

Bodhipaksa

*Digital Detox: Reclaim Your Mind From Social Media Addiction*

Week Three: “Weaning Ourselves Off of Screens by Resisting Compelling Thoughts”

January 19, 2020



I’m Bodhipaksa, and in this series of four talks, I’m exploring how dharma practice can help us free ourselves from our addiction to social media and online activities that can have a negative influence on our lives.

The specific tools we’re using are drawn from what I’m calling “The Social Media Sutra,” or the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta*. The Buddha didn’t talk about social media in this discourse, of course, but in the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta* he offered five tools to help us let go of obsessive patterns of mental activity, and these are all directly applicable to online addictions.

In the first talk we looked at the tool of turning our attention to something skillful. In the second week’s talk we looked at the tool of seeing the drawbacks of obsession.

One thing I should point out is that the Buddha advises us to work through these tools in order. If redirecting the mind to what’s positive doesn’t work for us, then we try seeing the drawbacks of addiction. And if that doesn’t work, we try the next tool—the one we’re exploring today.

The third tool is to try and ignore and forget whatever it is we’re obsessed by. The discourse is very terse where it comes to this tool. It just says that if in the mind of a practitioner, “*bad, unskillful thoughts connected with desire, hate, and delusion keep coming up they should ignore and forget about them.*” And there’s an illustration of this principle as well: *Suppose there was a person with good eyesight, and some undesirable sights came into their range of vision. They’d just close their eyes or look away.*

That sounds almost simplistic, but as we look into it I think you’ll see that it’s actually very practical and useful advice. We’re going to look at this in two areas.

First, we’ll look at the sphere of external activity—how we can change what we do so that we can literally ignore and look away from social media.

Next, when we’ll look at the sphere of internal activity—how we relate to our experience. I think there are some deep implications for how we habitually use our attention in this second sphere. I’d like to show that making a very simple shift in the way we notice our experience can have a powerfully transforming effect on our level of well-being.

First, some very practical advice for managing our attention in relation to things we can get addicted to. Let’s say, for example, that you wanted to lose weight, but had a problem with eating potato chips. If you have a big bag of them in the house, you’re much more likely to stumble into a situation where you’re feeling unhappy and end up pigging out. If you have the intention to lose weight, then it’s helpful if you can’t physically see the foods that you crave. To some extent, it’s literally true that “out of sight is out of mind”—something this example

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illustrates. And when you're in the supermarket, don't walk down the chip aisle. Turn away when you walk by it instead.

The same principle applies to our online addictions. Our main route into these nowadays is through those magic glass rectangles that we use to watch TV shows, get travel directions, play games, do our banking, look for a mate, do work, text-message our friends and family—and, of course, browse social media.

These devices are so useful that we carry them with us everywhere, which means that we're always in the presence of temptation. So if you have a tendency to get addicted to online activities, put your phone out of sight and out of mind, at least some of the time.

One of the best things you can do is to keep your phone off your bedside at night. If that's where you charge your phone, then your addiction is going to be the first thing you feed when you wake up. Your smartphone is going to be there first thing in the morning, or even if you wake up in the middle of the night. So try charging your phone at the other end of the house.

You might be saying, “But I need my phone beside me at night so that I know what time it is!” If that's the case, I'd like to remind you of an ancient technology called the “alarm clock.” It also tells the time and can be programmed to wake you up, but it doesn't tempt you to go online.

When you charge your phone in another room, you'll wake up and not have instant access to the internet. That gives you an opportunity to start your day free from addiction. And the way we start the day often conditions how we live during the rest of the day.

I find that when I charge my phone in the living room, I'm more likely to meditate or to read a dharma book first thing in the morning, rather than reading the news or seeing what's going on on Twitter. This is a great way to start the day.

Reading a novel first thing in the morning is also much healthier than going online. I think most of us have had the experience of finding it harder to read books because we've spent so much time reading short posts and articles online. Reading novels helps train the mind to become absorbed and develop concentration.

One further step regarding phones is to turn them off when we charge them overnight. We're naturally lazy, and the fact that your phone takes a minute or so to boot up creates a bit of a barrier between you and the internet. That barrier makes it easier for you to avoid addiction. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

You can create other opportunities to have phone- and internet-free time. When you're having a meal with family or friends you can mute your phone or put it somewhere out of sight. I've heard

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of people putting their phones in a pile on the table in a restaurant, and if anyone touches their phone during the meal they have to pay for everyone’s food. I think that’s a great idea.

