

## Chapter 13

### What is life without desires?

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#### Discussion points

- *Taṇhā* and *chanda*
- Wholesome and unwholesome desires
- Life becomes meaningful with pursuit of wholesome desires

**T**he Pāli word '*taṇhā*' (which the Buddha identified as the cause of [unhappiness](#)) has often been translated as 'desire'. The second noble Truth then gets interpreted as an injunction to abandon all desires. No wonder this puts off most young persons for one with no desires is seen as a zombie who will be buffeted here and there by the world. More inquisitive among them would ask at the end of a meditation retreat: "How about the desire to become a better person? If one were to give up all desires why would one ever follow the path of Dhamma? What will motivate him to attend a 10-day retreat?" Indeed, what is life without any desire?

Considering the fact that the Buddha had millions of householder disciples which included kings, ministers, merchants, generals, surely he couldn't have advised them to give up all desires, for that would demotivate them from doing good to the society, protecting the country from enemies, and even looking after the family.

The clue lies in understanding the word '*taṇhā*' vis-a-vis another Pāli word '*chanda*' which is also translated as desire.

The Pāli dictionary gives these meanings of the word *taṇhā*: thirst; craving, hunger for, the fever of unsatisfied longing, or as we translated it in Chapter 6, 'wanting'. The Buddha calls it the fourth 'soldier' in the army of the Mara<sup>72</sup>, the tempter (also known as the king of the Death realm), an anthropomorphization of our mental weaknesses, which becomes an obstacle during our quest for liberation from all unhappiness. In the Dhammapada we hear the Buddha say :

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<sup>72</sup> Sn 422, Padhāna sutta.

*Taṇhā begets sorrow, taṇhā begets fear. For him who is free from taṇhā there is no sorrow; how can there be fear for him?*<sup>73</sup>

In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta<sup>9</sup>, The Buddha terms it as the cause of ‘re-becoming (rebirth) accompanied by passionate greed, and finding fresh delight now here, and now there’. We also saw in [Chapter 6](#) that ‘taṇhā’ is a link in the chain of dependent origination of unhappiness; it arises because of unwise response to feelings – futile attempt to hold on to pleasant feelings and run away from unpleasant feelings. Naturally, the abandoning of taṇhā marks the end of all unhappiness – an experience of Nibbāna, the state of full Enlightenment. Thus ‘taṇhā’ is clearly an unwholesome mental factor, worthy of being abandoned.

The mental factor *chanda* is however classified in the discourses as one of the four iddhipādas, the bases of power, and the means of accomplishing anything worthwhile. It is best translated as: aspiration, the wish to act, to choose, the other near synonyms being impulse, intention, will, desire for, zeal. In the suttas it is mostly used in the sense of a wholesome quality, as a wish to commit oneself to the practice of Dhamma. In the Abhidhamma, however the *chanda* is classified as an ethically neutral mental factor, for the act which ensues from it could be ethical or unethical. Thus when conjoined with wholesome mental factors to achieve a worthy goal, it becomes a virtuous desire. However, if accompanied by unwholesome mental factors like craving, aversion or delusion, it becomes a reprehensible desire – a taṇhā.

Thus what we are being advised is not to give up all desires, but to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome desires and choose wisely. Wholesome desires are those which are for our good, promote our physical and mental well-being and the welfare of all; one should strive to fulfil these. Unwholesome desires are those which are harmful to us or others or both; and one should shun these.

Consider for example the two possible approaches to eating. One driven by the desire to ‘enjoy’ to the hilt would take foods which result in maximizing the pleasant feelings. Overeating and stomach upset follow – don’t most people feel so in the morning after a grand dinner in a marriage party? This is the result of desire becoming a taṇhā. On the other hand one not deluded by the temptations would choose delicious, but balanced food to satisfy the hunger and nourish the body, and would feel fine even after the party. Thus the desire becomes wholesome, a *chanda*.

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<sup>73</sup> Dhammapada 216

We can easily extend this to all other activities which originate from desires and see the difference between *taṇhā* and wholesome *chanda*. Any economic activity, when done with the sole objective of maximizing the profit will have its roots in *taṇhā* and cause unhappiness to all. Increasing inequity, environmental pollution and the climate change are some of the major effects of this *taṇhā* operating at the societal level. These threaten the very existence of human race, for whose welfare the economic activities were initiated in the first place. An alternative wholesome approach to fulfil this desire would include willingness to sacrifice profits for treating the effluents to minimize environmental damage, choosing technologies and products which are eco-friendly, and sharing the profits with all the stakeholders. As discussed in [Chapter 2](#), householders are enjoined to participate in activities that generate wealth righteously without harming anybody and share the fruits of labour with all. This is wholesome *chanda* in action.

Finally let us look at various alternative ways of responding to the inequity in the society. One approach imbued with unwise view would impute it entirely to the exploitation by the 'filthy rich' and wishing to 'teach them a lesson', try to quickly achieve economic and social equality by force. This aversion based response converts that desire into *taṇhā*. It is likely to lead to unrest and violence as happened during the communist revolution in the Soviet Union. This is fundamentally unsustainable - the disintegration of the communist block being a proof. An alternative response could be based on promoting the welfare of all and not viewing the rich as enemies to be crushed. Promoting loving kindness and compassion, and reducing acquisitiveness among the rich would be an important part of the strategy so that they become willing partners in establishing an egalitarian society. This would also enhance their level of happiness – for bringing happiness to others does [give joy](#). Empowering the poor through education, skill development and financial help by using the resources released by the rich, would slowly raise their standard of living and also promote harmony as the poor would realize the contribution of the 'rich' in improving their lot. Thus would the desire to do good, wholesome *chanda*, manifest when imbued with wisdom and lead to increase in the happiness of all and promote social harmony. Surely, the Buddha would not want us to give up such wholesome desires. In fact life becomes meaningful by the pursuit of such desires. The spiritual pursuit for which the Buddha himself left his family and the comfortable life of palace was also motivated by a similar noble desire- to find a way out of unhappiness for all mankind.

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