

Levels of Addiction

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What is attachment? It's basically a kind of addiction, trying to find happiness in things that have never given a true happiness, in things that aren't worth the effort. And we do it again and again and again. Partly, this is from a lack of imagination. We can't imagine other ways of finding happiness. Partly, it's from a lack of skill. We haven't mastered other ways, other approaches for finding happiness. And partly, it's simply a lack of knowledge. We're not paying careful attention to what's going on. So in the practice we try to develop more imagination, more skills, more knowledge.

Let's start with the knowledge. When you find yourself addicted to a particular pleasure and yet you know it has its drawbacks, look to see when the felt need for that pleasure arises. What sort of dis-ease is there in the body, what sort of dis-ease is there in the mind, that incites you with a sudden urge to try to alleviate that sense of dis-ease in the same old way you've tried before? Exactly what are the triggers, what are the feelings? Watch them arise; watch them pass away. You'll begin to realize that the need you have, say, for a particular kind of food or particular kind of pleasure, a particular kind of object, a particular kind of relationship is not permanent. In other words, if you don't give in to that old impulse, the need is not going to stay there. It goes away. If it's a basic hunger, you may need to feed the body, but you don't necessarily have to feed it with something that's going to cause trouble later on.

But so many of our other "needs" last for just a little while. If you have enough endurance to watch them from a different vantage point, you can watch them go away and you're done with them for the time being. A whispering voice in your mind might say that the impulse may be gone for now, but it's going to return, so why don't you just go ahead and give in now. But you don't have to be intimidated by that whispering voice. You can tell it, "We'll deal with its return when it returns. Right now I want to get over this one hurdle." If you get good at watching the need arise and pass away, you develop a greater sense of detachment from it.

The Buddha also says to look for the actual gratification you get out of trying to fill that need in the old way. After all, if there wasn't any gratification at all, you wouldn't go for it. And you won't understand it enough to really let go of it if you keep trying to deny that the gratification is there. At the same time, look

for the drawbacks. Learn to compare the two. Is the gratification really worth the price?

If you can't think of any other way of alleviating that need or desire, that's where you need to develop skill and imagination. A lot of the training is aimed at expanding your range of imagination. It's possible to find happiness in life without giving in to your old attachments. The more you see the drawbacks of the attachments, the more willing you'll be to listen to the Dhamma to expand your imagination of what's possible.

The Buddha himself said that as he was practicing, the idea of having to give up his sensual pleasures didn't appeal to him. But then he allowed himself to imagine that a higher type of pleasure was possible. And he realized that to find that higher level of happiness, that more gratifying and more rewarding level of happiness, he'd have to give up his sensual pleasures. So, for the time being, that's what he did. He didn't totally undercut sensual passions at first, but for the time being he told himself to put them aside. That's how he was able to get the mind into states of concentration that provided an even deeper and more gratifying pleasure than sensual passion could provide.

You'll notice this as you work with the breath. There come times when just the process of breathing can feel really gratifying. There's a very strong, intense feeling of pleasure that feels almost sensual. But as the Buddha says, it's not sensual. It has to do with the form of the body, as opposed to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and outside tactile sensations. But it can feel really good in a very visceral way. That's important. Once you see that there's this possibility, it's easier to let go of your other desires as they arise. You've got something better.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that the reason we get so stuck on sensual desires, sensual pleasures, is because we don't see any other alternative to pain. But when you see that there *is* the alternative and, as you reflect on it, you see that it has fewer drawbacks, greater rewards, and that you can learn how to tap into it when you need it, then it can be your new attachment—a much better one. If you want to call it an addiction, it's a healthy addiction, as opposed to the unhealthy ones you've pursued in the past.

So in the beginning it's a matter of learning to imagine yourself accessing the pleasure of concentration, realizing that there is that possibility, and then developing the skill. That way, having developed the skill, your knowledge gets more precise. After a while you begin to see that the level of concentration you've obtained is not as gratifying as you might like. So you can ask yourself: Are there deeper, more gratifying levels of concentration? Well, the Buddha says there are. Again, open your imagination to that idea and see what's there in your present state of concentration that's still a burden, still stressful, still unsatisfactory. Learn to let go of that.

