

Does one Have to Distance Himself from All Desires to Practice Buddhism?

Human beings have many desires: delicious food, fine clothing, nice houses to live in, etc. However, all these things are often the sources of afflictions. When dealing with these problems, many religions similarly see greed as a target to overcome. Some religion urges their followers not to be preoccupied with worldly wealth and glory, but to follow God's footsteps and act accordingly to His instructions. Hinduism also incorporated some Buddhist terms and says that everything in this world is fictitious and not worth attaching to nor pursuing. Rather, they emphasize purity and minimizing desire in order to unite with the Brahma. Chinese Taoism also teaches one to be content with minimum desires, since blindly pursuing material needs would lead one to see or hear things superficially and lose one's spirituality. Religions generally teach human beings to distance themselves from desires.

However, Buddhism, by contrast, has two different approaches of cultivation, one for monastic monks and nuns, and the other for laypeople. The expectations regarding the respective levels of letting go of desires are different. If one chooses to take the vow of becoming a Buddhist monk or nun, one should distance oneself from worldly desires, abide by strict precepts, and practice diligently. If one is practicing as a layperson, especially as a novice to Buddhism, one is also encouraged to reduce desire, so as to reduce one's worldly afflictions.

Laypeople who wish to transcend the cyclical birth and death of the three realms or to completely liberate themselves from afflictions should subdue desires in order to curb them. Therefore, as long as one acts with a sense of propriety around spouse and family, one doesn't have to suppress affectionate feelings for them deliberately.

As long as one is focused on the original goal of practice; possesses a correct understanding of the Paths to Liberation and Buddhahood; distances oneself from excessive pursuit of wealth, lust, and fame; practices diligently, and develops numerous wholesome affinities with sentient beings; there is no need to avoid all the worldly affairs.

When one attains enlightenment by realizing one's true mind - tathāgatagarbha - and is able to observe and benefit from all the merits of the true mind, it will be an enormous boost to one's cultivation as a layperson.

The environment surrounding a layperson can sometimes be counterproductive to the goal of one's practice. How can one remain on the right track and advance toward the goal? With enlightenment – realizing the true mind – one starts to experience how purely it works around us. If one aligns with such purity of the true mind, no desire would ever cause disruption to the lay practitioner while he lives freely among the five desires. Therefore, a lay practitioner does not have to distance himself from all desires in order to practice Buddhism.