

# The Problem with Desire

Guest

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(This *satsang* was submitted by Vidya Heisel.)

*Raga*, or desire, is seen as one of the major obstacles to enlightenment in the Vedic yogic tradition several thousand years ago. It also later became the foundation of the Buddha's teaching. We need to recognize the fact that desire causes suffering and overcome it by transcending or eliminating desire. Investigating its nature deeply enables us to see it for what it is, and therefore not be enslaved by it.

But is all desire really negative? In Buddhism, the word "craving," which definitely has a negative connotation, is often used synonymously with desire. What about the desire to get out of bed in the morning to do your *yoga* practice or to go to work so you can make money to pay your rent or the desire to pursue a certain kind of career or goal? Without some kind of desire we would be frozen, unable to do anything because it's desire that motivates us to act. And as Krishna assures Arjuna in the *Gita* we have no choice but to act.

Therefore it makes sense to divide desire into two distinct categories: on the one hand, there is normal everyday healthy desire or ambition that drives us to act in the world, and on the other hand, unwholesome desire or craving that leads to suffering.

A sure indication of the type of problematic desire that leads to suffering is when we tell ourselves, "If only I could be in that relationship, I would be happy," "if only I could have a different job, I would be happy," "if I had more money, I would be happy," "if I could take time out and travel to exotic locations, I would be happy." The list goes on and on. The moment we project our future happiness onto another person, object or event we are in deep trouble. We will suffer, whilst we wait, and as long as our desires remain unfulfilled, we will never feel satisfied. And even if we get the desired object immediately we will continue to suffer because we will start to experience the opposite problem, fear, or *dvesha*, at the thought of losing what we just gained. Or we may pretty soon lose interest in the attained object and start to lust after something new. That hunger that is never satisfied leaves us feeling unhappy and empty. We find ourselves trapped in a vicious cycle.

When we are very attached to getting what we want, when we want it in the way that we want it, and if this doesn't happen, which it quite often doesn't, we can feel upset, victimized, wronged, disappointed, depressed and even devastated. This is a mechanism of the ego.

In order to overcome this, it's important to see and understand this mechanism. When we are able to do this, the need to pursue our cravings loses its grip on us. We know we can't win and we understand that this is the inexorable nature of life and we surrender to this fact. In the *Bhagavad Gita* we are encouraged to renounce our attachment to any particular results following any action that we have done, meaning we still attempt to do our best in life, but then we simply and consciously let go of the way we want things to turn out because we are clear that we have no control over the outcome. We can do all the seemingly right actions and then we still may not get what we want, for reasons unknown to us. Our *karma* is unfolding in its

own mysterious ways. The more we let go of the way we want things to be and simply open to what is, without attempting to enforce our agenda on life, the more we are able to relax and allow life to carry us in its uncontrollable currents. We give up fighting, we give up trying to swim upstream and we embrace life exactly as it is because it cannot be any other way.

Letting go of wanting things to turn out the way you want them to be doesn't mean that we won't still have a preferred outcome, but that if we don't get our preferred outcome we are really fine with that. That is freedom, as then you are no longer a slave to your desires.

So next time a desire comes up, check to see if it's loaded. Does the desire have a strong agenda? Will you be unhappy if that desire is not fulfilled? If so, it's a red flag. Practise letting go of the desire simply because you recognise it as a wolf in sheep's clothing! Don't be fooled!