

Greed (3 of 5) Mindfulness Of Compulsion

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We continue these morning talks on greed. In the West, there is something called the seven deadly sins. Greed is one of them. In Buddhism, there is a very different attitude. We don't look upon anything as being a sin, but rather we look upon it as being damaging or harmful. Some things are harmful, and some things are not. And we want to stop doing the things that are harmful. There isn't that condemnation that might be there with the idea of sin. Rather, there is compassion, care, and an understanding that there is an alternative to harming.

Greed can be defined as being caught in desire. Even a beneficial desire (desire for something good and healthy), if we're caught in it, the caught-ness is what's harmful and unhealthy. This is an important distinction because people might have greed or be caught up in very strong needing and wanting – and maybe it's something that should happen or they should have it. But is it necessary to be caught in it?

If we're caught in desire, does that improve the situation or make it more likely that we get what we want? If we're tight or constricted around the desire, are we somehow harming ourselves, not only in the moment but also in the future, by creating a habit of constriction and forcefulness around our desires?

It's wonderful to discover how to have healthy desires and a quality of freedom, ease, peacefulness, and simplicity with them. We discover that we can act on these desires so much better and more effectively when we have a peacefulness, a lack of compulsion, with them. Also, if we have a lack of compulsion, then we can discover the freedom, the benefits, and the sacred ground of this openness, ease, and peace. Oddly enough, that can often give us a sense that we don't need to fulfill all our desires. Even if it is a healthy desire, we know something better – not to sacrifice that better thing.

One of the things that can be better is clear recognition. Not a forceful or complicated recognition. Not something that's excessively verbal – like we're pounding our thoughts out – desire, desire in some strong way. But rather, a soft, open, quiet, almost natural bubbling up of knowing, of clear recognition. And in that clear recognition, in that knowing, there is a treasure.

Knowing we have compulsive desire isn't, in and of itself, the treasure, but in it is found a treasure. So, to turn our attention 180 degrees around from the object of desire to be aware of the quality, the characteristics, of the clear knowing, the clear recognition. Is there some way of clearly knowing that feels really good? That feels like: "This my home, my ancestral land. This is the place of ease." Not to dismiss the world. Not to reject it in any way. But to find this place from which to live in the world, to know the world.

It takes a while to learn this. Maybe what I'm saying – that there's a treasure in the knowing – is perplexing for some people. So it takes a while to experiment, to look around. You can experiment with different ways of knowing or being aware until it feels really nice to be aware, present, and awake.

In insight meditation, the idea is to turn the attention away from the object of desire to what it's like to be desiring. When we have clear enough knowing and mindfulness, we can use that to feel the experience of desiring. Sometimes it's only by doing that, we begin to disengage ourselves from the compulsion.

One of the things to notice is what it feels like in the body to be desiring, greedy, or compulsive. Sometimes there's a leaning forward, or a jumping up, or an uplifting tension – "I really want this!" Sometimes there is a tightening around it. We can feel the physical qualities of desire. Maybe the jaw gets set or the eyes get set on an object – "I want this for sure!" There's a constriction or tightness in the mind. Sometimes there's a strong urge to want in the belly. Sometimes when there's a strong desire, it is almost as if we've been possessed. Everything in

us just wants. For instance, there are certain times when I get really famished that it seems there's almost a whole embodied, physiological, primal desire – “I better get food!” And it can be very compelling.

It's fascinating to practice with that. It's so interesting to discover these powerful forces within us – to sit in them, to discover freedom in them. We discover that clear recognition can always be there to provide us with a home of freedom. It allows us more clarity to think wisely about what we're doing and not act compulsively in ways that are harmful to ourselves or others.

So we can feel the physiology of compulsive desire. One of the interesting ways of doing this is to distinguish between a desire that has no compulsion and a desire that does. What does that compulsion feel like? What's that extra thing? And over time, to become a connoisseur of the physiological qualities and characteristics of compulsion. This isn't so that we can be compulsive better, but rather, the more familiar we are with the physical manifestations and expressions of compulsive desire, the easier it is to become free. The easier it is to discover the clear awareness that knows the compulsive desire, rather than having that compulsive desire infuse us with its authority.

Sometimes desires come with a lot of authority – “This must happen now, this is important.” There might be authority based on fear – “If I don't get it, [something bad might happen].” There might be authority based on fantasy – “[If I get this], then everything will be okay, I'll be successful.” It might be the authority of pleasure – “I really need some pleasure to feel fulfilled or satisfied.” What's the authority that comes with the compulsion? By feeling the physiology and physicalness of desire, it's easier to disengage from the sense of authority and command that can come with the desire.

As we drop into the body and feel the physicality of desire, we also may become aware of the emotionality of desire. What emotions come into play when we have a desire? Is it fear? Is it aversion? For example, in order to get away from something, we want something else. Is it anticipation? Are we living in fantasy with a promise of eternal happiness? Is there a delight in the desire we have? Are we caught in the delight of it, the promise of the happiness it might provide?

So what are the emotions? What is the emotional tone and feeling of what's happening with the desire? Is the desire mostly an attempt to get away from something uncomfortable? Or is the desire mostly an attempt to get to something that we think is wonderful?

Noticing clearly the emotions and feelings that are motivating the desire is another step towards disentangling ourselves from it. It's another step towards having a clear recognition of what's happening. And in that clear recognition, we can find freedom and ease.

As we settle in, relax, and open to the desire, it's also possible to become aware of the thought train. What are the beliefs that are operating? There can be beliefs – “This is how I'll be safe.” “If I have this pleasure or this desire is fulfilled, then I'll be happy in my life.” “This is how people will like me.”

All kinds of beliefs come into play, and we don't have to analyze that deeply. But, as we settle down and quiet ourselves, especially in meditation, it can be like we're looking out a window and a stream of different inner events begins to become clearer and clearer. At first, it might be that we're simply caught in desire. Then we start seeing the physicality of it. Then what comes through that window of awareness is the emotionality connected to the desire and the motivational quality of it.

Then, as we get quieter and quieter, we might also start seeing the stream of thoughts related to the desire. We might see that we're caught in a belief, a dream of hope, expectation, or fantasy. We can feel the way we lean in and hold on to that fantasy or dream we're living in. That's part of the desire as well.

We practice simple clear awareness of each step along the way: the desire itself, how it feels in the body, how it feels emotionally, and what's going on in the mind. For some of us, it means making very simple mental notes (e.g., “tightness,” “anticipation,” “fantasy”) to help us have that clear recognition.

When the desire is no longer compulsive, we can come back to the breathing. Or, if the clear recognition has become strong enough, the compulsion might still be there, but we are not really involved in it anymore. Then sometimes it can be useful to simply welcome back the healthy experience of breathing. Let breathing, the healthiness of breathing, fill the awareness. In a sense, there's no room for the compulsion anymore. The compulsion is not being fed by our involvement with it. It has a chance to settle down.

For this next day, when you find even the most subtle compulsive desire (e.g., you really need to have something now), if the situation is appropriate, you might close your eyes, sit down, explore, and track what is going on inside. Turn your attention 180 degrees around from the object of desire to what's happening within you as you're desiring.

Thank you. I look forward to continuing the series tomorrow.