

Addictive Thinking

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You can think of meditation as a way of overcoming addictive behavior, with the word “behavior” meaning not only things you do with the body or substances you take, but also your thoughts, because thoughts can be addictive—and not just the good ones. In the same way with addictive substances, the problem is that we think something over and over again, and even though it has lots of drawbacks, we keep doing it.

Thoughts of greed, thoughts of aversion, thoughts of delusion—thoughts by which we harm ourselves—are addictive. You wouldn’t think that we’d develop these addictions, but we do. It’s partly out of force of habit and partly out of an inability to imagine ourselves doing anything anyway else, thinking anyway else, feeling anyway else. So in the meditation, we have to have a technique, something to focus on, and another way of thinking to remind us there are other ways of reacting to feelings of pain, feelings of discomfort, feelings of loneliness, feelings of depression—everything by which we tend to harm ourselves.

So focus on your breath, because this is the way out. When anything comes up, keep coming back to the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the breathing sensations in the body. And notice whether they feel refreshing, because you’ll need that refreshment. If you’re going to change your behavior, you need an attractive alternative to your old ways.

If the breathing feels good, feels energizing, it’s hitting old addictive behavior right at its source. For most of us, that source is a funny uncomfortable feeling in the body that causes us to give into addictions, an unpleasant feeling that we can’t seem to get out of our system. We think, “The only way I’ve dealt with this in the past is to think in these ways, or try to arrange these situations, or take this substance.” And that approach gives a momentary pleasure before the drawbacks hit.

Well, here’s a pleasure that’s more lasting with no harmful after effects. Learn how to get that same pleasure simply by the way you breathe. Try to let the sensation of breathing feel comfortable all the way down, even to the most sensitive parts of the body, which may be in the throat, in the chest—wherever you find that your feelings tend to be most sensitive. Allow the breath to comfort those, to soothe those, to give energy or whatever that part of the body seems to need.

And stick with it, because in the beginning it may not seem all that satisfying, and you haven't yet built up the mental structure around it that your old addictions do have. That's a large part of the addiction: all the justifications for giving in to that particular addiction that one part of the mind tells the rest of the mind: "You need to have people around. You need to have this or you need to have that in order to feel at ease." We build this huge structure of excuses and values and ideas to justify our old harmful behavior.

This applies not only to gross addictions, but also to our subtle ones: our addiction to worry, our addiction to ill will, our addiction to sensual desires, our addiction to doubt—all the hindrances. We have a big superstructure of justifications. If you're worried about something, you tell yourself you've really got to worry about it: It really is an important issue, and if you don't take care of it now—if you don't just drive yourself crazy with worry—you're not being responsible. That's what the mind tells itself.

Every other lack that the mind has, every other unskillful habit has lots of justifications to sell you on why you have to do things their way. If it really were good, though, you wouldn't have to justify it. That's what the word "justification" basically means: You're doing something you know is not really skillful, it's not really satisfying, but you have to have some way of telling yourself, "Oh, it's good enough."

So one part of the meditation is learning how to remind yourself, "Okay, this is a lot better. It's a pleasure that's totally harmless, totally blameless." In fact, getting the mind into right concentration is an expression of right resolve; it's part of the path. You're going to wean your mind away from its addiction to sensual passion. And "sensual," here means not just the sensual object, but our obsession with thinking about sensual pleasures. Even when the pleasures are not around, we get a lot of pleasure out of thinking about them, anticipating them, planning them, or remembering old pleasures, forgetting that the actual pleasures themselves are pretty fleeting. The only reason we get worked about them is this habit the mind has of embroidering them and making them seem more than they actually are.

As the mind comes to meditation, comes to concentration, you're also expressing your desire not to give in to ill will. You're acting on goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. Here you are, working on a pleasure, a happiness, a sense of well-being, and a clarity of mind that doesn't harm you and doesn't harm the people around you. So as you're sitting here, it's an expression of right resolve—resolved on goodwill—as you work on getting the mind to settle down.

