

Bodhipaksa

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

Week Four: “Getting to the Root of the Problem: Meeting our Emotions Skillfully and with Self-Compassion”

January 26, 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 to online activities that can have a negative influence on our lives.

This week we’ll take a look at the final two tools from the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta*. *Vitakkasanthana* literally means “quieting our thinking.” But we’re talking not just about thoughts as inner speech, but also the urges and impulses that accompany our inner stories. In this case, it’s the thoughts and impulses that keep us hooked on social media that we’re looking at quieting down, so I’m calling the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta* “the Social Media Sutra.”

There are five tools in the social media sutra, and so far we’ve examined three of them. The first is turning our attention away from something unskillful to something that’s skillful. The second is looking at the drawbacks of our unskillful activities. The third is choosing not to get caught up in compelling thinking.

The fourth, which we will explore now, is what’s called “stopping the formation of thoughts.” That sounds great if you can do it! I think we’d all love to be able to find an “off” switch for our thinking, or at least to have access to a dial so that we could turn it down a bit.

So what does the discourse actually say about this tool? It tells us that if none of the other methods have quieted our unskillful thoughts and urges, and *“unskillful thoughts connected with desire, hate, and delusion keep coming up. The practitioner should focus on stopping the formation of thoughts. As they do so, those bad thoughts are given up and come to an end. Their mind becomes stilled internally; it settles, unifies, and becomes immersed in mindful absorption.”*

So that’s maybe not that helpful. But there’s an image, as always: *“Suppose there was a person walking quickly. They’d think: ‘Why am I walking so quickly? Why don’t I slow down?’ So they’d slow down. They’d think: ‘Why am I walking slowly? Why don’t I stand still?’ So they’d stand still. They’d think: ‘Why am I standing still? Why don’t I sit down?’ So they’d sit down. They’d think: ‘Why am I sitting? Why don’t I lie down?’ So they’d lie down. And so that person would reject successively coarser postures and adopt more subtle ones.”*

The important thing to note here is that we find ourselves bombing along the sidewalk, and then we realize that there are mechanisms at work causing this to happen. Something is propelling us. As we become more aware of what’s driving us, we can slow down and come to rest.

Similarly, when the mind is giving rise to thoughts and urges that prompt us to get involved—or to stay involved—in compulsive online activity, there is a mechanism that’s driving this. As we begin to look at the causes and conditions that are driving our actions, we can choose to let the mind come back to rest.

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So if we become aware that we’re literally surfing the web, rather unmindfully, then we might realize that there’s a sense of anxiety driving us. This feeling of anxiousness might be like a tight prickly ball of unpleasant sensations in the gut. One part of the brain is producing this sensation in the body because it thinks that being bored or missing out is a threat to our well-being. And it’s using this unpleasant sensation as a way of alerting us to this threat.

Other parts of the brain, reacting to the unpleasant feeling, are causing us to move from web page to web page, from social media post to social media post.

The Buddha said that “everything converges on feeling” because of the pivotal role that feelings play in our experience. It’s the unpleasant feeling that’s central to our experience. It’s what’s driving our behavior.

As we become mindful of the feeling that’s driving us and that the mind has been reacting to, we realize that we don’t have to react to it and be driven by it. Instead, we can simply observe it and recognize that it represents a part of us that is suffering, and perhaps have compassion for that part of us.

This attitude of mindful self-compassion toward our feelings creates a kind of gap, or sacred pause, in which we’re able to find a kinder, wiser way of acting.

In the case of internet addiction, there’s always an unpleasant feeling driving us. What is that feeling? Well, that’s going to vary. There might be a sense of boredom, or hollowness, or dread, or maybe anxiety. But whatever the feeling is, we can train ourselves to turn toward our discomfort and accept it. We can train ourselves to respond to our pain with kindness and compassion. This helps us to pivot from reactivity to responding in a more creative, mindful, and wise way.

Very often when I find myself glued to my computer, obsessed by reading articles online, I’ll use the approach I’ve just described. I’ll realize that I’m suffering and then turn my attention mindfully to the feelings that are present. Usually there’s a sense of something unpleasant in the gut.

When I’m not mindful, I take those unpleasant feelings as a signal that there’s something wrong. I need to fix something. I need to escape some threat, like loneliness or boredom. And the way to do that is to go online to find a fix. Of course, these reactions aren’t thought out or planned. They’re very instinctual.

