

Sensual Desire as a Hindrance

adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal, November 7th, 2004

As rain penetrates an ill-thatched house,
So lust penetrates an undeveloped mind.
As rain does not penetrate a well-thatched house,
So lust does not penetrate a well-developed mind.

Dhammapada (13-14)

It is sometimes said that practicing mindfulness is easy; what is hard is remembering to do it. To help us remember, it's useful to have a clear understanding of the forces in our minds that contribute to our forgetting. The one that the Buddhist tradition focuses on most is desire. Desire is ubiquitous in human life. Living without wants, wishes, motivations, and aspirations is inconceivable. Some desires are quite healthy, useful, and appropriate; some are not. One function of mindfulness practice is to help us distinguish between these. And differentiating helps support the beautiful aspiration for liberation and compassion.

Any desire, healthy or unhealthy, can easily manifest as a compulsion. Wherever there is compulsion, we are not free. In the West, we sometimes call particularly strong desires "addictions." Buddhism often refers to compulsive desires as cravings, clingings, or "thirsts." Careful attention to our inner life, through meditation, for example, will quickly reveal that compulsions are deeply rooted in the mind.

Because desire has such an important role in human life, we need to understand its nature, dangers, opportunities, and workings. It is helpful to notice the difference between simple desire and craving, and the tension that comes with craving. It can also be useful to notice how preoccupation with any desire contributes to an alienation from ourselves, from the present moment, and even from others, such as when we are lost in fantasies fueled by desire. People caught in the web of desire often live only on the surface of life.

Sometimes we are caught between competing desires. Healthier desires are all too easily crowded out by desires for comfort or pleasure. For example, some people would like to eat healthfully but give in to the attraction of junk food.

The conflict between desires is particularly evident when people meditate. One common hindrance to mindfulness that becomes evident in meditation is our propensity to think. Thinking can be quite compulsive, sometimes because of the power of a desire that we are thinking about, and at other times because we are simply addicted to thinking itself. The wish to remain mindfully present has to contend with the tendency to get lost in the mind's desire to think.

Sensual desire is the first item on the many Buddhist lists of obstacles to awakening and spiritual freedom. It is the first of the Five Hindrances. The Pali word for sensual desire is *kama-chanda*. *Chanda* simply means desire. *Kama* is a strong word referring to sense pleasure, sensual passion, and sexual lust. Together they refer to compulsive preoccupation with sensual pleasure and comfort.

Perhaps sensual desire is singled out as particularly hazardous to meditators because reaching for pleasure and avoiding pain are more basic than other desires. Even when the mind is still enough not to be caught up in other desires, the enticement of pleasure can still be operating. When the grip of sensual desire is strong, it often pulls us into the world of fantasy and imagination. Sometimes it is the pleasure of fantasizing itself that holds us more than the object of our wants.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with sensual pleasure, the desire for it is called a hindrance when it interferes with our ability to stay present. During meditation, even the most innocent desire can distract awareness from the razor's edge of the present moment. If we want to stay on that edge, we need to let go of anything that causes us to slip off it.

In mindfulness practice, there are three common approaches for overcoming sensual desires that are hindering mindfulness. All three require choosing not to pursue the desire, even by actively thinking about it.

First, sometimes it is enough to apply ourselves more diligently or energetically to the meditation. The effort of practice may then become stronger than the pull of sensual desire.

The second approach is to take a careful look at the object that we desire. Are we really seeing it accurately? If we are spellbound by the object, it can be healthy to become "disenchanted" with it; i.e., see through any unrealistic projections and expectations. It is also helpful to see what happens when the desire is fulfilled. Did it fulfill our expectation? Are we now content? Is it replaced by other desires?

Third, we can turn our attention away from the object of desire and instead become aware of the subjective experience of desiring. How strong is the wanting or the impulse to act? How long does it last? What are the physical sensations of desire? Where in the body do we feel them? What is the quality of the mind caught up in desire? Often our preoccupation with the object of desire masks the discomfort of the compulsion.

To explore the nature of desire itself, it is important neither to inhibit nor to act on the desire. Rather, the desiring is allowed to flow freely.

By turning to the subjective experience of desire for sense pleasure, we may discover what else is linked to the desire. We may have strong beliefs about pleasure and discomfort. Desire may be tied to ideas about security, success, or status, or to a need for reassurance. The desire may come with compelling arguments and feelings about why it needs to be pursued.

Or we may discover that we are trying to use sense pleasure to fill some emotional hole, such as sadness or loneliness. It is instructive that the English word "want" has two meanings. In addition to being a synonym for desire, it can also indicate an absence, for example, in the old saying, "for want of a nail..." At times, addiction to sensual pleasure can be a misplaced attempt to fill an absence or emptiness within. In mindfulness, we learn to fill our inner emptiness with awareness. When a meditator has become quite familiar with his or her tendency toward sensual desire, freedom may only require a few moments of mindfulness: looking at desire head on, naming it for what it is, and feeling how it is experienced in the body.

It also is helpful to clearly acknowledge whatever sense of freedom, well-being, or ease comes when the grip of sensual desire lessens. This shows that we can actually avoid succumbing to the pull of the desire. It also helps us to value feeling free from that pull.

As we touch into the deep satisfaction of being present, settled and concentrated in meditation, sensual desires become less and less powerful. Such satisfaction can even help to heal the compulsion behind some desires.

The more strongly the desire for sense pleasure hinders mindfulness, the greater is the value of learning to be free from it. And the more we value that freedom, the more likely we are to use that freedom to decide wisely which desires or aspirations we will allow to guide our life.