



5 Essential Teachings on Working With Habitual Patterns



LION'S ROAR

Watering the Seeds of Happiness

Happiness is a habit too, says Zen master **THICH NHAT HANH**. Here's how you can make it grow.

All of us have the capacity to be happy. We have seeds of compassion, understanding, and love in us. We all have many good seeds of happiness and joy. Yet we also have the habit of running in us. This restless energy of dissatisfaction and struggle separates us from the present moment and from ourselves.

In part, we're running toward something. We think happiness isn't possible in the here and now, so we try to run ahead into the future. We think if we can just get enough power, fame, wealth, or admiration from others, then we'll finally be happy. We hope that if we run toward these things faster and harder, we will get to happiness.

At the same time that we're running toward one thing, we're running away from something else. Every one of us has suffering, despair, anger, and loneliness inside of us. If we don't know how to be with these strong emotions, we want to get as far away from them as fast as possible.

Because we're always running, we're not there for ourselves. We're too busy trying to get somewhere else to be with the self we have right now. And if we're not able to take care of ourselves, we can't be there for our loved ones. So not only are we running away from ourselves, we're also running away from our family and friends.

All this running is a lot of work. It is exhausting, and creates tension in our body and mind. We do it because it has become a habit, but with mindful attention and deep looking, we can transform the painful habit of running into a habit of happiness.

The Roots of Our Habit Energy

Where does the energy pushing us to run come from? We need to stop and look deeply into the roots of our habit energy in order to transform it.

Each of us carries the habit energies of our ancestors. Our consciousness has a strong capacity to receive and absorb energies from those who have come before us and those around us. We carry these energies in our consciousness as fifty-one different mental formations preserved in the form of seeds, or *bija* in Sanskrit. These seeds of love, happiness, compassion, fear, hatred, anxiety, etc. are in every one of us.

Buddhist psychology divides consciousness into two parts. One part is mind consciousness and the other is store consciousness. Mind consciousness, which Western psychology calls “the conscious mind,” is our active awareness. Underlying it is the store consciousness, which contains the seeds of the fifty-one mental formations.

The first five are called the universal mental formations, because they are present in every other mental formation.

Contact, the first universal mental formation, happens when a sense organ and an object come together.

Next the mental formation attention has the function of drawing you to a particular object. When you hear a sound, your attention is drawn to that sound. There is appropriate and inappropriate attention, and with mindfulness, you can choose to focus your attention on something that is wholesome and beneficial.

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The third universal mental formation, feeling, may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. With mindfulness, our unpleasant feelings can be transformed into pleasant feelings, such as feelings of gratitude. When the feeling is pleasant, you can stop all thinking and just become aware of the feeling. If you can let go of thinking of this or that, you can be very happy just walking barefoot on the beach, feeling the sand between your toes.

The fourth universal mental formation is perception. When you see, taste, hear, or feel something, it appears in your mind as a sign that suggests a name. When we see something with petals and a stem, our mind gives it the name “flower.” If we don’t bring our mindfulness to our perception, we might not notice when it is wrong. Then we might mistake a piece of rope for a snake. We might believe a person is ignoring us when they are actually deaf, or we might see something and think it causes us pain when actually it could bring us joy. Wrong perception is always possible and can bring about fear, anger, and irritation.

The fifth universal mental formation is intention, also known as volition. You have contact with the object, your feeling, and perception about it, and then you have your relationship to that object. You decide whether to possess it or to push it away. The fifth mental formation is your decision whether to accept or reject an object.

Transforming Habit Energy

Our habit energy comes from these mental formations. Their seeds form neural pathways that lead to either suffering or happiness.

Any seed that manifests in your mind consciousness returns to your store consciousness stronger than ever. For example, when you come in contact with something that triggers the feeling of anger in you, your frequent traveling on that neural pathway turns anger into a habit. But with the intervention of mindfulness, you can erase the negative neural pathway and open up another pathway that leads to understanding and happiness.

Your depression, fear, jealousy, despair, and the conflicts within you are all negative mental formations that contribute to your habit of running away. Don't be afraid of them. If they want to come up, allow them to come up, recognize them, and embrace them.

We can't transform habit energy just with our intelligence and our desire to do so. We need some insight, and insight comes from deep looking. The only way to transform habit energy is to recognize it, embrace it with mindfulness, and practice inviting positive seeds to create positive habit energies.

Mindfulness helps us to recognize the habit energy of running. When we notice its presence, we smile to it and we are free from it. When we recognize the habit energy of running, it loses its power and can't push us to run anymore. Then we can easily release the tension in our body.