When I’m mindful, I recognize that the unpleasant feeling is just a sensation in the body. It’s simply a sensation created by some part of the brain that thinks that my well-being is threatened.

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I don't need to act on it. I can simply observe it. And perhaps I can compassionately recognize that a part of me is suffering and offer it some kindness and compassion. [Touching belly]: “May you be well. May you be happy. May you be at peace.”

When we crave something, it's like there's an invisible cord running between us and it through which our emotion flows. But when we turn our attention mindfully to the painful feelings that underlie our cravings, it's as if that cord has been cut.

So when I become mindful of my painful feelings it's as if my emotional connection with the internet, with social media, weakens, or is broken. I can simply put down my phone or close the lid of my laptop, and do something more wholesome than mindlessly scrolling through other people's social media posts.

So that's the fourth tool, or at least it's part of it. This is the approach of focusing on stopping the formation of thoughts. We see what feelings are driving our thoughts and urges, and we find a more wholesome way of responding to those feelings so that we no longer act in a reactive way.

So now for the fifth and final tool. This one may surprise you: the last resort tool that the Buddha offers us is sheer willpower. *“With teeth clenched and tongue pressed against the roof of the mouth, the practitioner should squeeze, squash, and torture mind with mind. As they do so, those bad thoughts are given up and come to an end.”*

That all sounds kind of harsh. And the image is rather violent as well. *“It's like a strong man,”* the discourse says, *“who grabs a weaker man by the head or throat or shoulder and squeezes, squashes, and tortures them.”*

You might be surprised at the Buddha teaching such a forceful method, but sometimes we need to be strict with ourselves. It's made very clear, though, that using willpower is a last resort, to be employed only when other methods have failed.

Sometimes I've found this useful. I can find myself, late at night, surfing the internet. It's all good stuff—articles about science, psychology, and dharma—but it's depriving me of sleep. I'll suddenly find myself experiencing disgust with what I'm doing and almost slam down the lid of my laptop. That sudden surge of a kind of healthy distaste overpowers my craving, which then loses all of its power over me.

I think there are better ways to use willpower, though. You could even call them sneakier ways. The sneaky aspect is that you use your willpower when you're not actively caught up in craving. That's when using force, for want of a better mind, is most effective. What we do is to make decisions that limit the ability of our active tendencies to control us.

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For example, if you delete your social media apps from your phone, that’s pretty forceful. It becomes much harder to access those services. Sure, you could use your phone’s internet browser instead, but that’s a bit clunkier. If you want to go a bit further, then you can use your phone’s parental safety settings to designate Twitter, or Facebook, or any other social media site you’re addicted to as an adult site and block it entirely. That way you can’t access those sites even in a browser.

Or you could use browser plugins you can use that limit the amount of time you can spend on social media. I’ve found those useful.

Going a bit further, you can delete your social media accounts altogether! That’s a very effective use of “force.” It actually does take a lot of willpower to do this. Very few people can do this.

Your addiction will find ways to talk you out of deleting your accounts, telling you how essential social media are to your happiness. It’s all lies, of course. These things didn’t even use to exist, and somehow we all got by.

I deleted my personal Facebook account and my Instagram account, and now the only social media service I use is Twitter, and I use the tools I’ve been discussing over these four weeks so that I don’t waste too much time there or get caught up in pointless arguments. I really do feel like I’ve reclaimed my mind.

To summarize this week’s talk, what we’ve been doing is exploring the final two tools out of the five that the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta* offers us. These tools are all designed to help us free our minds from obsessive thinking and compulsive urges.

We’ve explored how we can look at how addictive thinking and actions arise when we’re not mindful of our feelings, and how we can create a mindful and self-compassionate pause in which wiser and healthier actions can arise.

And we’ve explored how, as a last resort, we can use willpower to disengage from addictive activities on the internet, and how we can most effectively use our willpower at times we’re not actively caught up in craving. For example, we can make it harder for ourselves to connect to social media sites, or even delete our accounts.

Thank you for joining me for these four weeks on using the dharma to overcome social media addiction. There’s truly nothing I enjoy more than exploring and sharing the dharma, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to explore our practice together.

May we all continue to make progress in overcoming the obstacles that hold us back from living with mindfulness, compassion, and joy.