

Revisoning Buddhism 12

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

Desire

We are our senses

Sense-desire is the first of the five mental hindrances for a very good and natural reason: firstly, we are our senses and our minds work, like a computer, with an on-off pattern. "On" means paying attention to a thing, something which interests us; "off" means a lack of attention and interest towards something that we see no pleasure in. Behind this reactivity and predictability of samsaric behaviour lurks the mother of all emotions: desire.

More specifically, our desires are sense-based; for, that is *all* that we really are. We are our senses, and our senses create the world we live in¹ [2.2]. What sort of world do we create for ourselves? If we care to carefully review how we have lived up till now, we have been making choices between like and dislike, doing and not doing. Even at the moment of waking up, we need to choose between rising up and remaining in bed for a little while longer.

Although there are some choices we would rather not make (like going to work in an office run by an asura-like boss), we simply try not to think about it, not to give it any attention, so that the pain is much less, that is, less noticed and noted. Our desires, as such, bend the truth to fit our liking.

As a young man, before I became a monk, some of my friends and I tried our first beer. The taste was so awful I remembered wondering why people drink it at all. But after a short time, I began to enjoy its taste, not so much because I liked it, but because it was fun being with friends. It was as if we were expected to enjoy this disgusting brew. I gave this up on becoming a practising Buddhist.

Desire causes fear

Sensual desire causes fear; for, we invariably fear losing what we cling to. And we tend to cling to what we perceive as being pleasurable or empowering. Psychologically, lust is the identification or appropriation with a sense-object (form, sound, smell, taste or touch) that we regard as pleasurable. What we regard as pleasurable is invariably based on past experiences or memories of what we regarded as desirable or gratifying. And when a similar sense-object arises, we superimpose that perception on the present object. As such, we are caught up with the past, and we remain as Peter Pans of pleasure. Such pleasures are neither real nor lasting because they are based on past objects or events, which have all ceased to exist.

Our past perceptions and memories often condition our present perceptions. Conditioned by the past, lust arises in us towards present objects. When we are caught up in present sense-pleasures, sensual lust arouses a fear of losing them. Furthermore, when we are used to such pleasures, fear arises when we notice their absence.

¹ See **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15) = SD 7.1.

According to **the Abhaya Sutta** (A 8.184), *fear towards the future* arises when we are afflicted by some disaster or disease, and *our present lust* for sense-pleasures or *attachment* to the body arouses a fear of death.² **The (Kāma) Bhaya Sutta** (A 8.56) says that sensual lust causes fear not only in the present, but also towards the future.³ In this connection, the Dhammapada says:

From lust arises grief, from lust arises fear;
for one who is free from lust, there is no grief, much less fear. (Dh 215)

The Bhaya Bherava Sutta (M 4) says that those with lustful minds often feel fear in the present when they are in a secluded spot, such as a forest, as their minds are under the power of lust.⁴ This shows that lust is *a raw stimulation of the physical senses*. But we can be more than just our senses: we can experience profound mental joys.

When we are attracted to only a part of a person (say, the eyes) we are mistaking a part for the whole. And we may lose interest when we see the whole person. As such, it is important to know the whole person, that is, to accept him or her totally with lovingkindness. This is called unconditional love.

Based on Kama-c, chanda (SD 32.2), Piya Tan ©2010

² A 8.184/2:173-176 = SD 14.8.

³ A 8.56/4:289.

⁴ M 4.4/1:17 = SD 44.3.