



Bodhipaksa

Digital Detox: Reclaim Your Mind From Social Media Addiction

Week One: “The Social Media Sutra”

January 4, 2020

My name is Bodhipaksa, and I’m a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order, which was founded in the 1960s by an English-born Buddhist monk called Sangharakshita.

I’m an author and have published several books and many CDs of guided meditations. My most recent book is *This Difficult Thing of Being Human*, published by Parallax. It’s on the topic of mindful self-compassion, which I’ll touch on in the final talk in this series.

I’m a meditation teacher. I was one of the pioneers of teaching meditation online, where most of my teaching still happens. I formerly ran a meditation retreat center, called Dhanakosa, in the highlands of Scotland. I was the director of the Rocky Mountain Buddhist Center in Missoula for a while. I completed an interdisciplinary master’s degree in Buddhism and business at the University of Montana, which included the study of Pali, one of the main languages of the early scriptures. Although I draw inspiration from texts from all eras of the Buddhist tradition, I’m particularly interested in the earliest teachings, found in Pali and other early Indian languages.

Because of the way I teach, I spend a lot of time online, and so I’ve had to deal with the issue of technological addiction—especially being sucked into social media. Like most people I carry one of these things [shows an iPhone] around with me; it’s a kind of glass doorway that leads to a world of endless distraction.

So, spending a lot of time online and carrying around a device that allowed me to log on any time I wanted, I’d often find myself spending way too much time on the internet. My work would suffer, and sometimes I’d stay up too late, reading fascinating articles, usually about science and psychology. What I was reading was good, but I just couldn’t stop, and I’d end up depriving myself of sleep.

So the question naturally arose for me, “How can my Buddhist practice help me with addiction to online activities?”

The Buddha didn’t say anything about the internet or social media, of course, but he did have a lot to say about dealing with and overcoming compelling patterns of thought and behavior. So over the next four weeks, I’ll be looking at our addiction to social media and the internet more generally, through the lens of a *sutta*, or discourse, from the early texts. It’s called the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta* and it offers tools for working with compelling patterns of mental activity.

Vitakka means “thinking” and *santhana* literally means “a resting place,” and so means “end, stopping, cessation.” So this is the discourse on quieting our compelling thoughts and habits.

The *Vitakkasanthana* offers five tools to help us quiet our thoughts. It talks about these tools in the context of meditation, but the principles it outlines can be used in any context in our lives,



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including when we’re on social media. In a way, you could think of the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta* as “the Social Media Sutra.”

The first of the five tools this discourse offers is described in the following way:

“Take a practitioner who is focusing on some object in meditation that gives rise to bad, unskillful thoughts connected with desire, hate, and delusion. That practitioner should focus on some other object in meditation connected with the skillful. As they do so, those bad thoughts—imbued with desire, aversion, or delusion—are given up and come to an end.”

And then the Buddha offers an illustration:

“It’s like a deft carpenter or their apprentice who’d knock out or extract a large peg with a finer peg.”

Although this is talking about meditation, it directly relates to our online activities as well. It’s not that social media and so on are *inherently* bad, but that our minds often turn to them in an addictive way. We could include here not just Facebook, Twitter, and so on, but other online activities that can be compelling, from reading news articles to playing games. So there are many ways we can be unskillful online. Many more than I can mention.

The essence of any compelling activity, of course, is that we find it easy to start and hard to stop. We’re caught up in craving.

We might crave continual input. We just don’t want to stop browsing. We might crave the reassurance we get when people “like” or comment on our posts, and get disappointed when people don’t do those things.

Yet another common form of unskillfulness is when we are angered by opinions we disagree with. We might, out of anger, say things calculated to hurt people, or block them so that we don’t have to face up to our reactions to them.

All of this involves “unskillful thoughts connected with desire, hate, and delusion.”

The first suggestion the Buddha makes is that we simply turn the mind to something more wholesome instead. This is a basic principle of dharma practice: mindfulness gives us choice. Mindfulness allows us to see that some choices we make will make us happier and others unhappier.

Becoming mindful isn’t always comfortable. We see things going on—like addiction or anger—that make our lives miserable. But one of the first things we need to do is to stop blaming



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ourselves in response to our addictions. Blaming ourselves is just us responding to unskillfulness with further unskillfulness.

