



Desire, Aversion and Delusion and the Road to Suffering

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November 2019

The Buddha described the mind states of greed, aversion (ill-will) and delusion as the three poisons that lead to unskillful behavior and thus cause suffering. “And what are the roots of what is unskillful? Greed is a root of what is unskillful, aversion is a root of what is unskillful, delusion is a root of what is unskillful. These are called the roots of what is unskillful.”ⁱ In this talk, we will explore each of these three poisons.

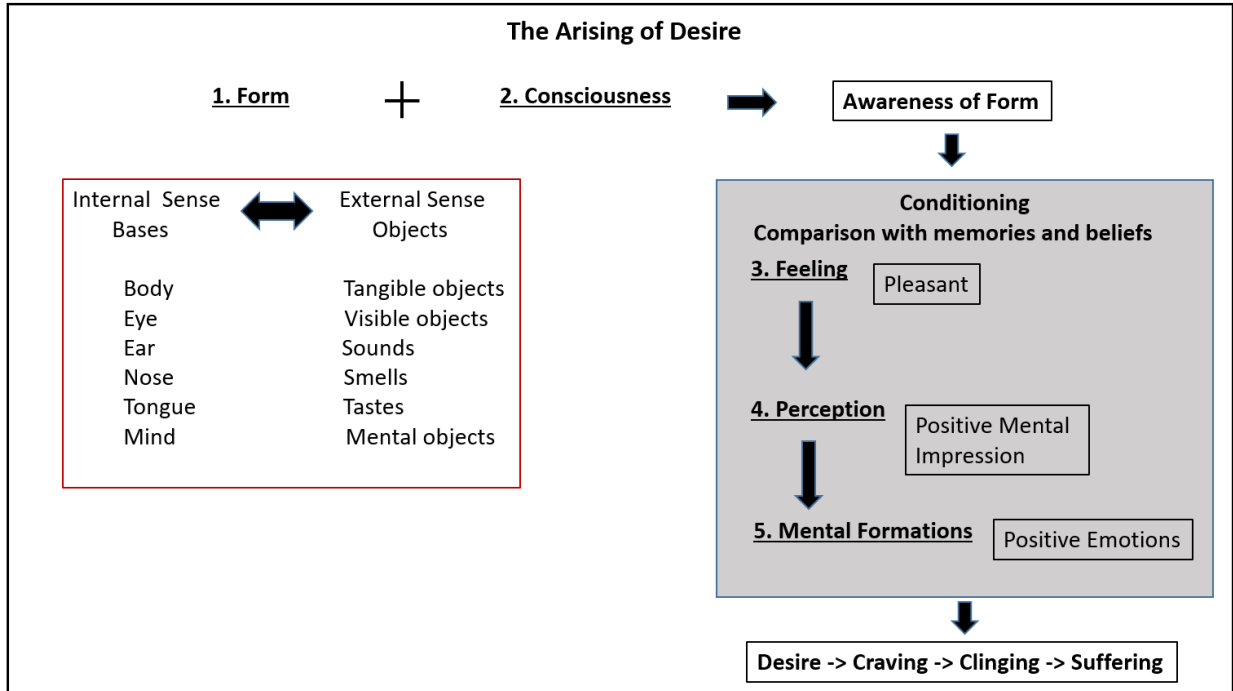
Desire

Greed arises from desire. In our daily life, we want many things as various desires arise. For example, we see an ad for something and a desire arises to buy it or we see a picture of food and desire arises to eat.

What is desire and how does it arise?

Phillip Moffitt defines desire as “energetic states felt in your body and mind that arise from pleasant and unpleasant feelings associated with various thoughts and sensations which then cause the mind to move toward or away from some experience.”ⁱⁱ

We experience life through what the Buddha called the Five Aggregates or what can be called the Five Elements of Experience: form, consciousness, feeling, perception and mental formations. Desire is triggered in the mind by an experience such as a thought or sensation being detected by one of your sense organs creating form that we become aware of when detected by our consciousness. The mind then compares this form with the stored memories and beliefs and a feeling arises, in this case, pleasant. This leads to a positive perception and positive mental formations such as happiness. Thus, desire has arisen for more of that pure experience. Our subsequent reaction (what we say or do) is based on that desire which arose from our feeling, perception, and mental formations.