Some habit energies are very difficult to transform. If you crumple a sheet of paper, it's difficult to make it flat again. It has the habit energy of being crumpled. We are the same. But happiness can also be a habit energy. The

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practice of mindfulness allows us to create new, more functional habit energies.

Suppose that you grimace when you hear a certain phrase. It's not because you want to make a face; it just happens automatically. To replace this old habit energy with a new one, every time you hear that phrase you can breathe with awareness. At first, conscious breathing may require effort, because it doesn't yet come naturally. If you continue to practice, however, conscious breathing will become a new and positive habit energy.

Non-Thinking and New Neural Pathways

The practice of non-thinking is the secret to creating new habits. When thinking settles in, you lose the immediate experience of contact and move on to the other mental formations. You do not have much chance to be in the here and the now, to be in touch with what is in your body and around you. So just become aware of contact and feelings. In this way you can be in touch with the elements of nourishment and healing available in your body and in the environment, both physical and mental.

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Suppose that every time you are worried or anxious or irritated, you reach for a big piece of cake to cover up that feeling in you. This is a habit, because a neural pathway in your brain has been created for it. But if you allow yourself to stop before you reach for the cake, you can recognize both the pattern and the other sensations happening in your mind and body. You may notice that you're not really hungry, that instead you're sad or tired. The habit of breathing and noticing your sadness will ease that suffering more effectively than cake, and you will not have the suffering of being overfull and cranky.

With mindfulness and concentration intervening in the process of perception, a new neural pathway can be created that does not lead to suffering.

Instead it leads to understanding, compassion, happiness, and healing. Our brains have the power of neuroplasticity; they can change.

Suppose someone says something that angers you. Your old pathway wants to say something to punish him. But that makes you a victim of your habit energy. Instead, you can stop, accept the anger and irritation in you, and smile at it. With mindfulness, you look at the other person and become aware of the suffering in him. He may have spoken like that to try to get relief. He may think that speaking like that will help him suffer less, although in fact it will make him suffer more.

With just one or two seconds of looking and seeing the suffering in the other person, compassion is born. When compassion is born, you don't suffer anymore, and you may find something to say that will help him. With practice, we can always open new neural pathways like this. When they become a habit, we call it the habit of happiness.

When you develop the habit of being happy, then everything you do, like serving yourself a cup of tea, you do in such a way that it creates joy and happiness.

We practice mindfulness in order to get in touch with appropriate attention, stop our thinking, and enjoy the feeling that is possible in the here and now. We recognize the many conditions of happiness that are here, more than we could possibly imagine. This is possible. While we are doing so, healing takes place. We don't have to make any effort, because we have the habit of happiness.

Gaining Perspective on Habitual Patterns

JOAN SUTHERLAND advises: when caught in habitual patterns try not to fixate on your reactions. Instead, cultivate awareness of everything that is happening in the moment.

Sometimes it can seem as though being human is a problem that spiritual practice is meant to solve. But Buddhist meditative and related practices actually have a different focus: developing our human faculties to see more clearly the true nature of things, so that we can participate in and respond to how things are in a more generous and helpful way. Our individual awakenings become part of the world's awakening. This means leaning into life, and to do that we have to recognize what gets in the way. For each of us, this is likely to include certain habitual patterns of thinking and feeling in reaction to what we encounter.

Meditation and inquiry are methods, ways to have direct experiences of the deepest insights of our tradition—of the interpermeation of all things and the way things, including our habitual reactions, rise into existence for a while and then fall away again. Everything is provisional, and everything influences everything else. The implication for our inner lives is that they are seamless with the outer world, and constantly changing with it. We're not encapsulated consciousnesses bouncing around in a world of other consciousnesses and inert matter, but part of a vibrant, ever-changing field that encompasses everything we can experience, and more. Everything is rising and falling in this field, sometimes for

a nanosecond and sometimes for a geological age, but still appearing and disappearing in an infinitely complex web of other things doing the same. To the extent that we experience, in the ordinary moments of our lives, the seamlessness of our inner states and outer circumstances, we're being more realistic, more in tune with the way things actually are.



A reaction is just one thing among many appearing in the field at that particular moment, no more or less important than anything else.

From this perspective, how do we deal with the habitual patterns of heart and mind that inhibit us from having a more realistic understanding of life, and a more intimate engagement with it? Perhaps it becomes less important to tackle the thoughts and feelings directly, to do something about them, than it is to see them in their true proportion. A reaction, after all, is just one thing among many appearing in the field at that particular moment, no more or less important than anything else.

