

# **Navigating Desire along the Path to Individuation**

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In this paper I will look at why desire is perceived by Hindu thinkers as both a force of degradation and a force for enlightenment. My analysis will start with a description of the two kinds of desire, how desire arises, and its intensities. Then I will discuss sexual desire. I'll review its perception as a force of evil, but then start a more upbeat discussion by examining how the mythology of Krishna introduced a new and beautiful way of looking at sexual desire. Because this mythology also reframes desire from an object we possess to a symbol that in some ways possesses us, it will lead me to a discussion of desire as a process of psyche and some final thoughts on desire and individuation.

Everyone desires, even the ascetic who practices renunciation in the desire for liberation. Kama, the Lord of Desire, shoots his arrows without regard for class, propriety or persona. No one can ignore them, even those trying to control their emotions.

Most Hindu traditions differentiate two kinds of desire, selfish desire and divine desire.

Selfish desire is a personal desire for ease or pleasure (frequently sensual or sexual) and is not a good spiritual path because "Just as a fire is covered by smoke and a mirror is obscured by dust, just as the embryo rests deep within the womb, knowledge is hidden by selfish desire" (Bhagavad Gita 21).

Divine desire is an altruistic desire in harmony with the purpose of life. It has a spiritual impulse and touches and moves the soul. Pleasure is not an end in itself, but a symbol, a pointer to the divine.

Artha and Dharma correspond to those things that are pursued by selfish and divine desire respectively.

Artha represents material goods, sense objects and delights of the ego. As such it includes possessions, status, intelligence, sexual gratification, power, good looks and health. Fear is Artha because it is a “not desire” for some type of Artha. Time is also Artha because it is a feature of the material world. Anticipation is therefore a type of selfish desire that wants to speed up time so that we can obtain something sooner. Selfish desire also manifests in our wishes to slow down time so that we can have fewer wrinkles or a firmer stomach. Death is also Artha because the true self never dies. When we long to kill or numb aspects of ourselves, it is to change our relationship with other aspects of Artha.

Dharma is not about me, but we. It is soulful and about my role in the world and deals with duty, order, virtue and righteousness. It includes the desire to serve others, understand life and to achieve our purpose in it.

Vatsyayana describes four kinds of love depending on its source:

“Love acquired by continual habit

Love resulting from the imagination

Love resulting from belief

Love resulting from the perception of external objects” (94)

These categories provide a useful way to think about desire as well. However, the source of desire is not an indicator of whether it is selfish or divine.

Desire acquired by continual habit could be the desire to be with a person we know, to read another book by an author we like, or to return to a place we have found holy. Either of the first two could be selfish desires, depending on what we anticipate doing with the person or the content of the book. The third desire is more likely to be divine.

Desire resulting from the imagination is desire coming from the soul. If the desire truly comes from the soul it will be divine. If we mistake being manipulated for imagining, then it is probably selfish desire.

Desire resulting from belief relates to our personal and cultural myths. We may desire a good education because (the prevailing cultural myth tells us that) it will help us earn a good living. We may want to live a certain way because our religion tells us God wants that from us. The former is selfish desire; the latter could be divine desire.

Desire resulting from the perception of external objects includes the sensual as well as the perceptual, through which advertising and propaganda work. This is almost certainly selfish desire.

Desire exists on a scale of intensities bounded at the ends by need and contemplation

Need, our own individual absolute, frequently blurs with desire. We need air. We desire fresh air. We need food. We desire tasty food. If sensitive, we may not be able to survive on the same low quality food or air as someone else. We need self respect. Most parents could not sacrifice their child to save their own life. Although we may desire a feeling that we are a valuable member of society, this wish may be an absolute need for some, leading to suicide when unmet.

Addiction starts with physical and psychological desire and grows into an unhealthy passion that is confused with need.

Passion is an intense form of desire in which the focus of awareness changes from the desire itself to its gratification.

Temptation is exploitation of desire by another.

Contemplative desire, unlike the others, does not construct a gratification scenario. Where the others react to desire by mobilizing their will and moving toward a goal, contemplative desire continues to experience the desire and acts spontaneously with no expectations of where it will lead. It savors the nuances of desire and lets them open it to a sense of wonder and full participation in the world. Desire originating in the imagination and caressed by contemplation is the beginning of divine desire.

The likelihood of a situation leading to desire also varies. Vatsyayana lists four kinds of embraces, “Touching, Piercing, Rubbing and Pressing” (97) and divides them into two categories depending on how well the people know each other. Even though he uses this approach to describe embraces, it’s useful to think of this approach for desire in general. If it’s a desire we have experienced before in a meaningful way, it goes deeper and its authenticity is more assured. If it’s a new desire we are just encountering, it may be wonderful or it may be shallow. A combination of the new and the familiar, even with desire, makes for a deeper and broader life.