In many cases, this will involve abandoning some of the factors that got you into concentration to begin with—such as directed thought and evaluation—so there may be a resistance to letting them go. Other times there's not. You see clearly that you don't need these things and you simply let them drop. Either way, the process of imagining that you can let them drop will open the way for you to go through more and more refined levels of concentration, deeper, more pervasive levels of pleasure and wellbeing, all the way to a strong state of equanimity. Even the equanimity that comes when you let go of pleasure has a very strong sense of wellbeing. You feel perfectly satisfied. You can stay there with the stillness, and it feels deep down good.

In this way you find that there *are* alternative ways for finding happiness in life, finding pleasure in life. You look back at your old addictions, and they seem not to make much sense any more. From your new perspective, you wonder why you would have felt so addicted to them in the first place. In this way the Buddha doesn't ask you just to go cold turkey, with no gratification, nothing to replace your old addiction. He gives you something new and viscerally pleasing to hold on to.

In so doing, you expand your imagination to other levels as well. You begin to see your old ways of doing things as not so fixed or necessary as you once thought they were. You begin to loosen up your sense of who you are and where you find your happiness, and that alerts you to the fact that you can change even further. You feel more inclined to try out new things in the meditation, even though they seem to go beyond your old ideas of what you thought was possible.

This is why the Buddha talks about nibbana primarily in metaphorical terms: to excite your imagination. He's not totally silent on the topic, and he's not—contrary to what most people say—willing only to discuss it in negative terms. He has some very positive things to say about it, calling it “shelter,” “harbor,” “the beyond.” This is to expand your imagination to encompass the possibility that there's something even beyond the pleasure, the wellbeing, that comes from getting the mind into good states of concentration. This encourages you to start questioning some of your other addictions, such as your sense of self.

Our sense of self is basically our strategy for happiness. In the course of the practice we learn how to develop new strategies. That means we develop different senses of ourselves as we go through the practice, as we expand our repertoire.

A lot of people feel threatened by the Buddha's teachings on not-self precisely for this reason. Your sense of self is your strategy for happiness. When you hear the idea of not-self, it sounds as if the Buddha is asking you to abandon everything you know about how to find happiness. No self would leave you

with no means for happiness at all. That's the fear. But what he's actually doing is teaching you how to refine your strategies for happiness, developing new strategies that are more effective, ultimately coming up with a strategy that's actually a not-self strategy. It's not that radically different from what he's been teaching you on the more elementary levels, because on those levels he's been teaching you to abandon your unskillful strategies, the addictions that are obviously harmful. But there comes a point in the practice where you have to learn to abandon some of the strategies that were skillful in the beginning but now are beginning to get in the way of something even more refined.

Sometimes you hear people treating your sense of self as an obvious fallacy that causes nothing but harm and stress. If that were the case, it wouldn't take much to let go of it, seeing how obviously harmful it is. But hey, it's part of your strategy for happiness. It has its gratifications. You've got to admit its good side. Still, there comes a point where you have to look at its drawbacks, its limitations. Even your most skillful strategies for happiness at some point have to get dropped. So the Buddha gives you the positive teachings on nibbana to encourage you to let go of those things, even those skillful strategies, when the time comes.

At the same time, he refuses to say whether there's going to be a *you* in there, or *no you* in there. He wants you to develop the attitude that, at this stage, your sense of self is irrelevant to whether you're going to be happy. But he's not saying that you don't exist. When asked point blank if there was a self or there was no self, he refused to answer, saying that if you hold to the idea that there is a self you get stuck in eternalism, which blocks the practice: You hold on to certain things as being the eternal you and you'll never be able to let them go. If you develop the idea that there is no self, that's annihilationism, which blocks the practice as well: Either you fear being annihilated or you have a neurotic desire to want to be annihilated, neither of which is helpful.

So there comes a point where you have to put issues of self and not-self aside, and just look at where there's stress, and what activities are causing the stress, and how to stop them. That's why the teachings on the four noble truths trump every other teaching. It's how the teachings on developing a skillful self are strategies, and the teachings on not-self are strategies as well. The teachings on nibbana are strategies, too. Nibbana won't get you to nibbana, but the desire to get there will. So learn to use these strategies to overcome your most blatant and harmful addictions, and then your more subtle ones, until you finally reach what the Buddha called the ultimate happiness—*nibbanam paramam sukham*—where you can put all your addictions, all your strategies, aside.