

[Buddhist Encounters: Finding a Home in the Human Condition]

## Desire

Dr. Lewis R. Lancaster

Emeritus Professor, University of California, Berkeley

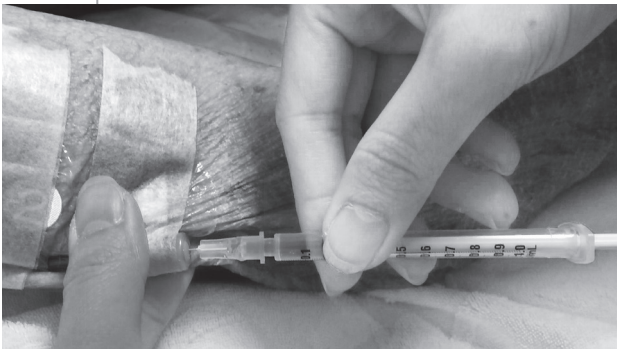
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A friend who follows my lecture series asked me why I had chosen to speak on the topic “Desire,” given all the current issues and problems in the world. I have not answered him yet. This lecture is my attempt to do so.

I believe that Desire, Addictive Desire, is in many ways a dominating problem for our society. It is related to hundreds of thousands of deaths, even more than COVID-19 during the pandemic period in the U.S. These are the deaths tied to the Addictive Desire for alcohol, tobacco, prescription opioids, and drugs. With every death, there are all the problems that must be faced by family and community. Chemical dependence, a major form of desire, is with us, and the question of how Buddhism can relate to the problem is crucial for the tradition.

This is one reason I have chosen to speak about “Desire.”

Throughout these monthly talks, we have returned many times to the Buddhist teaching that nothing has a fixed unchanging nature. This is especially crucial when dealing with the issues surrounding “desire.” It is tempting to say that “desire” is always negative in terms of what we read in the texts. Certainly, there is a negative aspect to our “thirst” or “desires”



Morphine can alleviate the pain caused by illness, but improper use can lead to destructive effects.

that can never be satisfied. And so, we seek to remove those things that cause Addictive Desire. At the same time, when there is unrelenting pain, even opioids can be a great gift of compassion. I learned this when my wife suffered extreme pain from fatal cancer. It is hard for me to imagine what it would have been like without morphine and methadone. It is ironic that a substance that can alleviate pain, can also be destructive when it is used in the wrong way, when it becomes mixed with the Three Poisons of Greed, Hatred, and Delusion.

I count myself among those who have had addictive desires... in my case tobacco. When I was a teenager, I started to smoke cigarettes. For me, it was exciting to do what I considered such a grown-up and mature activity. I felt that I was more of a man and less of a boy because I smoked. In due course, I developed a chronic cough and congestion in my lungs. Nevertheless, even in the face of such symptoms, I could not break the now firmly established pattern of smoking. I think the Buddhist teaching about this kind of behavior is best expressed when they say that there are people who have seen the beauty of the sea, the blue color, the magnificence of the white spray of waves. But they turn their back on it and instead choose to look at the muddy water in a footprint left by a cow. I was playing basketball in high school and knew the importance of having the lung power to sustain physical activity. Yet, I turned my back on this knowledge and chose instead to smoke and have less and less physical strength and oxygen. I was choosing to have the smoking pattern with its jolt of energy rather than having my full physical capabilities. As I look back, I fully understand the Buddhist idea that I was desiring the muddy water in a cow print, the rush from nicotine, rather than having the full expression of health and well-being. While my smoking days are nearly 60 years behind me, I still bear the signs of lung damage and the dangers it represents in the era of COVID-19 infections.

The Buddhist practitioners were aware that addictive desire is extremely difficult to overcome. Our brains respond to the “rush” of adrenaline and make it our number one act that outweighs all others. How is one to retrain the brain and break the sometimes fatal desire for a particular sensation? One method that was used for those monastics who could not shake off desires focused on the human body was a unique form of meditation. It was one that took place in the fields where the dead bodies were exposed, not buried underground. The bodies

were decaying and were being torn into by animals and birds. Meditation was based on sitting near a body that is decomposing and focusing on the changes that are occurring in this process. The practitioner was told, “Your body is like this rotting object you see in front of you. Even the most beautiful bodies will come to this state. Therefore, when a desire for a body arises, remember this experience and the feelings of revulsion.” This can be compared to modern psychological methods that were first developed in the 1930s, known as Aversion Therapy, as a treatment for alcoholism. The patient is given a medication that induces nausea and vomiting when even a sip of alcohol is taken. Instead of having the usual feeling of euphoria, there is extreme discomfort. Over time the experience of drinking is associated with feeling wretched and the desire for the drink is removed. When I tried to stop smoking after a decade of use, it was beyond me and I continually returned to cigarettes. This idea of Aversion came to me and I used it to help me break the chains of my addiction. I disliked smoking a pipe, I was a cigarette person. So, I took a vow to give up cigarettes and only smoke a pipe.



