

## Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation Part 2 (3 of 8): Desire

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So, my friends, welcome back to our Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation Part Two, looking at the hindrances. Today we're going to look at the hindrance of desire—sensual desire. In order to begin this topic today, and any time there's going to be some kind of practice opportunity like this, sometimes it's nice to just pause at the beginning to get settled and connected. Learning the art of thirty seconds settling, sixty second settling, is very helpful. So what you might do is, just without changing your posture, be the way you are. Close your eyes and then do the three breath journey: just count each breath, three times, in one to three breaths, just be with your breathing.

And then let's do that again: do a count, three breaths, a three breath journey. At the end of each, as you exhale each time, relax your body, settle your body. And then a third time, the three breath journey, counting three breaths. This time, as you exhale, can you soften, relax the thinking muscle, let the mind become more settled perhaps if you can, or rest the mind with each exhale? Then you can take one deep breath, and when you are ready, you can open your eyes. So the first of the five hindrances is what is usually translated as sensual desire.

It's useful just to step back and look at desire in general. Desire is a central aspect of human life, and so much so, such a big part of it, that it's probably fair to call humans not human beings, but human desiring beings, because we're always desiring. Desiring is part of life all the time, whether it's small or big, whether it's healthy or unhealthy desire. There's always some kind of desire. Even wanting to eat is a desire. Wanting to go to the bathroom is a desire.

Wanting to make yourself comfortable as you're sitting is a desire. So all these things that drive us, that move us, that inspire us, that help us make our way through our daily life and

our whole life itself. So it's very important not to automatically make desire a problem, to think that desire is the problem that we have to overcome. There has to be some discernment about desires, and to distinguish. There are two sets, two distinctions to be made. One is between those desires which are healthy, appropriate, and those desires which are unhealthy, or unhelpful, or not appropriate.

I have some wisdom about that. Distinguishment is very helpful. The word appropriate is important, because that's the second distinction to make: between the appropriateness of desire and the inappropriateness. That is, some desires could be very healthy and appropriate in some situations, but not in other situations. If we have a very busy, full life, and then we would like to help a neighbor with their shopping, that seems like a noble and wonderful thing to do. But if we're already overstretched and that's the straw that breaks the camel's back, to go and do one more thing for one more person, then that desire to be helpful probably isn't appropriate at that moment, and we'd better take care of ourselves or do what we've said we were going to do and finish that rather than take on a new thing.

So there are lots of appropriate, very healthy desires, but the timing of them or the situation for them is not appropriate. So we have the kind of distinction, so we're not making all desires a problem. A third distinction around desire are the desires that come up where there's no compulsion to act on them, and those desires that come up where there is compulsion. A compulsion means that we're driven. There is a sense of urgency. There is a sense of, I have to do this.

A desperation, even a very strong kind of energy that's driving us, and even sometimes against our own wisdom. In the extreme version, for example, a form of desire is addiction—a very strong desire for food, alcohol, drugs, sex, all kinds of things: being in relationship, getting approval from other people, being right, insisting on our opinions. These things are very powerful in people's psyche, and the sense of compulsion, and even healthy desires that are the object of desire, the purpose of desire, is good of itself, can come sometimes with this compulsion where we're not really free. Sometimes because it's a healthy and appropriate desire, it's so easy to justify it and not notice that we are not actually acting freely, in free will, with this. We are being driven and pushed into doing it, sometimes in situations not appropriate. And then there are desires that come up that there's no compulsion involved.

There can be a lot of strength to it, a lot of clarity, and a lot of even kind of passion to it, like enthusiasm for it. But there's no drivenness. There's no "we have to do this or else." We can just see, "Oh, there's my desire." Desires come dime a dozen. They come and they go, and

there's no compulsion.

But now that I sit with the desire and look at it, it does seem like a good desire, I think. And if I look at the situation, it seems like the situation warrants it. It seems appropriate, this desire. So let me act on it, and let me act on it with some being relaxed, and not a bulldozer that pushes through and gets what I want for me. I'll just work on it in an easy way, nice way, and if it works out, great. But I'm not going to—some of the forms of compulsion have to do with expectation, or when there's a sense of need associated with desire.

