
(Question here from a student about the meaning of desire.)

A: To clarify the meaning of 'desire' as we are using it here, the word desire in Tibetan (*do chag*) has a very specific meaning. It does not just mean desire in the general sense of desiring for anything good or bad, or whatever. Here, desire is categorised as one of the afflictive emotions, one of the mental factors. The way we generate desire is that first, we have the thought of possessing, of wanting an object that we find attractive or appealing. So, we are talking about desire in the sense of coveting an object because it appears attractive to your mind.

In the context of afflictive emotions, 'desire' is the mind that wants to possess a particular object, because it has exaggerated the object's beauty or some other quality, to a degree that does not accord with the actual reality of the object. When you feel anger or hatred, in contrast, you have a strong ill-feeling towards an object because your mind superimposes on that object a quality of ugliness, and you see it as something you dislike. So, when we talk of desire as an afflictive emotion, we mean it has this element of perceiving the object with a quality of beauty or whatever that is beyond the actual reality of that object.

We can see how, depending on your perception at the time, the same object would look attractive one moment, when you feel strong desire for it, and unattractive and unappealing the next moment, when you generate anger or hatred towards it. Whether an object appears attractive or ugly to us is something that is totally superimposed or projected by the mind.

For example, the way you feel about your partner (in a relationship) could fluctuate within a moment – depending on your perception or mood at the time, that same person could appear pleasant one moment and unpleasant the next, changing from someone you desire to someone you hate.

When we use the word 'desire' here, we mean an afflictive emotion. The reason you desire that object is that your mind has exaggerated its qualities and attractiveness. If the object were already beautiful, you would add even more beauty to it, so you would feel very strong desire for that object. Or, if the object were not beautiful, you would project beauty onto it, so that it will appear attractive to you and you would desire it. This is the sort of desire we are talking about – an afflictive emotion that is very destructive, very harmful.

On the other hand, we also use terms such as 'desire for liberation', desire to achieve liberation from cyclic existence. In this context, the object of your desire is the state of liberation, which is a visual form that cannot attract your mind in the same way as a physical, beautiful object can. Because the state of liberation is a realistic goal you can achieve, the desire to achieve it is not an afflictive emotion.

We can also talk of the desire to help other beings, to benefit society, something that even His Holiness the Dalai Lama says is a valid desire. So it's good that

someone has brought up the question of what this word means, because we have to be very careful and specific when we talk about desire in a similar context to hatred (i.e. an afflictive emotion), as being something harmful. We should be clear about the meaning of desire in this context.

That's all the teaching for tonight. As usual, we'll chant the Buddha's mantra seven times. Could you again try to relax and sit in the proper meditation posture, removing all distracting thoughts. Then try to focus the mind fully on the sound of the mantra as we chant it.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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