

Bodhipaksa

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

Week Two: "Seeing Through Addiction's False Promises"

January 12, 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 other online activities that can have a negative influence on our lives.

We're learning how to become more mindful in our use of social media, using lessons from the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta*, which is found in the Middle Length sayings of the Pali scriptures.

The *Vitakkasanthana Sutta* is, in a way, "The Social Media Sutra." The title means "the discourse on quieting compelling thoughts," and it offers five practices to help us gain more control over our minds. And that's exactly what we need to do when we're dealing with technology that's designed to hijack our attention.

Last week we looked at the practice of turning the mind from unskillful to more skillful pathways of thought and attention.

This week we're going to look at the second tool, which is examining the drawbacks of having an out of control mind. I love this particular description because it's illustrated by a truly graphic and visceral image. The discourse says:

*"They should examine the drawbacks of those thoughts: 'So these thoughts are unskillful, they're blameworthy, and they result in suffering.' As they do so, those bad thoughts are given up and come to an end. Suppose there was a woman or man who was young, youthful, and fond of adornments. If the corpse of a snake or a dog or a human were hung around their neck, they'd be horrified, repelled, and disgusted."*

Isn't that a great image? I'll come back to say more about it later.

The application of this tool to social media is quite obvious. We need to look at the disadvantages of social media, or of our addiction to it. We need to do this to counteract our very natural desire to get absorbed in Facebook, Twitter, and so on.

These technologies are actually designed to be addictive. They're carefully engineered to hook into our brains' reward circuits and to keep us coming back for more stimulation and to see if our posts have been liked, forwarded, or commented upon. They keep us hooked by making their streams endless, by autoplaying videos so that you have to take action to disengage, and by showing us when someone is composing a reply to something we've written.

The negative effects of social media are now well known, and we're not just talking about a few people who become serious addicts and have their lives completely ruined. There are, of course, people who are heavily addicted. A 2019 study on social media addiction, carried out by researchers at Michigan State University and Monash University in Australia, showed that people who use Facebook heavily have impaired decision-making skills, and perform as poorly

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in psychological tests as people who are addicted to cocaine or heroin. But virtually all of us are hooked. According to one study, the average person now spends four hours a day on their phone.

Social media make us anxious, depressed, and lonely. They con us into thinking that we're doing poorly in comparison to others because other people tend to show a falsely upbeat view of their own lives. Research shows that the more time we spend on social media, the more our sense of happiness and life satisfaction drop.

Social media are being used for social engineering. They are now used as propaganda tools to influence our political decision-making. These propaganda tools are so carefully designed that we don't even realize we're being manipulated, and sometimes will deny it when it's pointed out to us. In perhaps the ultimate irony, Facebook discovered that a Russian internet agency had set up a page on mindfulness as part of an attempt to influence elections in the US.

The main drawback for me, though, is just the sheer amount of time that I can waste on social media. If I'm not careful, I can pick up my phone in the morning and easily spend an hour or more reading news stories and browsing Twitter. That's time that I could use going for a walk, meditating, or working. Social media has an opportunity cost.

Here are some of the disadvantages of social media, but there are many others: the way we stay up too late, staring at screens; the way we reduce our productivity by constantly checking for new updates; the way we get so absorbed in our devices that we don't pay attention to our loved ones; the way we get sucked into online conflicts; the way we find it hard to stay focused the way we used to. Presumably all this is very familiar to you.

The thing about addiction is that even though it has a negative influence on our lives, it promises to be a source of happiness. This is a phenomenon that the Buddha included in his teachings of the *vipallasas* (or *viparyasas* in Sanskrit if you're more familiar with that language).

Vipallasa is a word that we could translate as “cognitive distortion.” These distorted ways of seeing things classically include assuming that impermanent things will last forever, seeing things that are ethically unattractive as attractive, and seeing things that are not who we are as being intrinsic to our sense of self.

But the cognitive distortion we're dealing with here is the assumption that we can be made happy by things that actually make us unhappy. It's the assumption that our happiness is dependent upon being involved in social media, playing online games, reading the news, and so on. It's the fear that if we don't participate in these things we'll be deprived and suffer.