Of course we have needs, but the compulsion that can go along with need transforms need into neediness. This idea of desire and neediness, then we're not free. So to make these kinds of distinctions: healthy and unhealthy desires, appropriate and inappropriate for the situation, and then is there compulsion or no compulsion? The idea of compulsion is fascinating, because a drivenness or being glued to the desire is something we can usually feel. If you quiet your mind a little bit, just close your eyes, you could maybe feel physically in the mind and in the body what it's like for that extra tension, pressure, reaching out, grabbing hold, contracting that comes along with compulsion. To really feel the tension of that, to feel the contraction of that, the pressure of it, is a game changer, because then we begin to step away and see what's going on underneath it, rather than just being pushed almost unconsciously sometimes by the compulsion.

So that's our looking at desire in different ways. Also, I think it's important to have a lot of respect for desire. As some of you know, I really like the word respect, because it's not to dismiss anything or demean anything. To see it with respect means to see it with its worth, our attention. It's okay for it to be there in a certain kind of way. But also the word respect means to look again, to re-spect, like spectacle, to look again, and mindfulness practice has a lot to do with looking again.

So not automatically reacting, automatically coming to conclusions, "This is what it is," but having some pause to be able to say, "What is this really? Let me take a look at this." So to respect our desires. And then if we respect them and really be with them, at first we just want to get the general picture, general sense of what's going on. Sometimes it takes—it's a big deal to admit how strong desire is, or even what our desires are. Some desires operate on us subconsciously that we don't really see.

Early in my practice, one of the desires that I had that I didn't even know was operating was a desire to be liked by other people. Now, even of itself, that's okay to have that desire. But to have neediness and need everyone to like me was exhausting, and it was like the social gymnastics to try to figure out how I can make everyone like me. It's just not possible. It's

not really—it's just exhausting to do it. So what I learned was eventually that the cost of trying to be driven, this compulsion to be liked, was just too much work, and it wasn't worth it.

It was actually counterproductive. But I didn't see that—I was unconscious, or subconscious, it was under the radar. So to see that and admit some of these deeper desires we have is something huge. Learning, a huge growth spurt to have this kind of honesty: "Oh, that's what's happening. I'm embarrassed to admit this." But all that kind of desire is what's operating.

Sometimes desires take the form of addiction. Sometimes they're so strong, the addiction and the compulsion, that we really sometimes can't—very hard—resist them. So there's a number of things to do before meditation if desires are really strong. Sometimes you want to do something that really helps you break the intensity of it. For some people, maybe just walk around the block, step away from a situation, get fresh air, walk around the block. It could be to talk to a friend, call a friend, and especially a friend who can represent something different than just going and getting your desires satisfied at all costs.

If there's alcoholic addiction, maybe you want to talk to a friend who is in recovery, not the friend who is still an adept. But you get some help, and people support. The Buddha talked about that with desire. Sometimes you want to go find a good spiritual friend to talk to and be with when there's really strong desire. The other thing is do something that helps you relax. Some people can take a shower, some people can take a nap, some people maybe eat.

Sometimes not having enough to drink or enough food can give a kind of compulsivity to the conditions and all that. For people who meditate when desires are really strong, I really think a useful exercise, and also a very instructive exercise, is something that I call riding out the wave. That is, as soon as you feel there's a strong addiction to something, no matter what it is, that you almost can't resist acting on it, go find a comfortable chair, sit in a chair, and have an unshakable commitment to not leaving the chair, to stay there and not act on the impulse. It can be like the rodeo. It can be wild in there to sit there and not move. The lawyers of the mind come up and say why it's so important.

There's tremendous feeling like, "I'm going to die if I don't get it. It has to be now." It's a very strong force that can arise when there's strong addictions, strong desires. But not move, sit there, and maybe hold the arms of the chair, and really insist on it, because sooner or later the wave will crest, the intensity will pick up, and pick up a wave. It'll crest, and you'll get to the other side, and it'll diminish and get quieter. The idea is to stay in the chair long enough until it crests and you find yourself on the other side of the wave.