For example, when our eyes make contact with a piece of chocolate cake and we become conscious of this **form**, our mind compares this to the stored memories of chocolate cake and a pleasant **feeling** arises. Our **perception** is that eating this cake will be a positive experience causing **mental formations** such as happiness to arise. Our **reaction** is a **desire** transforming into a **craving** to eat the cake. Note that, the mind created the desire. Seeing cake was just the trigger, not the cause. If we can't immediately eat the cake, we may become attached to the idea of getting the cake as soon as possible to eat it. In this case, the craving has turned into **clinging**.

Moffitt noted: "craving from the six sense organs occurs many times during the day: craving for certain food tastes or for pleasing sounds or for silence; craving for sexual, affectionate, or comforting touch or simple physical comfort in your body; craving for attractive, pleasant, comforting, inspiring sights as well as for pleasant, refreshing smells; and finally, craving for thoughts that are confirming, useful, stimulating, and reassuring to you. Just think of how many different sense desires you have in any given moment?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Moffitt goes on to say: "Desire can arise and pass without contracting into craving. For instance, maybe there's a movie you really want to see and you make the effort to drive to the theater where it's playing, only to discover that it's sold out. If your desire is characterized by clinging and you have contracted into craving, you will feel discontented, restless, or annoyed because you can't see the movie. If there is no clinging, then these emotions are absent and you're able to go on with your evening without losing equanimity."^{iv}

The Four Stages of Desire

The four stages of desire are:

1. Awareness (being conscious of the form)

2. Craving (a strong desire for the form)
3. Clinging (being attached to the form, obsessed to the extent that we can't let go of what we want)
4. Suffering (not able to get enough of or to remain attached to the form)

Experience the bodily sensations of desire

Feeling and mental formations are bodily sensations. We need to listen to what our body is telling us when these sensations arise. As Edward Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby noted: "Those who think they have not time for bodily exercise will sooner or later have to find time for illness." We can paraphrase that as "Those who think they have not time to listen to bodily sensations will sooner or later have to find time for suffering." We can practice by doing the following exercises.

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of desire, something that you wanted. What do you feel in your body? Where do you feel it? Is it a pleasant or unpleasant feeling?

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of intense desire, something that you really wanted or something that you had and you wanted to protect. What do you feel in your body? Where do you feel it? Is it a pleasant or unpleasant feeling?

The Buddha in the Fire Sermon described the bodily sensation of clinging as a burning (being aflame).^v See if that is what you can experience.

How do we keep desire from transforming into craving, clinging and suffering?

Ayya Khema explains: "When the eye sees, it simply registers color and shape. All the rest takes place in the mind. For instance, we see a piece of chocolate. The eye sees only the brown shape. It is the mind that says: "Ah, chocolate! That tastes delicious - I want a piece!" Not to grasp at the major signs or secondary characteristics is to stop the mind from doing exactly that.

We can practice this easily with anything we either very much like or very much dislike.

If we are easily swayed by what we see, the best thing to do is to recognize the sense-contact and stop the mind at the perception, the labeling. It is very hard to stop it before that. So, for example, if we see a person, or even think of a person, for whom we have hate or greed, someone we either dislike or long for intensely, **we should practice stopping at the label, person friend, male, female.** Nothing further. **The rest is our desire.** That is what is meant by guarding the sense-doors.

Our senses are our survival system. It is much easier to survive if we can see and hear than if we are blind or deaf. Most people assume, however, that the senses are there in order to provide them with pleasure. We use them in that way and become angry when they fail to do so. We then blame the trigger. If someone displeases us, we blame that person. It has nothing to do with the other person, who, like us, is made up of the four elements, has the same senses, the same limbs, and is looking, as we are, for happiness. There is nothing in that person that is producing displeasure. It is all in our own mind. Exactly the same applies when we think another person will provide us with pleasure.....There is no reason to look to that person for pleasure or blame then for not providing it. All we have to do is see

"person". Nothing more. There are so many "persons" in this world, why should we allow this particular one to arouse our syndrome of desire-distaste?