Every year sees the emergence of smartphones with more powerful features.

It was unpleasant to me and within a few days I could finally stop smoking. My addictive desire was not yet gone, it lingered on for some years. I would suddenly, after dinner when others lit a cigarette, be overcome with the desire to have one. As powerful as the desire for nicotine can be, it is less than other substances that cause addiction. Knowing how hard it was for me to quit smoking, my heart goes out to those who have far greater challenges with chemical addictions.

Another approach, along with Aversion, is described in the texts as “Substitution.” One of the young men in the Buddha’s family, Nanda by name, was so attracted to women that he could not consider a celibate life. The Buddha saw him surrounded by a tempting group of young beauties. In order to get the man’s attention, the Buddha opened up a vision of heavenly females whose beauty and perfection far exceed those who surround the reluctant candidate. Once Nanda saw these celestial beings, he rejected all those he had desired in the past. Even the divine beings of one level can be rejected when compared to higher states of existence. If, every time there is a desire for an object, a better one is shown, it soon dawns on the person that what I desire is of less and less value. If there is something superior, then my fixation on an object becomes difficult to maintain. We are faced with something similar in our lives today. The cell phone is a prized and desired object. But next year, a much better and more impressive model will appear and my old cell phone will no longer be desired. I was looked at with pity by young people when I was still using an iPhone 6. The younger generation is now standing in line to secure the newest model and they are anxious to trade in the old one from last year. This constant substitution dulls the thrill and desire for the “new.” It is teaching us a valuable lesson, no phone has an essential nature of being the best. Each year, the thing we so desired last year is downgraded in our estimation. At what point do we come to grips with the disillusionment that results from an endless array of desired substitutes?

If desire has no fixed nature, can I have desire as a positive thing in my life? The Buddhist texts tell us that it is possible to have certain desires that are appropriate. For example, the Perfection of Wisdom texts describe a great teacher named Dharmodgata. He is a Bodhisattva, not an Arhat, and not yet a Buddha. Renowned as one who teaches the way things really are, every afternoon the people in his city gather to hear his words. We are told that in the mornings, he

spends time with his family and friends in delightful activities, eating delicious food, singing, and dancing. In those moments, he savors the pleasures of what he possesses. After lunch, he leaves all that behind and goes to the center of the city, sits down in meditation posture, and enters into a trance state. A crowd gathers around him and when he emerges from his trance, he teaches. In another section, the Sutra explains, the Bodhisattva can be a person of great wealth with many possessions in which he delights. His wisdom is the ability to have such an experience without clinging to a life of ease and splendor. Like Dharmodgata, a bodhisattva can leave behind the objects of desire without a moment's regret or hesitation.

As I searched for some inspiration for this talk, I thought back to an earlier lecture where an octopus was my teacher. You may have watched that lecture on “Detachment” and how the octopus could at one time cling to objects and at another let them all fall away. What a teacher! I thought, “Where can I find such a mentor for my attempt to explore ‘Desire’?” My daily life is restricted and my main contact with the world is through the internet. However, every day I take a walk over the same route. My options for walking are limited by living in a small area that is bounded by two major highways, neither having sidewalks. And so, every day, I make my circle of the short streets in the neighborhood. There are seldom surprises, since I am very familiar with every house, know many of the occupants, and have even come to recognize their cars.

A few days ago, I set out on my daily walk with the thought that I would look for a teacher along the way to help me with this topic of “Desire.” At first, nothing caught my eye and I sighed with regret that no teacher was awaiting me. Then, I saw an object that had been a disappointment to me for several weeks and I tried to quickly look at something else. But I could not help continuing to look at my disappointment. In the early summer, my neighbor had planted a seed in the space near the street and he had stuck up the seed package to identify the plant. It was a watermelon and I was really pleased to have a chance to once again see a watermelon grow.