I've known many people who followed these instructions, and they've come back and said, "This was so empowering for me. I felt I developed so much confidence in my ability, and I felt a kind of strength developed in me, because it was really hard. I broke out in a sweat, but I just rode out the wave. And now when these things come, they're less powerful, or I know what to do." So these are all things you can do independent of meditation, because we respect them and respect the intensity of them. Sometimes sitting down in meditation, maybe it's not the time and place to really work through some of the intensity of desire.

The particular desire that the Buddha focused on as one of the hindrances is what's called sensual desire. The word for sensual is *kāma* in the ancient language, Pāli, and it also means sensual. Any kind of sensual desire—desire for comfort, desire for pleasure, desires for sex, desire for good experiences like good food or anything. These can be very primal in human beings, and very intense, and also very fundamental. That's maybe why the Buddha emphasized them for meditation practice, because as the mind gets quieter, and desires for more abstract things quiet down, we're more and more in touch with our immediacy of our experience or physical experience. Then the pleasure and discomfort, the desire for good feelings, good meditations, is one of the kind of last things that are left, or becomes more salient, more obvious.

So to get a handle on or understand our desire for sensuality, for sense pleasures, for comfort—and I think for me, when I was a new meditator, I didn't think of myself as having many sensual desires. But it doesn't take a lot of thinking about it to realize that it's really a desire which is often integrated deeply into many people's lives in ways that maybe, again, are subconscious. We don't really see it. Many people will spend money buying something that the only difference between getting something which is practical and straightforward and the basic needs taken care of, will spend more money to buy something that's more pleasant, more enjoyable, that brings more sense of sensual pleasure. Maybe you could buy a relatively cheap used car to get around, but you buy a nicer used car because it is a pleasant experience to drive that car. Maybe you could buy some basic, simple food at the market, but you spend a little bit more to buy something that's more pleasant.

It's not wrong to do that, and sometimes actually it's a good thing to do it. It satisfies something very deep inside of us to have some aesthetic or pleasure or something. It's the idea that it's always operating. To what degree are we free to choose, and what degree are we being pushed into doing it, even without thinking about it, just kind of automatic? I was trying to say this example about this, to convey the idea that sensual desire is a really common part of human experience, in human life. It's so much so that the Buddha called the human realm

the realm of desire, the *kāma-loka*, the world of desire.

So how do we work with it? We sit in meditation. This is where the BELLA that I talked about yesterday comes into play. The first is respect for desires. It's to sit and become aware of just the desires there, and to not make it a problem, not be critical or angry with it, not be embarrassed or ashamed of it. Just, "Here is a desire, that's what's happening."

To have this respect for it, and to learn that this letting it be is almost the same as being still. Maybe the "B" of BELLA could also be "be still" with it. Be still means recognize it's there, but don't act on it. Certainly don't act with it physically if you're meditating. Maybe just step back and look at it. That stepping back and taking a look at it can help you discern, hopefully in a very simple, relaxed way: Is it a healthy or unhealthy desire? Is it appropriate to have this desire at this time? Inappropriate? Is there compulsion with it or no compulsion?

There can be a desire, for example, if the knees hurt when you're meditating, a desire to have the knees be more comfortable. Is that appropriate? Is that healthy or not healthy? Depends a little bit on what motivates you. If it's healthy, is it appropriate to do it? It may or may not be. If you've been moving and adjusting yourself every ten seconds, maybe it would not be appropriate to do so much of it. Maybe it's appropriate just to see what's going on in some deeper way. Is there compulsion connected to it? You feel, "I've had no pain," and just really felt driven, "I had to change." What was interesting for me was to then look at the compulsion and relax that. Then I actually had more wisdom about whether to move my knee or not. Sometimes I would. Sometimes I wouldn't.

So just be still with it. It's such a powerful thing, no matter what happens, what comes up, what's happening around us, to have this respect, be still. It's a kind of independence from it, not being entangled. Then investigate it. Look, what's there? This is also part of these discernments I talked about. But some of the things to investigate—maybe I'll mention just one for now—and that is, when there is a desire (this is true for aversion as well), there is usually an object of the desire, something that we want, we think about or fantasize about, or something.

