

To Become or Not to Become

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

The Buddha lists three types of wrong desire - taṇhā. The first are those that cover all our day to day desires- kama taṇhā. The second is the desire to become – bhāva taṇhā. This is the self wanting to recreate itself time after time. And then there is vibhāva taṇhā – the desire not to become. The last desire is not as well publicised as the other two. We all know our day to day desires to do something, to enjoy life and get away from what upsets us. We are all aware of wanting to continue to live. Well, not all the time. Sometimes we want to get rid of ourselves. When we feel fed up, we slump into the armchair and fall asleep. Sometimes when things get really bad, we may even want to stop living altogether and sometimes wish we were never born. So, all of us experience these three desires now and again. However, the desire ‘to continue or not to continue’, refers also to a deeper positioning and this manifests in belief systems that presume the ‘I’ endures or does not. Such systems the Buddha called eternalism and annihilationism. His teaching did not sit in either category because these beliefs were based on the notion of a self. Annihilationism can often be confused with materialism or nihilism. Annihilationism seems to be a Buddhist term to oppose eternalism. It’s not in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). It is the belief that when a person dies, that’s it. Materialism, especially scientific materialism, believes everything is an ‘emergent property’ arising out of matter. So thoughts, emotions and consciousness arise primarily out of the material of the brain and nervous system. Nihilism ‘rejects all religious and moral principles, often in the belief that life is meaningless’ O.E.D. Annihilationism, unlike materialism, can also include a finer energy, mind, as well as matter. But that will also annihilate upon death. Unlike nihilism it does not reject religious and moral principles. There’s just no belief in an afterlife. When we sit deep within ourselves, we may touch upon our deepest intuition about life and death. It may be that we feel life is worthwhile and has a meaning beyond itself. That is ‘I’ am worthwhile, ‘I’ am meaningful and ‘I’ will continue to live after death. Or we may intuit life is not worthwhile and has no meaning beyond itself. That is ‘I’ am ultimately insignificant, ‘I’ have no intrinsic value and ‘I’ will not continue to live after death. Just because I believe I am eternal doesn’t mean life is all roses. Just because I think life is ultimately meaningless, doesn’t mean I’m not going to have good time or behave ethically. So long as there is a self, we will veer to one or the other of these opposites. And this will manifest in our understanding of the Buddhadhamma. Eternalists tend to think of Nibbana as an eternal state of Buddhahood that ‘I’ will enjoy – ‘someone’ who is a Buddha. Annihilationists will deny that the Buddha ever taught there was a transcendent and if there is, it is only momentary. The answer lies in our careful investigation of that very sense of self, the feeling of being ‘me’, whenever such a sense or feeling arises. We can also reflect when it has not been there – even in ordinary daily life. The Buddha says Nibbana was not created nor does it die. So it must be here. He says it doesn’t arise and pass away which is just another way of saying the same thing. So it must be constant. So what

could 'it' be?

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