



Desire and the Road to Suffering

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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 desire, the precursor of greed.

Our objectives will be to:

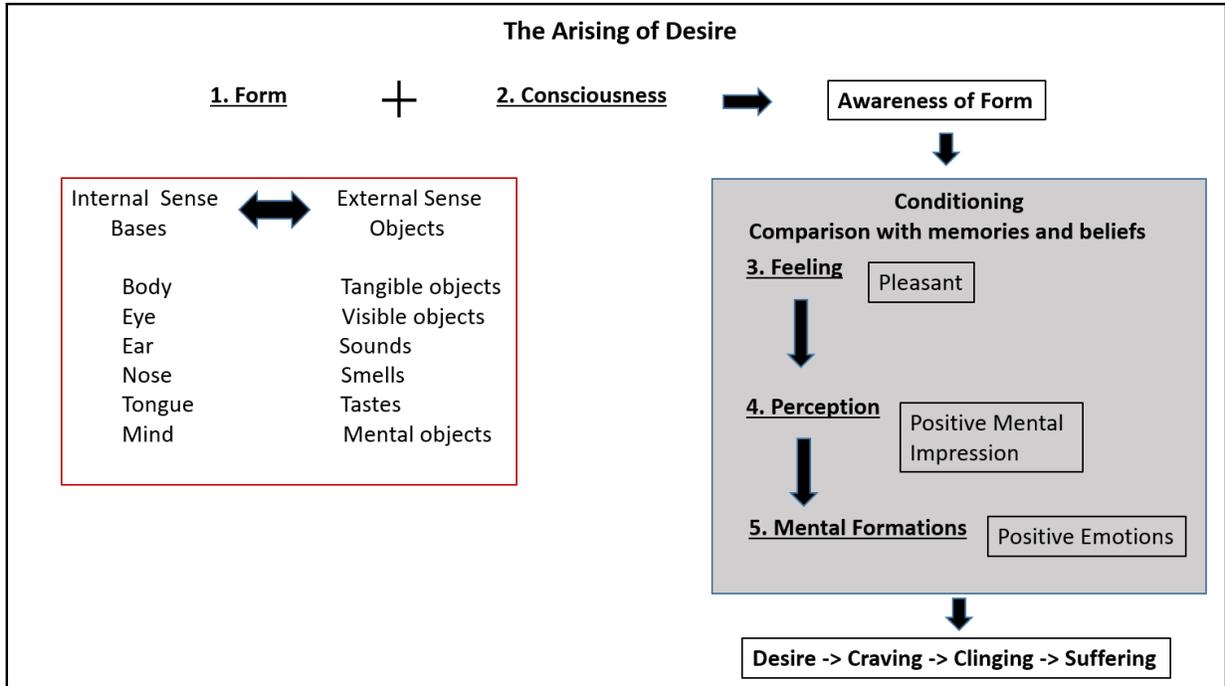
- Understand desire and how it arises.
- Know the four stages of desire
- Experience the bodily sensations of desire
- Understand how to guard the sense doors.

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 pictures 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 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. Best wishes!

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