

The Crucial Role of Desire and Intention

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 4 min read

There are three Pali words we need to understand that we translate variously such as desire, craving, intention, motivation in order to clarify the Buddhadhamma. They are taṇhā, chanda and cetanā. Taṇhā means drought and it is from this that we metaphorically get thirsty and then desire. Although it is translated usually as craving and does have a connotation of hunger for, fever for unsatisfied longing, it also includes even the tiniest of desires that are unwholesome, for untreated they can also become cravings. Taṇhā is the word used in Dependent Origination as that very craving is the psychological cause for suffering. In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha enumerates three basic cravings: the craving for sensual pleasure, for becoming and for an end of becoming. Taṇhā is always unwholesome and unskillful, leading to suffering and dissatisfaction. Chanda is the word for wholesome desires, although it can refer to unwholesome ones too, so it is often prefaced by sammā and micchā, wholesome and unwholesome. So micchā-chanda is taṇhā. Cetanā comes from ceto/citta which is the word for heart-mind and so thinking as active thought, intention, purpose. For easy understanding I shall use the words desire for taṇhā/chanda and intention for cetanā. The force of desire is neutral. It is the intention that makes it wholesome or unwholesome. Taking an example from physics, if I throw a stone, the force in my arm is transferred to the stone. As the stone flies, the force cannot be separated from the stone. I may have flicked a stone on a path here onto the car park where it belongs. I may come across a flat stone and skim it off the pond for fun. And I may throw a stone at a rabbit to scare it off. We have lots of rabbits who dig holes which is fine out in the meadows but not in the flower beds ... please! The Buddha equates intention or purpose to kamma. This word does not mean karma as it is used today to mean consequence, comeuppance. It is simply an act of body, speech or mind. However, many kamma produce a sankhara, usually translated as volitional conditioning, more easily understood as a habit. Our characters and personalities are collections of these habits and they are determining how we act and so produce our destiny. So it is of ultimate importance that we can discern those habits that lead to suffering and unsatisfactoriness, dukkha, and those leading to liberation from suffering. That is why the Buddha stresses the need for wise reflection, yoniso manisikāra. To make this distinction clear to us we can sit in front of a meal and feel the power of the desire to eat as wanting and the reason for it as the intention — do we eat to live or live to eat? The intention will either be to indulge or to nourish the body and just enjoy the taste. A difficult distinction to make. Observations What an unwholesome negative desire does is to create a separation between the self and the doing. It never does, says or thinks for its own sake but for another purpose. If I am grumbling to myself about washing the pots, I create a separation – me grumbling, the body washing the pots. I shall express my annoyance in how I wash the pots. I am identified with a negative state of mind and not the doing. In fact I am using the action to reinforce my annoyance! This is obviously an unhealthy

relationship. When we lose ourselves in an unwholesome state as when we rage or panic, that absorption is reinforcing the unwholesome conditioning and the sense of a separate self. The 'I' becomes absorbed in its own self-importance to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. Someone in an uncontrollable rage will kill, smash and create havoc. What an unwholesome indulgent desire does is to absorb into the object, the self and the gratification are one, but it is selective, prejudicial and exclusive. If I have a clear idea of what a pizza 'ought' to taste like, I approach the one just served with a bias. I'm unhappy if it does not live up to my expectation. Again I produce an unhealthy relationship. However, if it is just what I expect, I lose myself in the eating. I become one with the taste, succumbing to deliciousness. Unfortunately this absorption is reinforcing my bias. And the bias will actually stop me from experiencing all the flavours and aromas the pizza has to offer because I will concentrate on those sensations I expect and I will be simply unaware of any other more subtle ones. This is why a wine or tea taster has to clear their palate to be open to all the subtle tones and aromas. These sorts of desire are never gratified because the dissatisfaction is not coming from the doing, but from intentions that arise from unwholesome mental conditioning. And the action is reinforcing that conditioning. You need only contemplate how such attitudes, when dealing with people (and animals), give them cause to suffer. We turn people into objects to please us, objects to gratify us. We use them and at worse abuse them. When we do, say or think something with wholesome intentions, we don't create that separate self. We are at one with what we are doing. There is some level of happiness and satisfaction. And when the job is done there is a feeling of completion. And we haven't used or abused anyone. This is being our doing!

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