One way to examine desire is to turn the attention around a hundred and eighty degrees, and look at what it feels like—the subjective experience of having desire, or the subjective experience of having aversion—turning around and looking at it. At that point, we're no longer focused on the desire, but we are respecting the desire, the act of desiring, and really looking at that. Then looking: where is it in the body? What are the physical sensations that come into play with it? What are the contractions? Is there a sense of compulsivity, really? Then to hold all that gently in awareness, to watch and see and watch the pull and push, the being

for or against. Just be, and breathe, and be and feel what's going on, get to know it better, and in that examining, start to become free.

Then if the desire is strong, we want to lessen the intensity of it. That's why it's helpful to do the hundred and eighty degrees around, to really feel what's here, rather than being blinded by the object of desire, because then we might be able to see. We can lessen it by relaxing the shoulders, the belly, the face, the eyes, the jaws. Maybe we can soften in the mind as well. At some point, it might be possible to let go of the desire. Often desires come with thoughts. As we let go of the thoughts or let go of the desire—sometimes it's quite difficult to do that—but at some point it might be easy enough just to let go of it.

As the desires lessen, or if they stop or are let go of, then appreciate that. What a nice thing it is not to be caught in the grip of these things, the compulsivity of it. Appreciate the peace, the quiet, the subtleness, maybe even the contentment of just being when desires are not pushing us along. Then it would be easier to come back to the breath in meditation and sit in practice. So we could then maybe try a meditation session. If you could, take a comfortable, upright sitting posture, and then you can gently take a few long, slow, deep breaths—breathing in, breathing out—and then let your breathing return to normal.

Look around your body to see if there's anything that you can relax and soften, and then spend a few moments now breathing in a normal way. For a few moments, perhaps trusting the body's experience of breathing, even if it's uncomfortable in any kind of way, almost like you give breathing the benefit of doubt to trust being with it, being with the body breathing. It may be each time you exhale, let your thinking muscle relax, letting go of your thoughts, quieting your thinking mind. Then as you're sitting here, notice if there's any desire happening. Is there anything in your thinking or in your heart or in your being, any impulse that would be a wanting of something? Then can you offer it some respect in the sense of letting it be, or letting yourself be still, and just observe it, just know it's there, including knowing if there is any compulsivity, or is it there in a light, easy way, or is it strong?

If there is a wanting or a desire, no matter how small or big, weak or strong, see if you can do that: turn a hundred and eighty degree turn, rather than focusing on what you're wanting, to feeling the subjective experience of wanting, of desiring. What's that like for you in your body and your heart, your mind, to have a desire? Then if there is any easy way, simple way to relax and lessen the strength of the desire, maybe relaxing it all on the exhale, or letting go of the desire. If a desire has lessened or disappeared, is there something you can appreciate about that? Appreciate its absence. Appreciate maybe some nice feeling that replaces it, and then returning to being aware of your breathing and staying with your breath quietly for a few

minutes.

But if you find yourself distracted or challenged to be with your breathing, notice if there is any desire as part of that challenge. Is it you want something? That is the distraction. If there is, then see if you can go through BELLA: Be, Explore, Lessen, Let go, and Appreciate around this desire that has arisen. If there is some strong desire or you want to keep getting distracted by desire, see if you can move away from the object of desire, thinking about it, to feeling the subjective experience. If there is no strong desire and compulsive desire, maybe you can take a little bit of time to appreciate the absence of that. Appreciate the mind which is not caught up in desire, that's able to maybe be content with just this moment of experience, just with breathing.

If there is a strong desire in it, as we look at the desire, the desiring, you might also notice if there's an underlying emotion to it that may be feeling it, supporting it. If there is, you can do mindfulness of emotion. If you are mindful of the underlying emotion, what happens to the desire? In the last couple of minutes of this meditation, if it's at all effort, if it's at all possible, see if you can sit with a contentment that needs nothing more than the wish to rest with your breathing. Nothing more wishes, nothing more than being present to the experience of the moment, maybe resting with it, resting with breathing contently. Then to end this sitting, you can take a few long, slow, deep breaths, and when you are ready, you can open your eyes.