Meditation retreats are also an excellent opportunity to relearn that we don’t need to be online to be happy—and in fact, we’re happier when we’re offline and present with our direct experience. On some retreats people are asked to hand in their phones for the duration. But if that doesn’t happen you can leave your phone in your car, or switched off and at the bottom of your suitcase. You could even put your phone in a sealed envelope, which creates an extra barrier in case you get tempted to switch it on. And you could write some kind of encouraging message on the outside of the envelope, like “simplicity and presence.”

So these are all very simple and practical ways we can, in the words of the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta*, “look away” from our phones or “have our eyes closed” to them.

All this advice is about the outside world. But I said that there is something we can do *internally* that helps us to avoid getting caught up in and driven by thoughts about our addictions—that sudden desire to pick up our phone and go online. This is a deeper level of practice, and what I’m going to tell you might even change the way you meditate.

There are two ways that we can pay attention with our eyes. The first is where we’re aware of and concentrated on the focal point of our visual field. This is our normal way of seeing, and you’re probably doing that right now. You’re probably mainly aware of the screen in front of you, or of me, or my face, or even just part of my face. Often when we’re listening to someone we focus on the triangle made by the eyes and the mouth. This way of seeing is like a flashlight. It’s a narrow beam of attention. It focuses on what seems most vital, but it also misses a lot.

The other way of seeing is where we’re aware of our whole visual field. We do this not by moving the eyes around, but simply by letting the muscles around the eyes relax and letting the focus be soft. Try doing that right now. Once we’ve done that we find that we can be aware of everything that’s arising visually in a very relaxed way, from the very soft focus at the center of our visual field, right up to the corners of our eyes. This way of seeing is like a lamp. It illuminates many things. It’s less directional and more open than a flashlight.

If you’re doing that right now, you can still be aware of the video, letting it be a soft focal point, but you can also be aware of everything around the video. I encourage you to play with this way of seeing. Try doing it while you’re walking, or having a conversation with someone. When we relax the eyes in this way, we often find that the body starts to relax and the mind starts to calm.

Now, the really interesting thing about this is that the way we use the eyes affects the way we perceive internally as well. In meditation, when our eyes are tight and narrowly focused, then our

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inner field of attention is narrow as well. When our eyes are tight we can only be aware of a small range of internal sensations.

Maybe we notice just one small part of the breathing, for example. And the problem is that we're not giving the mind much to be aware of, and it gets bored. And then along comes a thought—maybe an emotionally loaded one—and the flashlight beam of our attention shifts to the thought, and the story it contains. Now we're completely lost in a distracted train of thought. Our meditation can go on like this for a long time, where we alternate shining the flashlight of our attention on a small range of bodily sensations and distracted thoughts.

But when the eyes are soft, and our attention is like a gently glowing lamp, we're able to be aware of many sensations in the body. We can be aware of the breathing in the whole body, for example. So now there's a lot for us to be aware of, and the mind is more nourished. When a thought arises, it's now just one small part of a vast, open field of attention. And because of that, the thought can simply pass through the mind. We don't resist it. We're not drawn into it. We just don't pay any particular attention to it.

So this brings us back to the topic of ignoring and forgetting about compelling thoughts.

We can maintain a soft gaze, an open gaze, during ordinary activities. And when a thought or an urge comes up—like “I need to check Facebook RIGHT NOW”—it's easier just to let that thought arise and pass away without our acting on it. Or if we're already in the throes of online activity, and we realize it's not good for us, we can soften the eyes, and it becomes easier to let go of our compulsion to stay engaged online. It becomes easier to step away from the screen or put down our phone.

This idea of ignoring and forgetting about unskillful thoughts and urges might seem simplistic and even a bit lame, but it's actually very deep.

So what have we learned today? We've seen that we can reduce our chances of being sucked into social media by making it harder for us to access our phones, by making sure that they're not right by us when we wake up, by having them switched off so that there's more of a barrier to accessing the internet, and by evolving rituals where we eat meals or spend time with friends and family undisturbed by our technology. We can create oases of sensory reality.

We've also seen that a slight shift in the way we relate to our eyes can create a sense of mental space in which thoughts can arise and pass away without our getting caught up in them. We literally can simply ignore and forget about the thoughts and impulses that keep us hooked on social media and in that way begin to let go of and free ourselves from addictive patterns of thought and behavior.