If we guard our senses, we guard our passions, which enables us to live with far greater equanimity. We are no longer on that endless seesaw; up, when we are getting what we want, down, when we are not, which induces a continual inner feeling of wanting something that just escapes us. Nothing that is to be had in the world, anywhere, under any circumstances, is capable of bringing fulfillment. All that the world can provide are sense-contacts - seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, and thinking. All are short-lived and have to be renewed, over and over again. This takes time and energy, and here again it is not the sense-contact itself that satisfies us. It is what the mind makes of it. Guarding the sense-doors is one of the most important things we can do, if we want to lead a peaceful, harmonious life, untroubled by **wanting what we do not have**, or **not wanting what we do have**. These are the only two causes of dukkha (suffering); there are no others. If we watch our sense-contacts and do not go past the labeling, we have a very good chance of being at ease."^{vi}

In summary, there are steps you can take to prevent desire taking the road to suffering. Be mindful of the bodily sensations of feeling (unpleasant, pleasant, and neutral) and of the mental formations (emotions). What is the body telling you? Guard the sense doors. Be mindful of what you are experiencing and see if this experience might lead to desire that can lead to suffering. Set boundaries by not exposing your sense organs unnecessarily to triggers. For example, avoiding food buffets that could lead to overindulgence.

Desires will arise. You can choose how to deal with them.

Aversion

Aversion is ill-will leading to the mind state of pushing away, resisting unpleasantness. This can lead to the arising of a number of mental formations (emotions) including anger: a strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure, or hostility.

How do we experience and react to aversion?

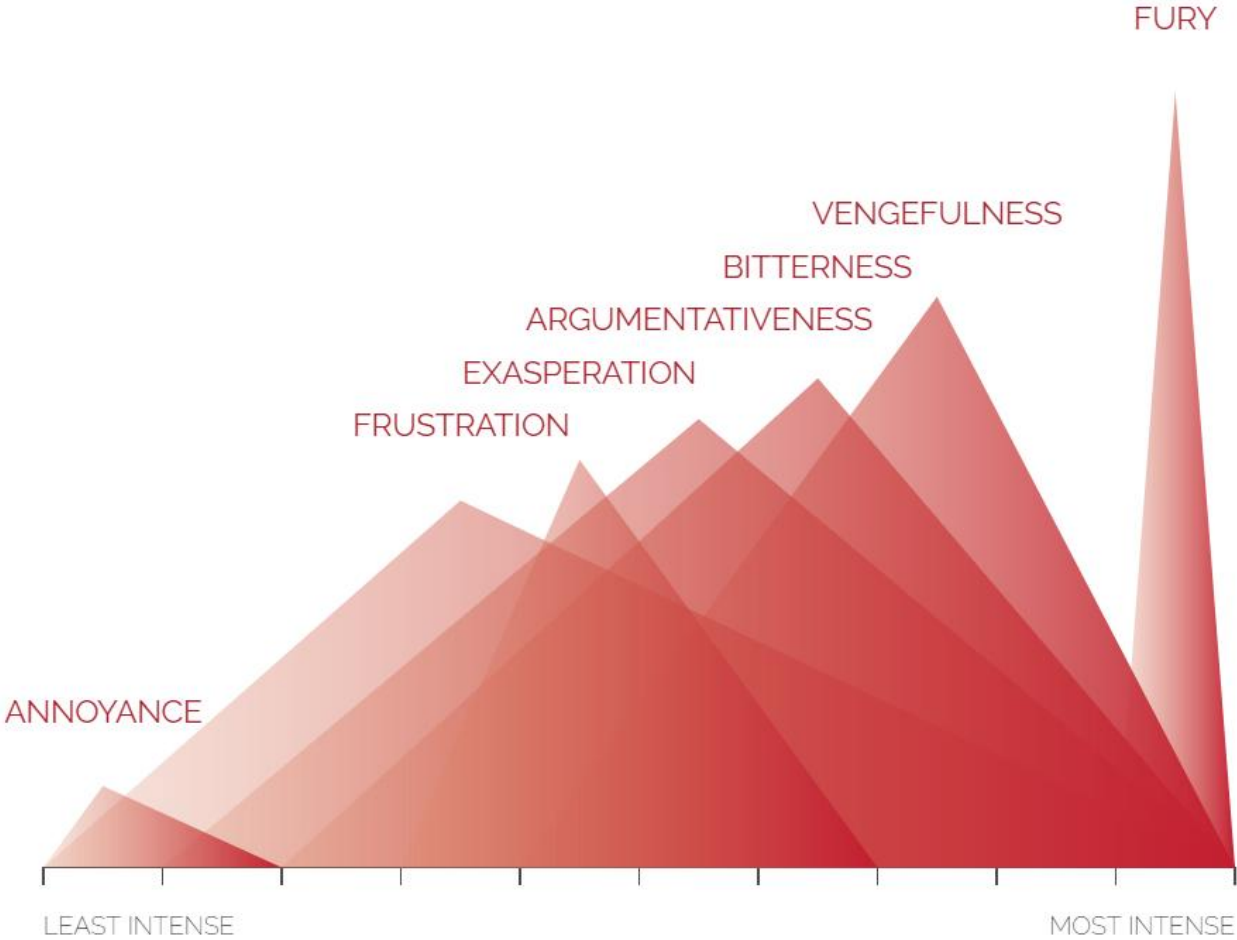
As noted with desire, we experience life through what the Buddha called the Five Aggregates or what can be called the Five Elements of Experience.: form, consciousness, feeling, perception and mental formations. Aversion is triggered in the mind by an experience such as a thought or sensation being detected by one of your sense organs creating form that we become aware of when detected by our consciousness. The mind then compares this form with the stored memories and beliefs and a feeling arises, a bodily sensation that is either pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This leads to a perception (mental impression) which causes mental formations (emotions) to arise. Our subsequent reaction (what we say or do) is based that aversion which arose from our feeling, perception, and mental formations.

