be the last comment back there.

Questioner 5: No, that's for you. Hi. My name is Varun. I've been coming here on and off for about a month. And about a month ago I returned from spending a month at a monastery. Well, it's technically called a monastic academy. It's in Vermont. And I just, I mean the monastery, they call it a container. It makes it conducive to practice. So like, this monastery is very diligent about you having to attend everything if you're going to stay at the monastery, and you have to follow a bunch of other rules, being on time, which actually kind of is in service of your practice once you are there for enough and realize that. And then in contrast, in regular life, I just find it's just so much harder to maintain a regular practice. So, I've been kind of using sangha[4], like this group and pretty much any group I can find. I find it's a lot stronger of an effect in person. But, you know, if it has to be remote, that works, too. So really grateful for every session like this. It just, on top of everything that is shared, that I hear, it's like a reinforcement of my practice. It's a way to stay accountable. I had a couple of kind of things to bring up, but I think I've already gone, so I'll just keep it to one. With my technique, which is basically just following the breath at the stomach, I've had this kind of preoccupation with it feeling kind of staticky. Like it's hard to describe, but the breath is not smooth. It's like boom boom boom boom. And on top of that, it's just kind of like a desire for more sensory clarity. Which I probably picked up from, I don't know, some random book or something that said that that's what should be happening. And then of course that adds an expectation of something that should be happening in practice, which is not conducive to practice. But I have had some success with at times just letting go of that kind of preoccupation and just enjoying the moment and being immersed in it. So I would like to have more of that. Do you have any advice for that besides just noticing when you're more preoccupied and kind of refocusing or re-reining?

Diana Clark: So when the staticky feeling is showing up, does it have to be a problem?

Questioner 5: Yeah, that's right.

Diana Clark: So just notice like, "Oh yeah, here's that staticky feeling," and maybe there's a little bit of curiosity about it. You don't have to figure it out. You don't have to make it go away and you don't have to make it a problem, but it's like, "Oh yeah, staticky is here." Is it moving around or is it in one place? Is it staticky like stabby or is it more vibrating? Or like, again, you don't have to figure it out. Just bring a little bit of curiosity to it and that'll help you stay present with it and that will help it unfold into whatever is going to be next.

Questioner 5: No, that's really great. Like actually going into that. Instead of just being frustrated about it. Thank you. Really appreciate it.

Diana Clark: You're welcome. Okay. Thank you everybody.

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1. **Four Noble Truths:** The foundational teachings of Buddhism, comprising the truth of suffering (dukkha), the truth of the cause of suffering (craving or desire), the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering. ↩
2. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." ↩
3. **Joseph Goldstein:** A prominent American Buddhist teacher and co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS). ↩
4. **Sangha:** A Pali and Sanskrit word referring to the Buddhist community of monks, nuns, novices, and laity. ↩

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