Simply put, how we react is not the most important element of any situation. When we fixate on our reactions, they pull us away from a primary experience of what's actually happening, into a small room where how we think and feel about the experience becomes the most important thing, the thing we're now in relationship with. If you and I are having a conversation and I become angry, I might find my emotions so compelling that suddenly I'm not in a conversation with you anymore, but with my anger. What's wrong with this person? This must not stand! Then, particularly if I'm involved in a spiritual practice, I'm likely to have reactions to my reactions. After all this meditation, I shouldn't be getting angry like this! Or, This is righteous anger! Now I'm in the third order of experience, moving further and further away from the actual conversation with you.

If we pull the camera back for a wider view, it's immediately apparent that a reaction like this is only one of many things rising in any given moment in

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the field. There's you and me and our surroundings, your mood, my capacity for misunderstanding, the temperature of the air, the sound of birds or traffic outside the window and the neighborhood beyond that, the most recent calamity in the news, and more other phenomena than we can possibly take into account. The moment is vast, with a lot of space between the things in it. The moment is generous. I don't have to zero in on my reaction, to act impulsively on it or repudiate it or improve it, all of which tend to reinforce the sense of its importance, but just accept it as one (small) part of what's happening. Usually that simple shift changes everything. It allows us to step out of the small room of second-order experience and back into a fuller, more realistic experience of the moment.

If reaction is a move into the partial, a privileging of how we think and feel above everything else, response emerges from the whole of oneself, grounded in the whole situation, with each element assuming its true size and shape. In responding we're not doing something about a situation, but participating in it.

It's interesting that our evaluation of a habitual reaction as negative doesn't arise until the third order of experience, fully two circles away from what's actually happening: it's our reaction to our reaction to what's happening. The ancients called this putting a head on top of your head. Not only are we distancing ourselves from the original situation, but even from our reaction to the situation. That kind of distancing can be a defense against a reaction that's causing unease out of proportion to its proportion, as it were, and that's when inquiry can be useful.

The basic inquiry is *What is this?* And it's a way back to what we're trying to avoid. We drop the self-centered focus of the third order of experience and

re-enter the second, encountering our reaction directly, without preconceptions and even with interest. We've picked up one thing from the field and are taking a closer look for a while. We inquire into whatever *What is this?* evokes—thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, memories. The unexpected and surprising are particularly valuable, because they come from somewhere other than what we can usually imagine. Habits can be deeply ingrained, but over time it's possible that even a quite troublesome reaction can assume its proper size and shape as one thing among many, rising and falling with everything else, no longer especially inhibiting or especially fascinating. And we move closer to a life lived in response instead of reaction, closer to participation in the way things actually are.

From Getting Mad to Going Shopping: What's Your Pattern?

SYLVIA BOORSTEIN on 5 styles of habitual reaction and how to free yourself from yours.

Emily, a long-time participant in my regular Wednesday morning Buddhist class, told us about a distressing experience she'd had the previous day. "I couldn't believe it," she said. "I came out of my apartment building and there was my car, just where I'd left it the night before, but lower. All the tires had been stolen. I got so upset that I walked the three blocks to Macy's and bought the silk pajamas I'd been coveting." People laughed sympathetically, acknowledging Emily's discomfort and appreciating the unexpected remedy she'd chosen. "After that" Emily continued, "I went home and called the police."

"I'm surprised you went shopping," another person said. "I would have found the building manager and given her a piece of my mind. I pay high rent to have good security. I probably would have been in a bad mood all day. It always takes time for my mind to settle down."

Someone else said, "I feel like I can't tolerate that kind of sudden stress. When something like that happens, I feel exhausted before I even start to deal with it. I would have gone into my apartment, called work, and told them I needed the rest of the day off."

Someone said, "Well, you people know what a worrier I am. I would have thought, 'Today the tires, tomorrow the car!' When I get over one worry,

my mind is quickly scanning for the next possible thing to worry about.” Finally someone said, “My mind doesn’t do any of those things. It blames. Mostly, it blames me. It is as if I have a built-in peer review committee always ready to criticize. I wonder who appointed them?”

By this time we were all laughing, realizing we had accidentally put together a list of the traditional five “afflictive energies.” These are five habitual ways people react to challenging circumstances that cloud clear judgment.

In traditional Buddhist texts, these energies are called the Five Hindrances, because they block access to sound decision-making. Here is the classic list:

- Desire (sometimes called “lust,” which somehow sounds worse)
- Aversion (in all its permutations, from annoyance to rage)
- Sloth and Torpor (which sounds sinful and intentional, in contrast to fatigue, my preferred term)
- Restlessness (which manifests as fretting or worrying)
- Doubt (which is linked with insecurity, self-blame, and lack of confidence)

When I tell the story about this class, it usually elicits an enthusiastic response: “Yes, that’s me! Matter of fact, I have two of those five response patterns. Can a person have more than one?”