Desire and sex have a special relationship. All desire may be sexual in some sense, but even if it’s not, sexual desire has a unique potency, probably due to its intimate and intense nature. As a private phenomenon, it is out of the public discourse and thus poses a special problem for institutions, like the church and government, which like their influence to be ubiquitous. In reaction, they frequently simplistically categorize sexual desire as evil carnal lust and frame sexual relationships, particularly those without their official endorsement, as dangerous seductions.

The cultural discomfort with true sexuality prevents us from mythologizing it. Because there is no supportive environment which holds our sexuality, we have a society obsessed with

lust, its dark side. This leads to stereotypes of sexuality as a threat to our better nature and an enemy to be conquered. In this spirit, the Bhagavad Gita tells us

“Pleasures conceived in the world of the senses have a beginning and an end and give birth to misery, Arjuna. The wise do not look for happiness in them. But those who overcome the impulses for lust and anger which arise in the body are made whole and live in joy” (32).

Therefore “... the wise master their senses, mind and intellect through meditation. Self-realization is their only goal. Freed from selfish desire, fear and anger, they live in freedom always” (Bhagavad Gita 32).

One of the most dangerous results of our culture’s unwillingness to properly mythologize sexual desire is projection. We expect more from sex than it can give and see less than is there.

Culture trains us to have certain desires, rewarding those which support the prevailing cultural myth. Most of our desires have been conditioned by the possibly vast, but still externally sanctioned, roles in our culture. Our culture attributes less and less value to spontaneity, so we live lives of conformity and dream of spontaneity because our “...real self is not the willing and deliberating function, but the spontaneous” (Watts 201). We project our desires for spontaneity onto sex and hope that it can somehow awaken our deadened selves.

Meanwhile, fashionable images of beauty focus our attention on illusions. Because of this, not only doesn’t sex bring us new life, it is also disappointing because we are so busy looking for an illusion that we can’t see the real beauty in which we are engaged.

Sweeping sexual desire under the rug doesn’t make it go away, but does bring out its dark side in the form of illicit desire. Sir Lancelot’s and Guinevere’s inability to find a healthy way to deal with their desires caused them to betray their beloved king and destroy the Knights of the Round Table. Gawain’s inability to be honest about his sexual desire almost cost him his head and Paris’ sexual desire led him to pluck the forbidden fruit and cause the destruction of Troy

Selfish desire is a never ending circle. Not only does it pull us from the path of enlightenment, but the craving it generates is “the bridge between consciousness and rebirth, the means by which karma and the energy of consciousness proceed into new becoming” (Matthews 33). To break this circle of death and rebirth, Krishna exhorts “Fight with all your strength, Arjuna! Controlling your senses, conquer your enemy, the destroyer of knowledge and realization” (Bhagavad Gita 21) because “release from painfulness is achieved only through the proper cultivation of ethics, intention, and meditation. Through them one knows how to change the current of desire and how at last to dissolve that current altogether. This is nirvana.” (Matthews 107).

The path to nirvana is renunciation, giving up all desire for and attachment to personal reward. Then:

“Free from self-will, aggressiveness, arrogance, anger and the lust to possess people or things, he is at peace with himself and others and enters into the unitive state. United with Brahman, ever joyful, beyond the reach of desire and sorrow, he has equal regard for every living creature and attains supreme devotion to me” (Bhagavad Gita 95).

However, divine desire should be kept, unless our desire to be divine is a selfish one, a possibly tricky distinction which opens the crack of duality. “Sublimation, curbing the senses, overcoming carnal desire is a fundamental ideal throughout Hinduism” (Siegel 18). However, at a very basic level this conflicts with the idea of an immanent divinity. If Nirvana is to be found in Samsara, then divine desire must exist in selfish desire and sacred love in profane love. This moves spirituality from a discipline of avoidance to one of embrace and sees “... the pleasures of the flesh within the context of a vision of the human promise” (Keen 5).

This new vision finds expression in the mythology of Krishna. His mythology teaches that passionate and sensuous human love directed toward Krishna is “... a means rather than an

obstruction to liberation” (Siegel 21) and “the devotee gains access to the sacred, the infinite and eternal through the expression, rather than the suppression of earthly desires” (Siegel 22). The Vaisnava traditions incorporated this into their spirituality and two major trends grew from this, those of Caitanya and the Sahajiyas.

The Caitanya tradition encourages erotic contemplation, but condemns actual sexual union in the belief that desire for union, not union itself, is the goal. This belief is similar to that of medieval courtly love, which encouraged everything but ejaculation in the hope that the intense desire so generated and maintained would irradiate the entire body.