So in giving these instructions today, I am aware that when we give mindfulness instructions, *vipassanā* instructions, sometimes there's a lot of instructions—almost too much—and it can lend itself to the idea there's a lot to do, and be busy, and do all these things, keep all the stuff in mind. Hopefully that's not the result of giving these instructions. What we're trying to do in *vipassanā* practice, mindfulness practice, is to start to become wise about how our minds and hearts work, so we can navigate with it and find a way to be free, to be at ease, to find peace, and not be so busy, not be so compulsively active in doing and searching. With the things I teach, it's more like the landscape of where we're becoming wise over time. It's not the instruction to be busy.

Now, in terms of desire, there's an interesting kind of thing to be aware of, and that is, there can be any of these hindrances, but let's keep focusing on desire. There can be a secondary desire in relationship to having a desire. There can be a desire that arises, and then there can be a strong desire for it to go away, a strong desire for some other experience, a strong desire to be involved with the desire. I've known people who've had fantasies, and fantasies are often desire fantasies—not always, but often. They've had fantasies, and then they felt, "You know, I've had a hard day. I deserve to fantasize for a while." So there's a desire for the



desire, for the fantasy. Or there could be a desire not to have it. There could be an aversion. There could be a desire for more of it, more of that desire.

Because part of the reason desire, especially fantasy desire, fantasy desires, can pull us into their orbit is because they can come along with a feeling of pleasantness, the promise of something pleasant, or the pleasantness of the promise of something wonderful happening, or just the imagination of great things can kind of make us physically start feeling pleasant and relaxed and warm. So we get seduced sometimes by the pleasure. The desire—maybe it's sexual desire, or desires for food, or desires of grandeur or something—and then we find ourselves wanting more of the good feeling that can come from having those fantasies. Sometimes I step back and say, "Is there any secondary desire, underlying desire for it all?" In good time, the idea of being still, letting it be, is such an important part of this mindfulness practice, because we don't want to be in a hurry to fix anything. Don't be in a hurry to do the technique and somehow overcome things and make it different. We really want to—it's really powerful to learn to just sit still, not being for something and not being against it, not being involved but also not pushing it away, just being with it and seeing it clearly. Then we can begin the examination.

One very hopefully simple way to go through the examination is to go through the instructions I gave for the Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation Part One, which was there's basically four domains of the area of our experience that are useful to tune into. There's our breathing, the body experience, the emotion, and the cognitive thinking parts of it. So if there's a lot of desire going on, you can go through that checklist: How's this affecting the breathing? The breathing gotten tight? Really a lot of desire, the breathing's maybe gotten contracted and tight and shallow. How is it in the body? The body's contracted. It's getting warm or very pleasant, these sensual desires and fantasies I'm having—"Ooh, this is really warm and nice and boy, addicted to this good feeling." What's going on with emotions? There might be an underlying emotion. Maybe fear is driving the desire. Maybe a feeling of lack or loneliness or some discomfort we're trying to get away from. Also, what's going on in the mind? What's going on with the thoughts? Are there certain beliefs operating that are very strong? Are there certain fantasies that are operating or images that are operating that's really fueling and keeping this going?

Again, not to be busy, but can I take your time? Be slow in being mindful. I like to think of mindfulness as going at the speed of trust, going at the speed of love. Even Erik's—just take your time, and just the speed of mindfulness, the speed of staying present and aware of what's here. Operate on this at the speed of awareness, speed of recognition: "Oh, that's

what's happening. That's what's happening.” So desire is an important part of human life. We're not trying to protect it or be critical automatically of desire. We're trying to become wise about desire. As we become wise, to navigate the world of desire so the desires don't take away our capacity to be centered, to be at peace, to be at ease, and to be wise about these desires that we have.