The degree of my desire for this watermelon plant may be an indication of how restricted life has been under COVID-19. Every day, I took time to look at the progress of the plant and was thrilled when it burst forth in bloom. Then to



my sorrow, the blooms faded and fell away, none of them having been fertile. But one day, a small melon appeared. One of the blossoms had developed. As the days went on, the melon grew larger but something was amiss. It was not like any watermelon that I knew. Could it be a new hybrid? The small melon grew larger and stranger.

One day, I stood and looked at it trying to decide what was happening. Finally, a realization came that it was not the watermelon that I had desired, it was a pumpkin! “Who,” I thought, “wants a pumpkin in place of a juicy and sweet watermelon?” Could it be that my teacher for the day was this ordinary, unwanted pumpkin that had somehow gotten mixed with watermelon seeds? I often commune with plants. I love to talk to yellow roses, delight in pomegranate flowers, and even look with respect at a large barrel cactus that greets me in my walks. But a pumpkin! I stood and thought, “Well unwanted pumpkin, are you my teacher?” As I looked, I was for the first time aware that the pumpkin, dark green with light red stripes, was in fact quite beautiful. It reminded me of the sculpture of Yayoi Kusama in Japan, a pumpkin seen through the eyes of an artist. So, I thought to the pumpkin, “You are in fact quite beautiful, but you are still not a watermelon. What do you have to teach?”

The answer came back,

“I am not what you desired. But I am something, and perhaps you should give thought to what I am rather than what you desired.

I am long-lasting and have many functions. When the days grow shorter and the darkness comes early, you can carve into me and make a wild-looking face with candles lit to glow. On the night when the ghosts of the past rise up to haunt, I will be a guardian. Those ghosts from the past, many painful in memory, and the



Each and every thing has its inherent value in existence.

source of sadness, will be repulsed by the light that I cast. For those memories that you cherish, I will provide a light to guide you to them. Children will follow my light to the door and receive a treat. Then as winter sets in, when you celebrate and give thanks for life and its bounty, I can be a pie and become a part of you.”

Reflecting in this fashion, I realized that we all have desires for how we want our life. We have desires for how we want our spouses to be; how smart, promising, and how admired we want our children to be; how our jobs are esteemed and productive of wealth. And when those around us do not match with our desires, we have a sense of disappointment. What will we do when we are given pumpkins instead of watermelons? When our children need help and struggle? When our job is demanding and has less rewards than we want? When our spouses look to their own desires and not fixate on ours? Will we ever be content with a “pumpkin”?

What is it that makes desire such a problem? It is the dangers that arise when desire becomes mixed with the Three Poisons of Greed, Hatred, and Delusion. Even when there is what seems to be a positive state where I only desire what I possess, and I have no need of having more or something else, still a darkness can emerge. I begin to cling to what is comfortable, I am content. But the reality is that everything changes and I can never stop the process and freeze something into permanent space. My greed is shown in wanting to hold onto the moment of contentment and my anger is roused when I feel it slipping away. I desire to have things as they once were, however delusory that wish.

As I watched the pumpkin plant, I held on to the thought that it was a watermelon. My inability to face the fact that the leaves were not quite right for a watermelon, that the blossom was different, and that the small melon was not the right shape or color; allowed me for a time to keep my delusion alive that the plant was a watermelon. Contentment is often like this, when I am content with my life, I think I have a watermelon and I try to avoid seeing any signs to the contrary. When I act in this way, change and recognition of reality will make me angry, disappointed, and unable to see anything positive about the way things are. I am unable to rejoice in the new moment.

Growing old is a challenge. I thought the 50-year decade was quite a good one and as I approach my 90th year, there are changes that make life more challenging than it was 40 years ago. It is so easy to be angry about the changes, and easy to deny the changes: ignoring the lack of energy; the problem of mobility; the slowness of recovery after fatigue; the wrinkles; the lack of strength. It all seems to have just descended on me with no warning. From my reactions to aging, I can sympathize with all those who live with me in this world that appears to be rapidly changing. I understand the situation of changes that I do not desire. There is no surprise that such situations produce great anger along with fear of being unable to manage the newness, that we look back to former times and feel that we once had it all. We despair that the erosion of what we now think was a “golden” time, is uncontrolled and we are destined to have a lesser life.

Can it be that the future is our pumpkin? Can it be that we do not desire what is happening? We once had a watermelon, or at least we thought we did. If the present and the future is a pumpkin, can I have the courage to look at it without prejudice? Can I see the glow of the future? Can I learn to know the value of what I possess? Can I ever learn to treasure my “pumpkin” ?

