

The Causes of Suffering: A Buddhist Analysis

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Grasping and Wanting

Grasping and wanting are two names for the most painful aspects of desire. Because our language uses the word desire in so many ways, it is helpful to sort them out. There are beneficial desires such as the desire for the well-being of others, the desire for enlightenment, the creative desires that express the positive aspects of passion and beauty. There are painful aspects of desire--the desires of addiction, greed, blind ambition, or unending internal hunger. Through meditative awareness we can bring an attention that can sort out and know the many forms of desire...

In beginning to name the demons, we can especially look for the difficult sides of desire, the grasping and wanting mind. When the wanting mind first arises we may not recognize it as a demon because we are often lost in its allure. Wanting is characterized as a Hungry Ghost, a ghost with an enormous belly and tiny pinhole mouth, who can never eat enough to satisfy his endless need. When this demon or difficulty arises, simply name it as "wanting" or "grasping" and begin to study its power in your life. When we look at wanting, we experience the part of ourselves that is never content, that always says, "If only I had something more, THAT would make me happy"--some other relationship, some other job, some more comfortable meditation cushion, less noise, cooler temperature, warmer temperature, more money, a little more sleep last night--"then I would be fulfilled." In meditation the voice of wanting calls to us and says, "If only I had something to eat now, I'd eat, then I'd be satisfied, and then I could get enlightened." The desire of wanting is the unconscious voice that can see an attractive meditator sitting nearby and imagine a whole romance fulfilled, a relationship, marriage, and divorce, and only half an hour later remember that we are meditating. For the voice of wanting, what is here now is never enough.

Naming the Wanting Mind

As we work to observe the wanting and grasping without condemning it, we can learn to be aware of this aspect of our nature without being caught up in it. When it arises we can feel it fully, naming our experience "hunger," "wanting," "longing," or whatever it is. Name it softly the whole time it is present, repeating the name every few seconds, five, ten, twenty times until it ends. As you note it, be conscious of what happens: How long does this kind of desire last? Does it intensify first or just fade away? How does it feel in the body? What parts of the body are affected by it--the gut, the breath, the eyes? What does it feel like in the heart, in the mind? When it is present, are you happy or agitated, open or closed?

...When we look, we see that wanting creates tension, that it is actually painful. We see how it arises out of our sense of longing and incompleteness, a feeling that we are separate and not whole. Observing more closely we notice that it is also fleeting, without essence. This aspect of desire is actually a form of imagination and accompanying feeling that comes and goes in our body and mind. Of course, at other times it seems very real...

Do not confuse desire with pleasure. There is nothing wrong with enjoying pleasant experiences. Given the many difficulties we often face in life, enjoyment is wonderful to have.

However, the wanting mind grasps at the pleasure. We are taught in this culture that if we can grasp enough pleasurable experiences quickly one after another, our life will be happy. By following a good game of tennis with a delicious dinner, a fine movie, then wonderful sex and sleep, and a good morning jog, a fine hour of meditation, an excellent breakfast, and off to an exciting morning of work, happiness will last. Our society is masterful at perpetuating this ruse. But will this satisfy the heart?

What happens when we do fulfill wanting? It often brings on more wanting. The whole process can become very tiring and empty. "What am I going to do next? Well, I'll just get some more." George Bernard Shaw said, "There are two great disappointments in life. Not getting what you want and getting it." The process of such unskillful desire is endless, because peace comes not from fulfilling our wants but from the moment that dissatisfaction ends. When wanting is filled, there comes a moment of satisfaction, not from the pleasure, but from stopping of the grasping.

As you name the wanting mind and feel it carefully, notice what happens just after it ends, and notice what states then follow. The issue of wanting and desire is a profound one. You will see how often our desires are misplaced. An obvious example is when we use food to replace the love we long for. To explain this, one Buddhist teacher, Geneen Roth, who works with eating disorders, wrote a book called *Feeding the Hungry Heart*. Through the practice of naming, we can sense how much of our surface desire arises from some deeper wanting in our being, from an underlying loneliness or fear or emptiness...

When we study Buddhist psychology, we discover that desire is divided into many categories. Most fundamentally these desires are then separated into painful desire and skillful desire, both aspects stemming from a neutral energy called the Will to Do. Painful desire involves greed, grasping, inadequacy, and longing. Skillful desire is born of this same Will to Do but directed by love, vitality, compassion, creativity, and wisdom. With the development of awareness, we begin to distinguish unhealthy desire from skillful motivation. We can sense which states are free from unskillful desire and enjoy a more spontaneous and natural way of being without struggle or ambition...

...One old teacher of mine said, "The problem with desire is that you do not desire deeply enough! ...You don't like what you have and want what you don't have. Simply reverse this. Want what you have and don't want what you don't have. Here you will find true fulfillment..."

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