For example, let's say that we are very sensitive to feedback which from the past we perceive as criticism. So, when we are conscious of hearing something that someone is saying to us such as feedback on something we have done, our mind compares this experience (form) to the stored

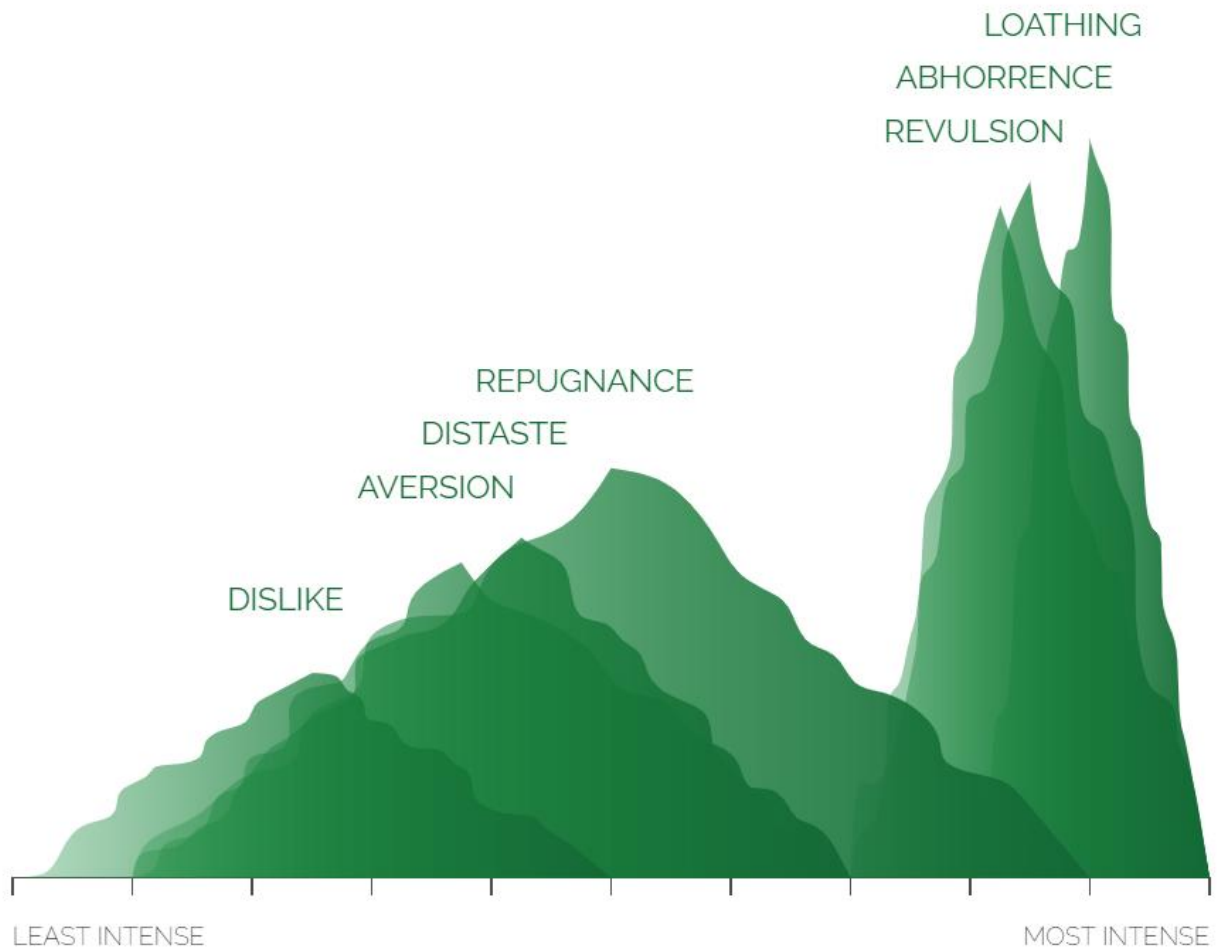
memories of similar feedback and an unpleasant **feeling** arises. Our **perception** is we are being unfairly criticized. This causes negative **mental formations** such as anger to arise. In this example, our **reaction** is a **craving** to argue with this person. Note that, the mind created the aversion.. Hearing what the other person said was just the trigger, not the cause. If we can't immediately make it clear to that person that we are being unfairly criticized, we may become attached to repeated efforts to get our point across. In this case, the craving has turned into **clinging**.