So we have about five minutes before the ten thirty ending. I did take some questions before we started at ten o'clock, and it was recorded for you too, and so we'll keep it in the recording. It was not recorded for Audio Dharma, but if you would like to maybe ask one or two questions, we have time now in the last five minutes. I'm happy to try to answer some more, and hopefully I didn't miss a question that was earlier and too hard for me to go back up in the chat box to find. It's so kind of fun to—I have this very interesting relationship with you in this format, and to share something that's very important for me. I really want the quarantine to go away. Big desire. Yes, a lot of people have that desire. The question is, it's a reasonable desire to have. It could even be appropriate. But can we not have that big desire take over or make us do unwise things? Learn to find our peace with that desire. Maybe just the intensity needs to lessen, not so big. As we recover, we recover something important about ourselves when desire is not in the forefront.

A grief is a big hindrance for me, the clinging and nothing—you must let go. What is a good way to approach this? I think that grief is a powerful emotion; there's an appropriate grief, actually healthy grief, and there are ways of grieving which are not so healthy. Part of this discernment of mindfulness is, over time, to learn the difference between a kind of healthy and not so healthy ways of desiring, grieving, and all that. One thing about grief is not to collapse into it and not to have self-pity. This is why meditation is a wonderful kind of laboratory for discovering a different way of grieving: to sit in an upright way, and like this, riding out the wave can be done very respectfully for grief. Allow the waves of grief to come, but don't collapse into it, or don't make conclusions on it, or don't build up a sense of self or self-pity, or just kind of trust it and ride out the wave, and this washing it through, and keeping the posture upright rather than collapsing or pulling back. It's a very powerful thing, and allows the waves to wash through. Then it's also possible to do BELLA with grief.

And I like the quarantine. Yes, some people do, and some people don't. Some people—and I also find it hard to let go of grief. Yeah, maybe sometimes grief should not be let go of quickly. Grief is sometimes—the natural inner process of the heart to work through something. I am not saying it's true for those of you who made comments here, but sometimes many people in our society have this idea that if you are uncomfortable or grief is strong, you are not sup-

posed to be grieving. Or people unfortunately will come and say, imply that you should be over it by now. But this is very powerful, very healthy and wise to allow your grief to arise in meditation. There's something purifying and allows the inner process, the healing process of the mind, to have good grief, to have healthy grieving. It might actually be a very important part of learning and the growing and the developing of our life, and respecting what it is we've lost. So I'm not one to be quick to overcome grief; give it its time. Let it be.

Can desiring Dhamma and helping others be an addiction? To what extent is it an addiction? Great question. Yes, too much Dhamma, too much Buddhism—wanting it too much—can be a desperation. It can be holding on tight. It can be all kinds of reasons why people get attached to it. They want to be right. They want to be holding on to the truth. They're attached to hope that their Buddhism's going to give. All kinds of things: wanting to do it right, wanting to be successful, wanting to be the next great Buddhist teacher. So then there's a lot of intensity there, and helping other people, same thing. There can be a lot of different ideas. There's an addict, addicted to helping other people. All these things can be respected. All these things, we can stop, be still, look at them, respect them, and begin to see more fully what's going on, to do the hundred and eighty degree turn and look at what it's like to be desiring. Look at the feelings of clinging, the compulsion, this idea of no longer looking at the object of desire, the thing that we want, but really turning in: what's the impact it has on us? What's it like to have these desires, this compulsion and clinging? There's a lot of wisdom and freedom can be found by no longer being fixated on the object of desire.

So I appreciate these questions very much, and I hopefully we'll have more chance. Hopefully, even just answering a few of them is useful for many people. I really value a lot that you're doing this class and part of all this, and you're interested in working on these very important and deep and difficult human energies that we have. So we'll go on tomorrow, and the plan tomorrow is to talk about the second hindrance: ill will or aversion. In the meantime, I hope that these next twenty-three hours, if you want to make a particular study of how desire works in your life, and have conversations with friends about what you've learned about how desire works in your life and the different aspects of it, and look for different ways it operates throughout the day, in subtle ways, small ways, big ways. Just learn, read the Dharma book of your own inner life. Thank you very much.