Having a tendency to be addicted isn't something to take personally. It's not a weakness. It's just causes and conditions unfolding in our lives. Of course, it's important that we don't let ourselves off the hook. But self-hatred just tends to make us miserable, and addiction feeds on misery.

First, with mindfulness, recognize that you're doing something that's making you unhappy. You're causing yourself to suffer. Now, become aware of what kind of unhelpful mental habit has arisen. What's the unskillful activity that you need to switch from?

In my experience, the three most common forms are: 1. craving stimulation, 2. craving attention, and 3. becoming angry.

Let's deal with those one at a time.

1. **If you're craving stimulation**, take a mindful break. Notice physical sensations in the body, feelings, and the sensory reality of your surroundings. This is a different kind of stimulation—a more wholesome and grounding kind of input for the mind. And while online stimulation can never truly satisfy us, being mindfully aware of the richness of our experience leaves us feeling more fulfilled. So here you're switching your mind from mindless stimulation to mindful appreciation of your direct experience. You can learn to trust that this moment is enough. You can be content right now.

2. **If you're craving attention**, then you probably aren't feeling good about yourself. There's probably an underlying sense that you don't matter, which is why you're dependent on seeking reassurance from other people. You're probably not valuing yourself, or giving yourself appreciation. You may even be putting yourself down.

To switch to a skillful alternative to craving attention, you can give yourself some love, compassion, and appreciation. You can place your hand on your heart and say to yourself, “It's OK. I'm here for you. You matter, and I care about you. I will take care of you. Let yourself feel this love.” You can learn to trust that *you* are enough.

3. **When we get angry**, which is the third way we often behave unskillfully online, you probably don't have enough kindness and empathy toward others in your heart. When you're seeing others acting or speaking in ways that disturb you, you react with ill will. Maybe you speak or write unkindly. Maybe you insult people.

Switching to a more skillful way of relating means bringing more empathy and compassion into the present moment. So, first, recognize that if you're angry or outraged, you're suffering. So



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once again, place a hand on your heart and offer yourself some kindness. "May you be well. May you be happy. May you be at peace." Breathe.

Then remind yourself that the person you're angry with is a feeling being, just as you are. They feel happiness, just as you do. They suffer, just as you do. They prefer happiness rather than suffering, just as you do. And then, having connected empathetically in this way, perhaps you'll find that you naturally relate and communicate in a more empathetic, kinder way.

Just a word about the image the Buddha used to illustrate this tool. He said that switching our focus to a skillful object is like using a small peg to knock out a larger peg. That's what a carpenter would do to remove a cart wheel, for example.

Although you might think that the forces of addiction and anger are powerful, and your mindfulness and compassion are weak, a small pin can knock out a big pin. Your mindfulness or compassion, even though they may seem feeble, just need to be used in a directed way.

Remember that when a carpenter used one pin to remove another, it doesn't take just one blow of the hammer. It takes *repetition*. So don't be discouraged if it takes time to change your habits. Just keep working at it.

So what we've learned here is that the first tool for dealing with unhelpful behaviors and mental habits around social media is to switch our attention to an object connected with the skillful—bringing skillfulness into our present moment experience.

When you're craving stimulation, you can learn to trust the present moment. When you're craving attention, you can learn to trust that you are enough. That you matter. That you can support yourself. When you're angry, you can learn to trust in the power of connecting empathetically first with yourself, and then with others. In this way, you can switch from unhealthy ways of relating to social media to having a healthier relationship with them.

One last thing: I've said a lot about trust—trusting the present moment, trusting that you matter, trusting your capacity to connect empathetically. Sometimes when I catch myself tempted to mindlessly pick up my phone so that I can check Twitter or read some news articles online, I say to myself, “Trust the dharma.” This is just a reminder to myself of everything I've said above about the potential and the power of making mindful choices. Trust the dharma means “trust yourself.” It means trusting your immediate experience. It means trusting that this moment, right here, can be deeply fulfilling if you simply accept it.

So I'll pick up my phone to mindlessly go online, I'll remind myself, "Trust the dharma," and then I can gently put the phone back down again.