“The Dalai Lama imagined "a map of our emotions to develop a calm mind." He asked his longtime friend and renowned emotion scientist Dr. Paul Ekman to realize his idea. Ekman took on the creation of the Atlas alongside his daughter, Eve Ekman, a second-generation emotion researcher and trainer. The Atlas represents what researchers have learned from the psychological study of emotion.”^{vii}

Below are two diagrams from the Atlas showing the range of emotions of anger and disgust. **The more intense the emotion, the more likelihood of a more unskillful reaction (what you may so or do):**
Anger has many dimensions:



Disgust has many dimensions:



Experience the bodily sensations of aversion

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of anger or disgust with someone. What do you feel in your body? Where do you feel it? Is it a pleasant or unpleasant feeling?

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of clinging (attachments) to the emotions of anger or disgust. What do you feel in your body? Where do you feel it? Is it a pleasant or unpleasant feeling?

How do we keep our aversion from transforming into craving, clinging and suffering?

The most important step is to be mindful so as to be aware of the aversion at the earliest possible stage, the unpleasant bodily feeling and then to pause.

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space.
In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our happiness.”^{viii}

Viktor Frankl, a noted psychologist, wrote, “This is the idea I am fascinated by—that we need not wait until our response has begun and then somehow catch ourselves because we are responding in a way that is overly forceful, or angry, or violent. If we learn to see that space, to expand it, to live in it, then we can respond in ways of our choosing, rather than simply reacting. The question is then, what can we do to enlarge and inhabit that space more often?”

Other steps include reflections and reading the dharma

Reflections

- Realize that the mind causes these mental formations and that you can control your reactions.
- Contemplate the downsides of hate
“Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.”^{ix}
- Contemplate the benefits of tolerance
The antidote to aversion in relationships is loving-kindness. Wish others well and reflect on their skillful actions.
- “I sat with my anger long enough until she told me her real name was grief^x(a deep sorrow wanting life to be other than the way it is).
- “Never let a problem to be solved be more important than a person to be loved.”^{xi}

Read the Dharma

Below are three suttas:

Chetvā Sutta: Having Killed SN 1.71^{xii}

As she was standing to one side, a devata recited this verse to the Blessed One:

Having killed what
do you sleep in ease?
Having killed what
do you not grieve?
Of the slaying
of what one thing
does Gotama approve?

[The Buddha:]

Having killed anger
you sleep in ease.
Having killed anger
you do not grieve.
The noble ones praise
the slaying of anger
— with its honeyed crest
& poison root —
for having killed it
you do not grieve.

Akkosa Sutta: Insult SN 7.2^{xiii}

Whence is there anger
for one free from anger,
tamed,
living in tune —
one released through right knowing,
calmed
& Such.

You make things worse
when you flare up
at someone who's angry.
Whoever doesn't flare up
at someone who's angry
wins a battle
hard to win.

