

Having and being¹

As long as we remain unawakened (no matter what species we belong to), we are instinctively spurred on by ignorance and craving. Ignorance means not knowing what we really are, or the potential we have for good. Ignorance, then, induces us with a delusion of lack. Craving (*taṇhā*), rooted in this delusion, drives us to seek succour and solutions outside of ourself, without making any self-effort in self-understanding, in truly knowing our self.

In our ignorance, we *measure* others, and then see ourself as lacking what others “have.” Unconsciously, we see what are worth *having* as the objects of our physical senses: sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches. “Sounds” include praises and pleasantries from others, which we view as self-affirming, and thus desirable. Hence, we mistake having to be true happiness.

As such, we keep on wanting what we think we do not *have*, and keep seeking for them: things, money, pleasure, power, holiness, and love. Upon getting these things – or, we think that we have a hold on them – we grasp them and cling on to them. We do not even know that we are doing this. Ignorance is a blind man carrying Craving, who is lame, and who directs and decides Ignorance where to go.

What we grasp takes the shape of our hand: we become the thoughts that make us grasp, we are shaped by the things that we grasp, so that we are less than human by unmindfully, but deliberately,² breaking the precepts, and compelling others to do the same.³

Whatever induces us to accumulate things or build up our negative habits “to have” has nothing to do with the Buddha Dharma. According to the *Netti, pakaraṇa*, a post-canonical work on exegesis (a critical explanation of the early Buddhist texts), “There are 2 types of craving, the wholesome and the unwholesome. Unwholesome craving leads to samsara, but the wholesome is the way of non-accumulating, that is, the abandoning of craving” (*Nett* 87).

While unwholesome craving goes with the cyclic life, wholesome craving goes with non-accumulation (*apacaya*), that is, the abandoning of craving (*Nett* 87). Here, craving (*taṇhā*) is used in a neutral sense of “motivating factor,” whose moral tone depends on whether the motivation is rooted in the unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion, or rooted in the wholesome roots of non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion.

Unwholesome craving (*akusala taṇhā*) is the desire to “have,” an acquisitive and accumulative impulse that is instinctively *sense*-based. Wholesome craving (*kusala taṇhā*), on the other hand, is the desire to “be,” a *mental* cultivating of the lightening and enlightening drive that keeps the senses in check, and in the service of true happiness.

¹ This reflection is from the Introduction to **the (Dhamma,vinaya) Gotamī Sutta** (A 8.53), [SD 46.15](#) (2.3).

² Karma can be deliberate and planned, or habitual, both whether knowingly or unknowingly (motivated by delusion). On how karma can be unconscious, see **The unconscious mind**, [SD 17.8b](#).

³ On the precepts and being human, see [SD 38.4](#) (4.4.3.2).

The desire to “have” is unwholesome because what we see as worth having—the sense-objects—are all impermanent, and hence, unsatisfactory. The desire to “be” is wholesome insofar as it is understood to *be impermanent, unsatisfactory and lacking any essence*. Whatever happiness we can “have” by way of the senses is only in the moment, in letting it go, just as we breathe in, we must then breathe out.

The desire to be enhances our happiness when we have the mind and heart to remember and rejoice in the good that we have enjoyed and the good that others have done for us.⁴ While sense-based pleasures last only the moment, mind-based joy can be sustained only as long as we are mindful of it, such as in the cultivating of lovingkindness. Yet, we must see that even this “joy of being” has the nature of rising and falling, conditioned, changing and becoming other.

The Buddha Dharma teaches us how to let go of things. On a simple level, this means learning to truly enjoy what we have in a way that benefits us and others (or at least not harming anyone). When we truly enjoy what we are, we feel satisfied, and so we do not *want* “things” any more.

It’s like eating our favourite food, or any healthy food for that matter. Once we feel full, we stop eating, satisfied and happy. It also makes good sense to eat slowly and mindfully to fully enjoy our meal. As a bonus, such enjoyable eating also allows us to feel satiated even before we are really full.⁵

Non-accumulation, on a spiritual level, also means understanding the difference between having and being. Whatever we have is external to us, and so it is really insecure and can easily be lost. The good that we are remains with us forever, as our memory. In lovingkindness meditation, for example, we can recall some happy memory, no matter how long ago it was. We *are* happy recalling such good. We *re-live* that moment, which we can do for as long we wish and as often as we want to.

Often enough in our lives, no matter how poor we may be, there are times when we have more of a good thing than we need, so that we can and should share it with others. Recall the days when we were young children, when we had a bit of delicious food, we would share it with others. We might have intangible goodness such as skill, strength and time (attention), which we may share with others by helping them when they need it, or spending quality time with them, such as listening wisely to them.

It is natural that we need not and cannot “collect” good things. Their goodness arises from our experiencing them and letting them go. Good is *not* what we have: it is what we are. It is like our breath: we take in a breath, and then we breathe it out again. We never hold our breath, not too long anyway. So, too, love: it is only love when we show it and give it away. Goodness, then, is what we habitually and wholesomely *are*.

One of the best examples of non-accumulation is the practice of meditation. A good meditator learns not to accumulate anything, whether they are things, memories or views. The first step to proper effort in meditation is to sit comfortably. This means

⁴ See [Kataññu Kata,vedī Sutta \(A 2.11.2\), SD 3.1\(1.4.4\)](#).

⁵ The Buddha’s advice on stopping to eat before we are really full is found in **the Doṇa,pāka Sutta (S 3.13), SD 37.13 (3.2.4)**.

simply letting go of all sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts, that is, letting them rise and fall away, and never holding them back.

Then, we notice how feelings rise and fall away. We simply smile at them and let them come and let them go without being drawn to pleasant feelings or rejecting unpleasant one. When we notice neutral feelings, we reflect on their impermanence.

So, too, with thoughts: we see them for what they are: mind-made states running back to the past, bringing on remorse and guilt, or rushing into the future, bringing on restlessness. In either case, we notice how lust, hate, delusion and fear try to mislead us away from our meditation object.

Then, as our minds become more calm, we begin to better understand what really hinders our mental well-being and spiritual progress. We cultivate joyful insights into true reality, see impermanence, suffering, even non-self, as they are, and more clearly and directly experience the 4 noble truths, thus ennobling oneself.⁶

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⁶ See also Reflection, "[To have or to be?](#)" R166, 2010.