“In fact,” I respond, “we each have all those habitual patterns of response in varying combinations in response to different circumstances.”

On one notable occasion, though, a man who had recently joined the class said, “I don’t understand any of this. I would have phoned my work to tell them I’d be late. Then I would have phoned the police, my insurance company, and an auto repair to get the car towed and serviced. Then I would have taken the bus to work. What’s the matter with these people?”

Everyone laughed, and I probably did too. But I was very careful in my re-

sponse, because no one had been wrong in identifying how they responded to stress and nothing was “the matter” with anyone.

I replied, “I think most of us here would have done that too. What people are describing is what they felt like doing, what thoughts flashed through their minds before they did the obvious sensible thing.” The silk pajama story served as a prompt for people to notice what their minds habitually bring up in response to stress and difficulty.

My most prominent default position, the one that’s been the most painful all my life, is restlessness, an agitation of mind that manifests as obsessive worrying. Long before I knew about restlessness as a recognizable, commonly shared form of confusion, I knew I had it. I worried about things that were sometimes genuine concerns (which required attention, but not obsessive fretting) and I worried about imagined concerns, things that had not yet happened but could. When I describe to people the kinds of worst-case scenarios my mind can construct out of minimal data, many heads nod in rueful recognition of this familiar experience.

Imagine this scene:

I was traveling with my husband in a foreign country, before there were cellphones, and we planned to meet at a particular restaurant for lunch. I arrived on time, at noon. He wasn’t there yet.

I waited a minute, maybe two, and then I thought, “What if something bad happened to him? What if he got lost? He doesn’t speak the language. What if he took ill? He is old. What if he is missing and no one can find him? I suppose I could call the American embassy. If something terrible happened I’d need to call our family ...”

“Only a few minutes passed before he strolled into view, happy to tell me about his morning’s adventures.” I felt dismayed to find myself caught, yet again, in a gratuitous mind-storm.

Each experience like this solidified my view of myself. “I am a world class worrier,” I would think, “and I guess I’ll need to deal with this forever.” Calling myself “world class” was an attempt to make light of my uncomfortable habit. I wouldn’t do that now. Every afflictive mind tendency that becomes a habit is painful.

Here’s a second scene from the pre-cellphone era:

I was waiting with other parents for a ski bus to return from a day in the mountains. Aboard were sixty eleven-year-olds, one of whom was mine. The bus was fifteen minutes late. As we stood together in the winter evening darkness, it began to rain.

Ten more minutes passed. I thought, “How come these other parents, like the one who just said, ‘Let’s get something to eat while we wait?’, are not thinking that if it’s raining here, it’s snowing in the mountains, and quite likely there has been an accident?”

I was aware of the frightening thoughts I was having, and the pain of having those thoughts. I was also aware that the other parents did not take every situation of ambiguity to a dreadful conclusion. I felt envious.

Over the years I have made the shift from thinking, “I am stuck with this mind and these tendencies forever” to trusting, “I can be different! I’m not sure these thoughts will stop, but I can stop being held hostage by them.”

I began by deliberately not identifying myself with my habitual pattern. To voice my confidence in the possibility of change I began to say, “I’m thinking of myself as a recovering fretter.” As a diligent practice, I became particularly vigilant about the arising of frightening thoughts. I describe this practice as “mindfulness of alarming thoughts.” Being genuinely mindful requires that I acknowledge the thoughts with a balanced mind. Whenever I am able to intercept the thoughts in the tiny space in my awareness be-

fore fear enzymes flood through my body, I can recognize that they are only thoughts and I don't have to believe them. Then the thoughts just become thoughts. They don't stir up a commotion. This is tremendous progress.

I had hoped in my early years of practice that my tendency toward alarm would disappear. That didn't happen. Perhaps these habitual tendencies are coded in our genes. Perhaps they are patterns we learn in our families, or from our culture. Because I am a psychologist, I selected elements of my childhood experience to present a plausible story for why my mind makes up worries. But validating my habit with a story didn't make it better. What helped was years of recognizing and not responding to afflictive tendencies. Now, worry thoughts happen less, and when they do, they have much less power. That, for me, is liberating enough.

In the end, it isn't about never having afflictive habits arise. They are part of being human and having complex lives. Treating afflictive habits like mildly annoying cousins who visit from time to time reduces their power. I'm sure that is true across the spectrum of afflictive energies, not just my habit of restless worry. I'm also sure that a relaxed mind—one that is steady enough to absorb the initial startle of an afflictive energy, alert enough to identify it clearly, and determined enough not to give in to it—is the key to working with any disturbing habit. We can follow the Buddha's example.