So remind yourself that this is part of the path to the end of suffering. And if you haven't developed that resolve yet, this is where the Buddha has you develop a sense of conviction in the importance of training the mind, in the importance of your actions. Those two things are connected because your actions come out of your mind. The decisions you make depend on the state of mind you're in. If the mind is in a good state, it's much more likely to do skillful things, to say skillful things, think skillful things.

In the beginning, you may not have all the evidence you want. But as a general principle, we all know that taking responsibility for your actions tends to have better results than hoping that somebody else will do things for you. The Buddha's showing by his example—and there's the example of all his noble disciples—that it's by training your mind and developing good qualities of mind that true happiness can be found. So until the truth is verified when we've seen that happen in our minds, it has to be taken on conviction.

But then you ask yourself, if you don't have conviction in this, what *do* you have conviction in? The fact that we act shows that we're convinced of something. Otherwise, we wouldn't put forth the energy to try to keep acting. We'd say, "Well, whatever's going to happen is going to happen. It doesn't matter what I do." Then we'd just lie back. Well, you know what happens to people who think that way. They're miserable. So part of the meditation is learning how to keep that conviction alive. Then you strengthen it by focusing on the breath and finding which ways of breathing feel really good. That puts the mind in a much better mood.

That mood may come and go, but you're exploring. Keep remembering that you're working on a skill. You're developing new habits. It's not the case you get the mind into concentration once and it's going to stay that way forever. It takes a while for your center of gravity to shift so that the state of concentration does become more normal. The state of being in the present moment, mindful and alert, becomes more normal.

If you ever worked on a physical skill—sports, carpentry, music—you know that originally, the moments where everything just seems to come together are few and far between. But with practice, they come more often and then they become more continuous. The advantage of meditation is that you're focusing on exactly why they become more continuous, i.e., the qualities of mindfulness and alertness you're developing as you meditate. This is why the Buddha said that learning is an important part of the practice, i.e., learning the Dhamma, listening to the Dhamma.

If you don't listen to the Dhamma, what are you listening to? You're listening to all those voices of the media out there and who knows what other voices you've picked up. You have to ask yourself, "What was the intention behind those voices? What were they trying to get out of me? And how did I let them come in and become part of the voices of my own mind?" Then think of the voice of the Buddha: Here's someone who attained total happiness and didn't need anything from anyone else. All he had were things to offer, saying, "Here, look. You can do this for yourself. You can train your own mind." This is where the image of the mind as a committee is useful, because different parts of the mind are more skillful than others. You take the skillful parts and you basically make them stronger.

Everything the Buddha taught was out of pure compassion. So that's the voice you want to have in your mind, along with the shoulds of the Buddha's voice. Suffering, he said, is something you should try to comprehend. You don't just push it away. You should try to develop the path; that's another one of his shoulds. Develop the concentration and the mindfulness so that you can have a sense of well-being and steadiness that will enable you to watch the suffering and not feel threatened by it. When you comprehend it, you also come to see what's causing it. Once you see the cause, that's something you should abandon. So ultimately, the final should is: "You should realize the end of suffering."

These are all good shoulds. They all have your true happiness in mind, not like the shoulds of society, which have a lot of other agendas.

So these are the voices you want to develop. This is the new superstructure you want to develop in the mind to keep reminding yourself, when the mind slips off to its old habits: "Hey! Here's something better over here, and you *can* do it."

It may take time. There will be times when the practice seems to advance and times when it seems to retreat, but that's just a normal part of developing any skill, especially a skill as subtle as training the mind. That's why you learn not to get discouraged. This is why the meditation has techniques—it gives you an alternative to do besides your old addictive habits—and it also gives you some reasons, some motivations to stick with these new techniques, these new habits until you have them firmly in hand.

So work with the breath. Find where the breath feels most comfortable in the body. Find the spots in the body that most need a sense of ease or a sense of healing from the breath, or that need to be soothed or energized. Notice what the breath can do for them.

You're going to have plenty of breaths to work with, plenty of breaths to observe in the next hour. So try to make the most out of each one.