

Binding and Unbinding (1 of 5) Unwholesome Desire and Wholesome Desire

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

bind, tie, untie, unbind, desires, *rāga*, lust, passion, *dosa*, *moha*, conceit, *diṭṭhi*, ardency, determination, confidence, ardor, compulsive, suffering, poison, *virāga*, fading, freedom, healthy, strain

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Hello everyone and greetings at this beginning of the week.

This week I would like to pair teachings about five things that tie us down or bind us with five things that untie or unbind us. Often this tradition tends to have a lot of lists, such as the attachments, the defilements, and what brings us suffering. To clearly link these to their opposite, that which moves in the other direction, will clarify some of what this Buddhist practice is about.

The five things that bind us are *rāga*, *dosa*, *moha*, conceit (I cannot remember the Pali), and *diṭṭhi*. *Rāga*, translated in English, is greed. But there is another word that is a better fit for *rāga* than greed. *Rāga* is also translated into English as lust or passion. *Dosa*, translated in English, is aversion, hostility, and *moha* is delusion. *Diṭṭhi* is speculative views or being caught up in stories and opinions.

The opposite of those is a variety of things. Ardency and determination are a kind of healthy desire. Restraint and avoiding are a healthy kind of aversion. Instead of delusion, there is insight and understanding. Instead of conceit, there is a powerful form of confidence. We might almost say self-confidence. Instead of speculative views, being caught up in opinions, there is a real understanding.

Rāga pairs with ardency, determination, perseverance, engagement, a desire to practice. There is often an assumption that Buddhism is critical of desires, that all desires are somehow wrong. That the problem with life is we have desires, and the ending of desires is the whole point of all this.

What we are ending is unhealthy desires – desires that keep us limited, in bondage, caught up in ourselves.

We are awakening within us desires for freedom, desires that are healthy, healing, and beneficial. It is not just simply awakening healthy desires but also letting them become strong. There is a real sense of ardency, ardor, dedication, getting oriented, and organizing. *This* is important and really doing it. Some of us put our life energy behind this. *This* is what we are doing – no question about it.

This difference between desires that bind us and desires that untie or free us is such an important distinction. It plays itself out in all five of these topics that we are going to talk about this week. It is a distinction we want to learn to be wise about. We want to recognize the distinction between that which brings strain, stress, despair, contraction, and a limited and narrow feeling versus that which helps us to feel expansive, open, happy, and free.

The narrowing and contracting *do* reinforce conceit. The tightening up, the inward focus of suffering gives birth to a very tight kind of self-preoccupation. Whereas the expansive movement of the path, of the practice, of the possibility of freedom tends to free us from excessive self-preoccupation, from this tightening around self. To be with that gives room for there to emerge all kinds of wonderful qualities of the heart: love of compassion, love of freedom, love of truth, love of peace. All kinds of

things come that are freeing of self, freeing of self-preoccupation.

For today, we have *rāga*. *Rāga* is often translated as lust, sometimes as passion. There is *kāma rāga*, which is the lust or passion for the senses. There is the lust for *diṭṭhi*, *diṭṭhi rāga*, the lust or passion for views and stories.

Rāga is a strong, intense form of compulsive desire. I think of it as a drivenness, desire that has us by the nose. We have almost no choice but to follow it, to be pushed around by it, or give in to it. It is very, very compelling.

Compulsive passion – sometimes in modern English, the word passion is a very positive quality. When it is used to translate Buddhist texts, it is a strong, compulsive force in which there is no freedom. A compulsivity that involves suffering, which is the original Latin meaning for the word passion. The passion of Christ was the suffering of Christ.

Rāga is one of the fundamental sources for suffering, for bondage. It is one of the three poisons that are listed. *Rāga* is something that is poisonous. You might protest a little bit, but you have to appreciate that the definition of *rāga* is that it is a poison. It is something

that hurts. It has barbs and thorns in it that are often not seen.

The promise of compulsive desires is different. It is a promise of pleasure. It comes with imaginations of pleasure – how wonderful it will be and how much good it is going to do us. We are tricked sometimes by the imagination and possibilities of the future. So we are not really present for the cost of these compulsive desires in the present moment.

It becomes clearer and clearer this kind of study, this kind of exploration, when we meditate. To argue about desires without meditating is not going to be very productive. As we begin meditating – getting quieter, stiller, and more mindful – we start seeing the cost of what happens in our minds. Something that seemed fine in daily life – because we are not that sensitive in daily life – we see, in meditation, that it is quite limiting. It is not only limiting, but it undermines us and brings a kind of stress and tension. That is very different from calm, quiet meditation, where the mind is open, relaxed, and present.

Meditation is a wonderful laboratory to see the shortcomings of compulsion, passionate cravings, and clingings. We see the passion for power, the passion for money, the lust for power, the lust for money. Exactly

the English words we want to use to translate *rāga* are not so clear.

Rāga is not something that goes away quickly. It slowly fades away over time. One meaning of *rāga* is a dye. The movement of the practice is *virāga*, which is a fading of the dye. There is a fading of lust, of this drivenness. How does it fade away? Well, partly by the opposite. There has to be a strong desire.

The desire for freedom can be as strong or stronger than any compulsive desire we have, provided that there is not compulsion in that. There is not tension or strain in that desire. The Buddha emphasized a lot of words for having a strong desire for practice – ardency, ardor. Sometimes it is translated into English as striving – a word resisted by Western English-speaking dharma teachers, even myself. I hesitate to use the word striving because English speakers will often feel tension from that, like straining. If they are striving, it is almost synonymous with strain.

The determination, the perseverance of yes, a big YES. That is why I like the word yes. It has an uplifting and opening quality. “Yes, this is what I am doing. I am practicing on the path of freedom, practicing yes to be present here.”

We are allowed in Buddhist practice to have a strong dedication and devotion to the path of freedom. This might mean that we give it a big priority in our lives. We may clear the table, clear our lives, of lots of things that distract from that. Some of these things might be worthwhile, but we have an important thing to do – this path of freedom. To feel that desire, to feel that awaken, and to heed it, to listen to it, “Yes, this is what I am going to do.” Certainly, it would be nice to make that yes a counter to the ways in which desires limit us, constrict us, undermine us, drain us, or bring us immeasurable suffering of all kinds.

To have another path, and to feel the possibility of saying yes to it in a strong, determined way – this we are allowed to do in Buddhism. This is a message some people do not hear. They hear the opposite. It is almost like you just accept and be present in some gentle, soft way, but do not try a lot. But trying with this healthy desire is one of the great pleasures of life.

The pleasure of practicing with enthusiasm is the kind of enthusiasm that helps the mind quiet and become peaceful. The laboratory of meditation is one of the great places to discover how there can be strong, healthy desire in a way that helps bring greater peace, calm, and settledness. Calm peace and strong ardor can go hand in hand.

So, thank you for this. I hope this has given you something to consider. I hope you will spend time this day to see if you can find the difference – the physical, emotional, and mental distinction, sensations, and experience – between compulsive desire and freeing desire. If you can see that difference, maybe you can set your freeing desire free to support you and your life.

Thank you.