Imagine the Buddha sitting under the bodhi tree on the night of his enlightenment. He is absolutely resolute and determined to free his mind of all confusion. According to legend, Mara, the personification of ego, arrives to thwart his plan. Accompanying Mara are all the forces that confuse the mind. The Buddha, recognizing that his mind is about to be challenged, says, "I see your armies, Mara, and I am not afraid."

Visualize, if you can, this wonderful scene as it unfolds. The forces of Mara unleash spears and arrows which turn into flowers as they encounter the field of poised benevolence that surrounds the Buddha. Mara then creates

a display of erotic temptations which dissolve in the field of radiant ease that surrounds the Buddha. Mara disappears and the Buddha declares his enlightenment.

The Buddha gains wisdom because he is peaceful. Equanimity is the prerequisite for liberation. The Buddha's ability to remain poised, to counter potential distress with blessings of goodwill, demonstrates the end of suffering. His behavior represents his central teaching, "Peace is possible." The Buddha is said to have placed his hand on the ground as Mara appeared, in a gesture that signified, "I have a right to be here."

As human beings, we also have the right to recognize challenge, choose to override our instinctive impulses, and liberate ourselves, moment to moment, from falling into the confusion that is suffering. We too can recognize hindrance habits as unwholesome and override their lure. We can modulate aversive feelings so that our views are expressed as useful responses. We can resist the impulse to disengage when participation is appropriate. We can recognize irrelevant alarming thoughts as the creations of fantasy that they are and put them aside. We can recognize self-doubt (although it is the subtlest of energies and masquerades as truth) and ignore it.

There are a variety of special trainings or practices for developing each of these skills. But the universal remedy, which is effective in responding to confusion of any sort, is the training of the mind that the Buddha demonstrated under the bodhi tree.

This training involves the practices of wise effort, wise concentration, and wise mindfulness. Wise effort is the ongoing determination to choose responses that are wholesome. Wise concentration is building, through lifestyle choices and meditation practice, enough stability in the mind to maintain equanimity through the ever-changing challenges of life. Wise mindfulness is the continual, non-coercive awareness of changing experiences, which is, in itself, the practice of peace.

In classes where I ask that people disclose, by a show of hands, which hindrance energy is their most prominent one, there are always five groups that identify themselves. Sometimes the people in each group meet together to share their experiences of what works best as responses to these uncomfortable tendencies. Participants report that they find the groups helpful. More than specific remedies, the discovery that other people are willing to share stories of their experiences, especially when a lack of consciousness has created serious difficulties in their lives, is reassuring, and normalizing, and inspiring.

It is helpful to identify hindrance energies not as character flaws but as default positions of the mind under stress. This allows the mind to relax. “I have a mind that, under stress, thinks first of sensual soothing” is kinder than “I am a lustful person.” “When I am startled, angry thoughts arise in my mind” is kinder than “I am an angry person.” “At the slightest hint of ambiguity in a situation, dire possibilities fill my mind,” is kinder, and less embarrassing, than admitting “I am a chronic fretter.”

What helps is remembering, “This confusion is a temporary attack which will pass soon. It will pass faster if I’m kind to myself (because, after all, I am in pain) and if I don’t solidify this experience into a fixed view.” Reframing unpleasant energies (and all the hindrances are unpleasant) as transient, opportunistic phenomena doesn’t preclude them from arising or immediately neutralize them. But it does make them workable.

The Natural Liberation of Habits

When you recognize the true nature of mind, says **TSOKYNI RINPOCHE**, all habitual patterns are naturally liberated in the space of wisdom. That includes the ultimate habit known as *samsara*.

The ultimate habitual pattern is *samsara* itself—the wheel of habitual cyclic existence that causes all your suffering. The karma that drives the wheel—the three poisons of attachment, aggression, and ignorance—are actually deep-seated habits of mind.

When you finally get tired of unconsciously participating in the daily show of habitual *samsaric* programming, what can you do to change it? Buddhism teaches three ways to cut your ties to *samsara*, once you have decided this is something you really need and want to do.

One approach is to shut off the world of phenomena and your attachment to it. This is the path of renunciation. It is illustrated by the paintings of skeletons on the walls of temples in Burma or Thailand. They are reminders to Theravada monks and nuns to stay free of desire and attachment arising in their mind. The problem is that this method of cutting individual episodes of attachment one after another could be endless.

Another possibility is to transform how you perceive *samsara* altogether. Instead of renouncing it, you train to develop strong compassion and insight into the empty nature of *samsara*. By changing your habitually deluded way of perceiving phenomena, you will change how your mind is

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affected by and responds to negative emotions and confusion. This is the basic approach of Mahayana Buddhism. It is a subtle practice that requires a good deal of patient self-examination and clear awareness of your motivation.

