

## **From Meditation Obstacles to Meditation Objects**

### **Class 2 – Sensual Desire as a Hindrance**

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#### ***Introduction***

Desire is ubiquitous in human life. Living without wants, wishes, motivations, and aspirations is impossible. Some desires are quite healthy, useful, and appropriate; some are not. One function of mindfulness practice is to help us distinguish between these. Buddhism focuses on overcoming the desires that bring suffering while at the same time encouraging us to act on those desires leading to liberation and compassion.

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, the present moment and others.

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. Perhaps sensual desire is singled out as particularly hazardous to meditators because even when the mind is quiet enough not to be caught up in other desires, the enticement of pleasure can still be operating. During meditation, even the most innocent desire can distract awareness from the razor's edge of the present moment. 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.

#### ***Practicing with Sensual Desire***

In mindfulness practice, there are four common approaches for overcoming sensual desires. All four require choosing not to pursue the desire.

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 our subjective experience of desiring. We can examine the physical sensations and quality of mind associated with having desire. What are the physical sensations of desire? Where in the body do we feel them? . How strong is the wanting or the impulse to act? How long does it last? 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. Or we may discover that we are trying to use sense pleasure to counter emotional challenges, such as sadness or loneliness.

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, status, or to a need for reassurance. The desire may come with compelling arguments about why it needs to be pursued.

A fourth way of practicing with sensual desire is to develop or cultivate a strong sense of well-being. In this way, the unhelpful cravings for sense pleasures can simply fade away from lack of interest. A sense of well-being is often a by-product of meditation; as we touch into the deep satisfaction of being present, settled and concentrated in meditation, sensual desires become less and less compelling.

Lastly, it also is helpful to clearly acknowledge whatever sense of freedom, well-being, or ease that comes when the grip of sensual desire lessens or passes away. Taking the time to notice and appreciate the increased sense of well-being and ease strengthens confidence that we can avoid succumbing to the unhelpful pull of desire. It also helps us to value this freedom.

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 and its pleasure, the more likely that freedom guides us in deciding which desires or aspirations we will allow to guide our life.

### ***Exercise***

- Devote a period of time - at least a few days - to look for opportunities to study what effect the experience of sense desire has on you.
  - What effect does desire have on your body, your mind, and your ability to pay attention?
  - What beliefs and justifications might accompany the desire?
  - What do you experience after a sense desire has been satisfied?