One way people talk about this is in terms of the acronym FOMO, which stands for the “Fear of Missing Out.” When I first thought about deleting my Facebook account, I worried about losing contact with distant relatives, being deprived of learning about significant events in my friends'

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lives, missing breaking news, and so on. Surely, I thought, giving up my Facebook and Instagram accounts would reduce my sense of well-being.

But I found that the opposite was the case. The less I used social media, the more content I was. I was far more productive. I spent more time meditating. I started to experience once more the long-lost joy of being deeply immersed in a book. Instead of experiencing FOMO, the “Fear of Missing Out,” I experienced JOMO—the “Joy of Missing Out.” Cutting my ties with social media platforms, or most of them at least, was joyful and liberating.

So this second tool from the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta*, examining the drawbacks of our immersion in social media, is a way of undermining our addiction. It helps us to look more clearly at our desire to go onto social media or to stay hooked on it. It helps us to regard those desires with a bit more skepticism.

We can start to see thoughts of quickly checking our Facebook or Twitter accounts as false promises. These thoughts are saying, “This will make you happy. This will give your life meaning. You need this.” We can see more starkly that in reality, our addictive use of social media makes us unhappy and takes us away from things that are truly meaningful.

I’d like to come back to the image that the Buddha uses: It’s like “*a woman or man who was young, youthful, and fond of adornments. If the corpse of a snake or a dog or a human were hung around their neck, they’d be horrified, repelled, and disgusted.*”

That’s a powerful image! Imagine you’re all dressed up in your finest clothes ready to go out somewhere, and someone was to drape the stinking corpse of some animal around your neck! How gross! So this points to us waking up to the fact that there’s something unwholesome going on when we’re addicted. Our social media addiction is this gross thing in our lives.

But let’s not ignore the finery. What’s the finery in our lives? Well, that’s what’s wholesome and skillful, and that’s there too. It’s important to recognize that fact. We’re being encouraged not just to see the presence of the unskillful in our lives, but also to recognize the things that are going on that bring us a sense of peace and joy. It’s only when we recognize and honor the skillful in our lives that the unskillful looks out of place.

If we were just to reflect on the drawbacks of online addiction, we’d probably just feel bad about ourselves, and ironically that might prompt us to spend even more time online because that’s where we go to escape things we don’t like. So at the same time as we reflect on the drawbacks of online addiction, we need to turn our attention to more wholesome activities—like being more fully present with ourselves and with anything we happen to be doing, meditating, being present for others, focusing on meaningful work, the simple pleasures of life that we’re not addicted to, and so on.

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One thing I’ve found as I’ve disengaged from social media is that I’ve rediscovered the joys of immersing myself deeply in a good book— something that at one point I worried that I might no longer be able to do. I’ve also rediscovered the joys of listening to classical music and going for walks. I’m rediscovering the delights of simplicity and presence.

So I’d suggest that you do two things. First, spend some time listing what, for you, are the biggest drawbacks of addiction to social media. Second, also make a list of the simple things in life that you find most nourishing—those things that, perhaps, social media take you away from.

Then, when you find yourself caught up in addictive behaviors online, call those two lists to mind. Create a sense of—it’s a strong word but a good one—“disgust” with addictive behavior, but balance that by creating an attraction to what’s wholesome and nourishing in your life, the things that make you truly happy and that bring you a sense of peace and meaning.

So what have we learned today? We’ve learned that one way we can weaken our addictions is to reflect on their negative influence on our lives, and that social media have many such negative effects. We need to consciously reflect on those negative effects because the addictive circuits in our brains rely on cognitive distortions—vipallasas—that tell us that we need the object of our addiction in order to be happy.

But we also need simultaneously to turn to what is positive—what brings us joy, peace, and a sense that we’re living in a meaningful way. And we need to be clear what those positive things are. For the dharma to be effective in our lives we need to tailor its general recommendations so that they fit the precise contours of our lives and our minds.

These dual reflections help us to see our addictive behavior as something gross, and as something that just doesn’t fit with who we are and who we want to be. They help us to recognize and undermine our addictive tendencies so that we can become freer, and happier, and more in control of our minds. We’ve seen how we can replace the fear of missing out with the joy of missing out.