The third method is to allow samsara to manifest and immediately recognize that it is the expression or display of primordial wisdom. This is the approach in the Dzogchen and Mahamudra meditation traditions of Vajrayana Buddhism.

In Dzogchen practice, the most important thing is the recognition of inner space, or emptiness. If you can practice this, then whatever phenomena of samsara arise are dissolved into wisdom mind.

For this to happen, your recognition of mind nature has to be unwavering. If you can achieve this, then anything that arises in your mindstream—any emotions, thoughts, likes, dislikes, perceptions of good and bad, and so on—is naturally released without effort.

The problem is that when phenomena arise from confusion and ignorance, they dominate your perception and the result is suffering. However, habitual negative emotions like fear can be naturally liberated by allowing them to dissolve into the inner space of mind. You can do this because the essence of these habitual emotions is actually wisdom.

The key point is to let go of the grasping within the emotion and see its true nature. When habitual emotions arise, you neither suppress nor get

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caught up in them. You do not get carried away by clinging to self and other. If you just allow the emotion to dissolve, the energy trapped within it is released and blossoms as wisdom.

With continued practice in the true nature of mind, you can develop strong self-knowing awareness so that it naturally alchemizes negative emotions into their essence. When phenomena arise, they are self-liberated because your ego identity and conceptual mind have finally retired. Then the true nature of mind, which is wisdom, lets them resolve into inner space naturally.

In Dzogchen, this is called the “great ease,” in which even the concept of death is a joke, just another phenomenon that is ultimately empty. You have gone through a secret door of sorts: everything that was hidden from you by conceptual mind and ego fixation is revealed. You realize it has been completely accessible and present all the time as your basic nature.

True mind nature does not act, do anything, modify, or function as some subtle antidote to phenomena. It is simply open space and luminosity in union. If you throw colored chalk powder into the air, it has nothing to hold onto or cling to. It naturally falls to the ground. It is not like space does anything. It is simply how space is. The true nature of mind is like that.

There are progressive unfoldings in Dzogchen, as you deepen your experience of wisdom mind and learn to liberate habits without effort. The stage of self-liberation is compared to throwing chalk into space. Liberation

upon arising is like making a drawing on water, and liberation beyond benefit and harm is like a thief entering an empty house.

When you reach this last level, everything that arises is seen as friendly and you are completely carefree. You do not need to accept, reject, or change anything. All appearances are realized as pure wisdom phenomena, arising spontaneously as compassionate energy from the unity of absolute and relative truth.

This natural liberation of thoughts and emotions is based on a non-conceptual recognition of inner space. You know that the essence of any afflictive emotion is pure wisdom and that thoughts in themselves are empty. This gives you a deep sense of spacious ease, a carefree feeling. You have confidence that all phenomena can be naturally released by themselves without the necessity of an antidote or remedy. You experience the infinite purity that pervades everything. You do not need to eliminate or abandon anything, since it is already pure in essence.

How We Get Hooked and How We Get Unhooked

PEMA CHÖDRÖN on *shenpa*, or the urge, the hook, that triggers our habitual tendency to close down. We get hooked in that moment of tightening when we reach for relief. To get unhooked, we begin by recognizing that moment of unease and learn to relax in that moment.

You're trying to make a point with a coworker or your partner. At one moment, her face is open and she's listening, and at the next, her eyes cloud over or her jaw tenses. What is it that you're seeing?

Someone criticizes you. They criticize your work or your appearance or your child. At moments like that, what is it you feel? It has a familiar taste in your mouth, it has a familiar smell. Once you begin to notice it, you feel like this experience has been happening forever.

The Tibetan word for this is *shenpa*. It is usually translated "attachment," but a more descriptive translation might be "hooked." When *shenpa* hooks us, we're likely to get stuck. We could call *shenpa* "that sticky feeling." It's an everyday experience. Even a spot on your new sweater can take you there. At the subtlest level, we feel a tightening, a tensing, a sense of closing down. Then we feel a sense of withdrawing, not wanting to be where we are. That's the hooked quality. That tight feeling has the power to hook us into self-denigration, blame, anger, jealousy and other emotions which lead to words and actions that end up poisoning us.

Remember the fairy tale in which toads hop out of the princess's mouth

whenever she starts to say mean words? That's how being hooked can feel. Yet we don't stop—we can't stop—because we're in the habit of associating whatever we're doing with relief from our own discomfort. This is the shenpa syndrome. The word “attachment” doesn't quite translate what's happening. It's a quality of experience that's not easy to describe but which everyone knows well. Shenpa is usually involuntary and it gets right to the root of why we suffer.