You live for the good of both
— your own, the other's —
when, knowing the other's provoked,
you mindfully grow calm.

When you work the cure of both
— your own, the other's —
those who think you a fool
know nothing of Dhamma.

Lekha Sutta Inscriptions (AN 3:133)^{xiv}

translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

"Monks, there are these three types of individuals to be found existing in the world. Which three? An individual like an inscription in rock, an individual like an inscription in soil, and an individual like an inscription in water.

"And how is an individual like an inscription in rock? There is the case where a certain individual is often angered, and his anger stays with him a long time. Just as an inscription in rock is not quickly effaced by wind or water and lasts a long time, in the same way a certain individual is often angered, and his anger stays with him a long time. This is called an individual like an inscription in rock.

"And how is an individual like an inscription in soil? There is the case where a certain individual is often angered, but his anger doesn't stay with him a long time. Just as an inscription in soil is quickly effaced by wind or water and doesn't last a long time, in the same way a certain individual is often angered, but his anger doesn't stay with him a long time. This is called an individual like an inscription in soil.

"And how is an individual like an inscription in water? There is the case where a certain individual — when spoken to roughly, spoken to harshly, spoken to in an unpleasing way — is nevertheless congenial, companionable, & courteous. Just as an inscription in water immediately disappears and doesn't last a long time, in the same way a certain individual — when spoken to roughly, spoken to harshly, spoken to in an unpleasing way — is nevertheless congenial, companionable, & courteous. This is called an individual like an inscription in water.

"These are the three types of individuals to be found existing in the world."

Delusion

Delusion is “an idiosyncratic (individual) belief or impression that is firmly maintained despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality or rational argument, typically a symptom of mental disorder.” The idiosyncratic belief is that all things are permanent, can give lasting happiness, and are part of our self. This belief is not consistent with reality when we really look at what is. What is true reality? All things are impermanent, unable to give lasting satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and there is no permanent self.

How do we experience and react to delusion?

As noted with Desire and Aversion, we experience life through what the Buddha called the Five Aggregates of Clinging or what can be called the Five Elements of Experience.: form, consciousness, feeling, perception and mental formations. Delusion is triggered in the mind by a sense object such as a thought or sensation being detected by one of your sense organs creating form that we become aware of when detected by our consciousness. The mind then compares this form with the stored memories and beliefs and a feeling arises, a bodily sensation that is either pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This leads to a perception (mental impression) which causes mental formations (emotions) to arise. Our subsequent reaction (what we say or do) is based that delusion which arose from our feeling, perception, and mental formations.

For example, let's say that we hear that a loved one has passed away. When we are conscious of hearing this, our mind compares this experience (**form**) to the stored memories of similar losses and an unpleasant **feeling** arises. Our **perception** is that this loss should not have happened. This causes negative **mental formations** such sadness to arise. In this example, our **reaction** is a **craving** to wish that this didn't happen. We are ignorant that life is impermanent. Note that, the mind created the delusion. Hearing what the other person said was just the trigger, not the cause. When we fail to realize that nothing is permanent, these mental formations keep arising. In this case, the craving has turned into **clinging**.

To truly experience the nature of reality, reflect on these three questions:

