

THE ESSENTIALS
of
BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Tiantai Master Zhiyi's Classic Meditation Manual:

*The Essentials for Practicing
Calming-and-Insight & Dhyāna Meditation*

English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra

CHAPTER TWO

Renunciation of Desires

2. SECTION TWO: RENUNCIATION OF DESIRES

a. [THE IMPORTANCE AND SCOPE OF RENUNCIATION OF DESIRE]

As for what is meant by “renunciation of desires,” this refers to the five objects of sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*). When one wishes to cultivate calming-and-insight while sitting in dhyāna meditation, it is absolutely essential to renounce them. The “five desires” are the forms, sounds, smells, tastes and touchables encountered in the world. They are ever able to deceive and delude all ordinary people, causing them to develop fond attachment. If one is able to become deeply aware of the negative consequences of desires, one will not become involved with them. This is what is meant by renouncing desire.

1) [DESIRE FOR FORMS]

First, the renunciation of the desire for forms refers to such forms as the stately and decorous shapes and features of men and women, including alluring eyes, long eyebrows, red lips, and white teeth, as well as things regarded in the world as precious. It also includes colors such as blue, yellow, red, white, vermilion, purple, chartreuse, and green. All sorts of such marvelous forms are able to influence the foolish observer to develop fondness for them and consequently embark on all manner of unwholesome karmic deeds.

One example is King Bimbisāra who, on account of sexual desire, stole into a hostile kingdom and entered the quarters of Āmrāpālī, the courtesan. Another is King Udayana who, corrupted by lust, hacked off the hands and feet of five hundred rishis. [Desire for forms] is possessed of all manner of negative consequences like this.

2) [DESIRE FOR SOUNDS]

Second, the renunciation of the desire for sounds, refers to musical sounds such as issue from harps, zithers, or flutes, and such as are created by strings, bamboo, metal, or stone, and refers also to such sounds as the voices of men and women singing, chanting,

hymning, or reciting. They may influence the foolish common person who hears them to straightaway develop defiling attachment and to generate all manner of unwholesome karmic deeds.

One example of this phenomenon is the case of the five hundred rishis dwelling in the Snow Mountains who heard the singing of a *kinnara*-spirit maiden, immediately lost dhyāna absorption, and thus became mentally intoxicated and deranged.¹ On account of all sorts of reasons such as these, one should realize the negative consequences of desire for sounds.

3) [DESIRE FOR FRAGRANCES]

Third, the renunciation of the desire for fragrances, refers to the physical scents of men and women, the fragrances of human society's food, drink and perfumes, as well as all manner of incenses and aromas. An ordinary fool does not understand the true character of fragrances and so, on smelling them, becomes fondly attached, and thus opens the door to the fetters.²

An example of this is the case of the bhikshu at the side of the lotus pond who smelled the fragrance of the blossoms and whose thoughts were then moved to fondness and pleasure. The pond spirit then rebuked him soundly by scolding, "Why did you steal my fragrances?"³

One may, on account of attachment to fragrances, stir up otherwise quiescent fetters. For all sorts of reasons like these, one should realize the negative consequences of the desire for fragrances.

4) [DESIRE FOR FLAVORS]

Fourth, the renunciation of the desire for flavors, refers to bitterness, sourness, sweetness, pungency, saltiness, mildness, and other such fine flavors characteristic of fine beverages and cuisine. They may be able to incite the foolish common person to develop a kind of corrupting attachment and then to consequently engage in unwholesome karma.

An example of this is the case of the *śrāmaṇera* who developed a corrupting obsession with the flavor of curds and who thus, at the conclusion of his life, was reborn in a container of curds where he took on the body of a curd worm.⁴ On account of all manner of reasons such as these, one should realize the negative consequences of the desire for flavors.

5) [DESIRE FOR TOUCHABLES]

Fifth, the renunciation of the desire for touchables, refers to the

softness and delicate slickness of the bodies of men and women, to the sensations of their physical warmth when it is cold, their physical coolness when it is hot, as well as to all other pleasant tactile contacts. The foolish person, lacking in wisdom, is submerged by them and thus generates karma blocking progress along the Path.

An example of this was the one-horned rishi who, on account of indulging the desire for physical contact, lost the superknowledges and ended up with a courtesan riding him about, mounted atop his shoulders.⁵ For all manner of reasons such as these, one should realize the negative consequences of the desire for touchables.

b. [SCRIPTURAL CITATIONS]

The dharma of renouncing desire as treated above is drawn from the discussion in the *Mahāyāna Treatise*.⁶

It additionally states, “Alas! These beings! They are constantly harassed by the five desires and yet they continue to pursue them incessantly.

“As for these five types of desire, gaining their objects results in their becoming even more intense.

“They are like fire which, when stoked with more firewood, burns ever brighter.

“The five desires yield no happiness. [When one pursues them], one is comparable to a dog gnawing away at a dried-up bone.

“The five desires proliferate contention, just as birds skirmish over carrion.

“The five desires scorch a person, just as one is burned when carrying a torch into the wind.

“The five desires bring harm to a person, just as when one treads upon a poisonous snake.

“Like bounty gained in a dream, the five desires have nothing real about them.

“[The pleasure arising from] the five desires does not endure long. It is borrowed only for a moment and is like a spark struck from a stone.

“The wise also consider them to be like enemies or thieves. The worldly person is foolish and deluded, is covetously attached to the five desires, won’t relinquish them even in the face of death, and later undergoes immeasurable suffering and aggravation as a result.

“This dharma of the five desires is something people have in common with animals.”⁷

All beings typically act under the direction of the five desires and thus become slaves to the desires. On account of this, having become covered over by desires, they are prone to fall into the three lower realms.

[One should reflect]: “If, even as I cultivate dhyāna meditation, I revert to being obstructed and covered over by them, then I am a great thief. I must urgently distance myself from them.”

As stated in verses from the *Dhyāna Sutra*:

That birth and death are not cut off
Is on account of desire and fondness for its flavor.
As when nursing a grudge all the way to the grave,
One endures in vain all manner of bitter suffering.

The smell of the body is like that of a corpse.
Impurities stream forth from its nine apertures.
Just as worms in an outhouse delight in the feces,
So too does the foolish man delight in the body.

The one who is wise should contemplate the body,
And not lust after the tainted pleasures of the world.
To be without burdens and to have nothing desired—
This is what qualifies as true nirvāṇa.

It’s just as described by the Buddhas themselves:
Practicing with one mind and singular intention,
While counting the breath in dhyāna absorption—
It is this which is the practice of the *dhūtas* (ascetic practices).⁸