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Someone looks at us in a certain way, or we hear a certain song, we smell a certain smell, we walk into a certain room and boom. The feeling has nothing to do with the present, and nevertheless, there it is. When we were practicing recognizing shenpa at Gampo Abbey, we discovered that some of us could feel it even when a particular person simply sat down next to us at the dining table.

Shenpa thrives on the underlying insecurity of living in a world that is always changing. We experience this insecurity as a background of slight unease or restlessness. We all want some kind of relief from that unease, so we turn to what we enjoy—food, alcohol, drugs, sex, work or shopping. In moderation what we enjoy might be very delightful. We can appreciate its taste and its presence in our life. But when we empower it with the idea that it will bring us comfort, that it will remove our unease, we get hooked.

So we could also call shenpa “the urge”—the urge to smoke that cigarette, to overeat, to have another drink, to indulge our addiction, whatever it is. Sometimes shenpa is so strong that we're willing to die getting this short-term symptomatic relief. The momentum behind the urge is so strong that we never pull out of the habitual pattern of turning to poison for comfort. It doesn't necessarily have to involve a substance; it can be saying mean things, or approaching everything with a critical mind. That's a major hook. Something triggers an old pattern we'd rather not feel, and we tighten up

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and hook into criticizing or complaining. It gives us a puffed-up satisfaction and a feeling of control that provides short-term relief from uneasiness.

Those of us with strong addictions know that working with habitual patterns begins with the willingness to fully acknowledge our urge, and then the willingness not to act on it. This business of not acting out is called refraining. Traditionally it’s called renunciation. What we renounce or refrain from isn’t food, sex, work or relationships per se. We renounce and refrain from the shenpa. When we talk about refraining from the shenpa, we’re not talking about trying to cast it out; we’re talking about trying to see the shenpa clearly and experiencing it. If we can see shenpa just as we’re starting to close down, when we feel the tightening, there’s the possibility of catching the urge to do the habitual thing, and not doing it.

Without meditation practice, this is almost impossible to do. Generally speaking, we don’t catch the tightening until we’ve indulged the urge to scratch our itch in some habitual way. And unless we equate refraining with loving-kindness and friendliness towards ourselves, refraining feels like putting on a straitjacket. We struggle against it. The Tibetan word for renunciation is shenlok, which means turning shenpa upside-down, shaking it up. When we feel the tightening, somehow we have to know how to open up the space without getting hooked into our habitual pattern.

In practicing with shenpa, first we try to recognize it. The best place to do this is on the meditation cushion. Sitting practice teaches us how to open to and relax with whatever arises, without picking and choosing. It teaches us to experience the uneasiness and the urge fully, and to interrupt the momentum that usually follows. We do this by not following after

the thoughts and learning to come back to the present moment. We learn to stay with the uneasiness, the tightening, the itch of shenpa. We train in sitting still with our desire to scratch. This is how we learn to stop the chain reaction of habitual patterns that otherwise will rule our lives. This is how we weaken the patterns that keep us hooked into discomfort that we mistake as comfort. We label the spinoff “thinking” and return to the present moment. Yet even in meditation, we experience shenpa.

Let’s say, for example, that in meditation you felt settled and open. Thoughts came and went, but they didn’t hook you. They were like clouds in the sky that dissolved when you acknowledged them. You were able to return to the moment without a sense of struggle. Afterwards, you’re hooked on that very pleasant experience: “I did it right, I got it right. That’s how it should always be, that’s the model.” Getting caught like that builds arrogance, and conversely it builds poverty, because your next session is nothing like that. In fact, your “bad” session is even worse now because you’re hooked on the “good” one. You sat there and you were discursive: you were obsessing about something at home, at work. You worried and you fretted; you got caught up in fear or anger. At the end of the session, you feel discouraged—it was “bad,” and there’s only you to blame.

Is there something inherently wrong or right with either meditation experience? Only the shenpa. The shenpa we feel toward “good” meditation hooks us into how it’s “supposed” to be, and that sets us up for shenpa towards how it’s not “supposed” to be. Yet the meditation is just what it is. We get caught in our idea of it: that’s the shenpa. That stickiness is the root shenpa. We call it ego-clinging or self-absorption. When we’re hooked on the idea of good experience, self-absorption gets stronger; when we’re hooked on the idea of bad experience, self-absorption gets stronger. This is why we, as practitioners, are taught not to judge ourselves, not to get caught in good or bad.

What we really need to do is address things just as they are. Learning to recognize shenpa teaches us the meaning of not being attached to this world.

“Once we see how we get hooked and how we get swept along by the momentum, there’s no way to be arrogant. The trick is to keep seeing.”