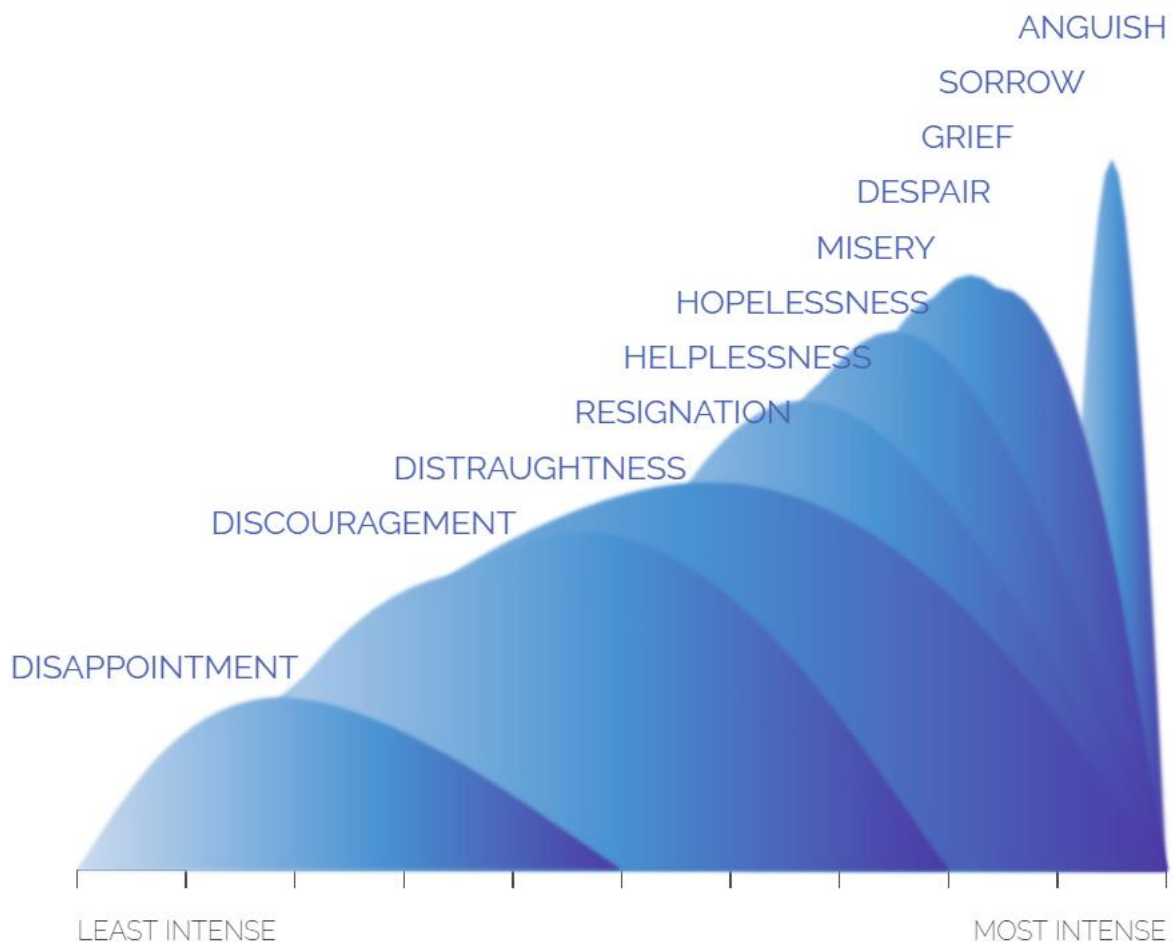
1. Can you name anything that is permanent?
2. Can you name anything that can provide lasting (permanent) satisfaction?
3. Can you find a permanent self?

Loss is one of the experiences that can cause delusion to arise as noted in the example above. The mental formation sadness arises and can persist as clinging to cause persistent suffering.

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Below is a diagram from the Atlas showing the range of emotions of sadness which frequently arises as a result of delusion. **The more intense the emotion, the more likelihood of a more unskillful reaction (what you may so or do):**

The Delusion of sadness has many dimensions:



Experience the bodily sensations of delusion

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on a recent experience of loss. What do you feel in your body? Where do you feel it? Is it a pleasant or unpleasant feeling?

Exercise: Close your eyes and reflect on an experience of recurrent sadness. What do you feel in your body? Where do you feel it? Is it a pleasant or unpleasant feeling?

How do we keep our delusion from transforming into craving, clinging and suffering?

The most important step is to be mindful (paying appropriate attention) so as to be aware of the delusion at the earliest possible stage such as the unpleasant bodily feeling and then to pause and reflect on the true nature of reality.

The Buddha: “‘Friends, there are these three qualities. Which three? Passion, aversion, & delusion. These are the three qualities. Now what is the difference, what the distinction, what the distinguishing factor among these three qualities?’”

“‘But what, friends, is the reason, what the cause, why unarisen delusion arises, or arisen delusion tends to growth & abundance?’ ‘Inappropriate attention,’ it should be said. ‘For one who attends inappropriately, unarisen delusion arises and arisen delusion tends to growth & abundance....’”