We can see the problems that the union of desire and object can present in many parts of modern society. In the political arena, desire motivates the party out of power to seek power in order to implement its ideals, but when it becomes successful, those desires are frequently replaced by a desire to maintain power, which is a desire to sustain gratification. There is a real danger that gratification can become the focus of desire, but a conscious effort to preclude gratification, as in the Caitanya tradition, also makes gratification the focus. Desire is a powerful force and there are no easy ways to experience that power.

The Sahajiyas combined the teachings of Caitanya with those of the Tantras. In it “love becomes a yearning for union with the divinity... The power and mastery of creation is worshipped using the sexual organs as symbols” (Vatsyayana 42). “Using ones body as a medium of prayer and loving spontaneously, was ... the highest truth, encompassing the sacred and the profane” (Siegel 25). Liberation comes through experiencing the entire range, from despair to ecstasy, of loving and desiring Krishna.

The mythology of Krishna marks a change in the perception of desire from an object we have to a symbol opening us to new possibilities of the divine. We recognize that desire is “the

very bond of the cosmos, the basic force of cohesion, the source of becoming... The human experience of wanting something, desiring someone, is then the manifestation in the individual of the primal force, the very energy which evolves the universe..." (Siegel 64). Thus, desire is recognized as an operating principle of psyche, with both conscious and imaginal dynamics. It is a forming principal and consequence of both.

Consciousness has an important role in our experience of desire, but it is one of awareness, not control, because "willed control brings about a sense of duality, of consciousness in conflict with appetite" (Watts 145).

Desire nourishes consciousness and consciousness nourishes desire. Jung observed that emotion is a major source of consciousness. Desire attracts our ego and draws it into dynamics that further its development and awareness. As desire draws us into the future, new possibilities attract its attention and the process is rekindled. Consciousness is also a major source of desire. The ability to read opens me up to new ideas which can ignite my desire. My memory lets me recognize situations that are similar to ones I've enjoyed in the past.

Consciousness also lets us recognize deceptive desire. TV commercials and other attempts to manipulate us activate our desires and falsely suggest certain products can satisfy them. This is a symbolic issue of the inappropriateness of a container to hold desire and one in which Vatsyayana gives good advice. He divides men into three categories according to the size of their lingam and women into three kinds depending on the depth of their yoni. He also describes three levels of timing and three of passion. He tells us that "...equal unions are the best..." (Vatsyayana 100). I believe this approach can fruitfully inform our attitude toward desire. For instance, a large desire for something like love cannot be held in a car, or physical

well-being in a can of diet soda. We need to understand our desires and bring conscious discrimination to the temptations that promise to hold them.

Desire sparks the imagination, which gives it form and points in a direction of possibilities. Imagination sparks desire by creating an image of potential in which desire can develop further. In the imagination desire does the possessing. It is our task to establish a relationship with that desire and its sources. We need to accept that “it is not only the ego that loves, but other figures, images and dreams love and desire us” (Hillman 267) and to ask the images what they desire from us.

Individuation is the path that will let us see Nirvana in Samsara. We cannot get there without listening to psyche and desire is a language of psyche, who speaks through experiences. “By experiencing an event psychologically, we tend to feel a connection with it: in feeling and desire we tend to realize the importance of something for the soul. Desire is holy because ... it touches and moves the soul. Reflection is never enough” (Hillman 273).

An important element to individuation is recognizing, honoring and joining with our anima (or animus). Divine sexual desire also involves recognizing, honoring and joining with an opposite sexual principle. Not only can sexual desire help us accomplish this, but it may be essential. Alan Watts seems to endorse this approach when he observes that “Sexual equality should mean the woman realizing her masculinity through man and the man realizing his femininity through woman” (179).

A symbolic appreciation of sexual desire can transform us so that

“The experience of sexual love is therefore no longer to be sought as the repetition of a familiar ecstasy, prejudiced by the expectation of what we already know. It will be the exploration of our relationship with an ever-changing, ever unknown partner, unknown because he or she is not in truth the abstract role or person, the set of conditioned reflexes which society has imposed, the stereotyped male or female which education has led us to expect. All these are maya, and the

love of these is the endlessly frustrating love of fantasy. What is not maya is mystery, what cannot be described or measured, and it is in this sense...that we must understand van der Leeuw's remarkable saying that 'the mystery of life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced'" (Watts 158).

Desire is "...always reminding us that whatever we have is not all there is" (Stroud 67).

If this reminder makes us crave more, it will lead us to a vicious cycle of acquisition and disillusionment. But if it leads us to a sense of wonder about the endless possibilities of existence, then we will be touching the divine.

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