“‘But what, friends, is the reason, what the cause, why unarisen delusion does not arise, or arisen delusion is abandoned?’ ‘Appropriate attention,’ it should be said. ‘For one who attends appropriately, unarisen delusion does not arise and arisen delusion is abandoned. This is the reason, this the cause, why unarisen delusion does not arise and arisen delusion is abandoned.’”^{xvi}

Appropriate attention is being mindful (paying attention moment to what is). If we feel sad at a loss, just try to be with it and realize that it too will pass as this is the nature of reality. This does not mean that we that we should detach ourselves. Instead we practice non-attachment, living from a place of presence, where we honor each experience (including our desires and aversions), without grasping or resisting what is occurring. It has the quality of spaciousness and it reflects the ability to live in the present moment.

Ajahn Sucitto notes: “This acknowledgment (that suffering exists) doesn’t require that everyone should feel wretched; rather, it’s a matter of learning to know and accept that this earthly realm is one of limitation. When we wake up to how human life on this planet actually is, and stop running away or building walls in our heart, then we develop a wiser motivation for our life. And we keep waking up as the natural dukkha [suffering] touches us. This means that we sharpen our attention to catch our instinctive reactions of blaming ourselves, blaming our parents, or blaming society; we meditate and access our suffering at its root; and consequently, we learn to open and be still in our heart. And even on a small scale in daily life situations, such as when we feel bored or ill at ease, instead of trying to avoid these feelings by staying busy or buying another fancy gadget, we learn to look more clearly at our impulses, attitudes, and defenses. In this way dukkha guides and deepens our motivation to the point where we’ll say, “Enough running, enough walls, I’ll grow through handling my blocks and lost places.””^{xvii}

Mark Matousek notes, “Grief may be the greatest healing experience of a lifetime. It’s certainly one of the hottest fires we will encounter. It penetrates the hard layers of our self-protection, plunges us into the sadness, fear, and despair we have tried so hard to avoid. Grief is unpredictable, uncontrollable. There are no shortcuts around grief. The only way is right through the middle. Some say time heals, but that’s a half-truth. Time alone doesn’t heal. Time and attention heal.

In grief we access parts of ourselves that were somehow unavailable to us in the past. With awareness, the journey through grief becomes a path to wholeness. Grief can lead us to a profound understanding that reaches beyond our individual loss. It opens us to the most essential truth of our lives: the truth of impermanence, the causes of suffering, and the illusion of separateness. When we meet these experiences with mercy and awareness, we begin to appreciate that we are more than the grief. We are what the grief is moving through. In the end, we may still fear death, but we don't fear living nearly as much. In surrendering to our grief, we have learned to give ourselves more fully to life.^{”xviii}

Conclusion

The three poisons of desire, aversion, and delusion are the roots of our suffering. In order to deal with them, we must be mindful of their arising and then take the appropriate steps to eradicate them. Practicing the pause upon recognition that we are craving or clinging allow us some breathing space to make choices. According to the Visuddhimagga, realization of the truth and reality of the three marks (poisons) constitutes enlightenment, which eradicates belief in the existence of a perduring self ^{xix}

ⁱ [Sammāditthi Sutta](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN9.html) (MN 9) Thanissaro Bhikkhu <https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN9.html>

ⁱⁱ Phillip Moffitt. *Dancing with Life: Buddhist Insights for Finding Meaning and Joy in the Face of Suffering* (pp. 80-81).

ⁱⁱⁱ Mottitt p. 82

^{iv} Moffitt p. 82

^v [The Fire Sermon Āditta-pariyāya Sutta \(SN 35:28\)](#)

^{vi} <http://minddeep.blogspot.com/2010/06/not-forgetting-to-guard-sense-doors.html>

^{vii} <http://atlasofemotions.org/#introduction/>

^{viii} Unknown attribution

^{ix} Unknown attribution

^x Unknown attribution

^{xi} Emily Hoffman, [How to Avoid Getting Angry](#)

^{xii} [Chetvā Sutta: Having Killed SN 1.71](#)

^{xiii} [Akkosa Sutta: Insult SN 7.2](#)

^{xiv} [Lekha Sutta Inscriptions \(AN 3:133\)](#)

^{xv} <http://atlasofemotions.org/#introduction/>

^{xvi} [Titthiya Sutta Sectarians \(AN 3:69\)](#)

^{xvii} [From Turning the Wheel of Truth: Commentary on the Buddha's First Teaching](#) Ajahn Sucitto

^{xviii} [A Splinter of Love Are grief and mourning the most precious proofs of love?](#) Mark Matousek

^{xix} Buswell Jr., Robert E.; Donald S., Jr. Lopez. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*