Not being attached has nothing to do with this world. It has to do with shenpa—being hooked by what we associate with comfort. All we’re trying to do is not to feel our uneasiness. But when we do this we never get to the root of practice. The root is experiencing the itch as well as the urge to scratch, and then not acting it out.

If we’re willing to practice this way over time, *prajna* begins to kick in. Prajna is clear seeing. It’s our innate intelligence, our wisdom. With prajna, we begin to see the whole chain reaction clearly. As we practice, this wisdom becomes a stronger force than shenpa. That in itself has the power to stop the chain reaction.

Prajna isn’t ego-involved. It’s wisdom found in basic goodness, openness, equanimity—which cuts through self-absorption. With prajna we can see what will open up space. Habituation, which is ego-based, is just the opposite—a compulsion to fill up space in our own particular style. Some of us close space by hammering our point through; others do it by trying to smooth the waters.

We’re taught that whatever arises is fresh, the essence of realization. That’s the basic view. But how do we see whatever arises as the essence of realization when the fact of the matter is, we have work to do? The key is to look into shenpa. The work we have to do is about coming to know that we’re tensing or hooked or “all worked up.” That’s the essence of realization. The earlier we catch it, the easier shenpa is to work with, but even catching it when we’re already all worked up is good. Sometimes we have to go through the whole cycle even though we see what we’re doing. The urge is so strong, the hook so sharp, the habitual pattern so sticky, that there are

times when we can't do anything about it.

There is something we can do after the fact, however. We can go sit on the meditation cushion and re-run the story. Maybe we start with remembering the all-worked-up feeling and get in touch with that. We look clearly at the shenpa in retrospect; this is very helpful. It's also helpful to see shenpa arising in little ways, where the hook is not so sharp.

Buddhists are talking about shenpa when they say, "Don't get caught in the content: observe the underlying quality—the clinging, the desire, the attachment." Sitting meditation teaches us how to see that tangent before we go off on it. It basically comes down to the instruction, "label it thinking." To train in this on the cushion, where it's relatively easy and pleasant to do, is how we can prepare ourselves to stay when we get all worked up.

Then we can train in seeing shenpa wherever we are. Say something to another person and maybe you'll feel that tensing. Rather than get caught in a story line about how right you are or how wrong you are, take it as an opportunity to be present with the hooked quality. Use it as an opportunity to stay with the tightness without acting upon it. Let that training be your base.

You can also practice recognizing shenpa out in nature. Practice sitting still and catching the moment when you close down. Or practice in a crowd, watching one person at a time. When you're silent, what hooks you is mental dialogue. You talk to yourself about badness or goodness: me-bad or they-bad, this-right or that-wrong. Just to see this is a practice. You'll be intrigued by how you'll involuntarily shut down and get hooked, one way or another. Just keep labeling those thoughts and come back to the immediacy of the feeling. That's how not to follow the chain reaction.

Once we're aware of shenpa, we begin to notice it in other people. We see them shutting down. We see that they've been hooked and that nothing is going to get through to them now. At that moment we have prajna. That ba-

sic intelligence comes through when we're not caught up in escaping from our own unease. With prajna we can see what's happening with others; we can see when they've been hooked. Then we can give the situation some space. One way to do that is by opening up the space on the spot, through meditation. Be quiet and place your mind on your breath. Hold your mind in place with great openness and curiosity toward the other person. Asking a question is another way of creating space around that sticky feeling. So is postponing your discussion to another time.

At the abbey, we're very fortunate that everybody is excited about working with shenpa. So many words I've tried using become ammunition that people use against themselves. But we feel some kind of gladness about working with shenpa, perhaps because the word is unfamiliar. We can acknowledge what's happening with clear seeing, without aiming it at ourselves. Since no one particularly likes to have his shenpa pointed out, people at the Abbey make deals like, "When you see me getting hooked, just pull your earlobe, and if I see you getting hooked, I'll do the same. Or if you see it in yourself, and I'm not picking up on it, at least give some little sign that maybe this isn't the time to continue this discussion." This is how we help each other cultivate prajna, clear seeing.

We could think of this whole process in terms of four R's: recognizing the shenpa, refraining from scratching, relaxing into the underlying urge to scratch and then resolving to continue to interrupt our habitual patterns like this for the rest of our lives. What do you do when you don't do the habitual thing? You're left with your urge. That's how you become more in touch with the craving and the wanting to move away. You learn to relax with it. Then you resolve to keep practicing this way.

Working with shenpa softens us up. Once we see how we get hooked and how we get swept along by the momentum, there's no way to be arrogant. The trick is to keep seeing. Don't let the softening and humility turn into self-denigration. That's just another hook. Because we've been strengthening the whole habituated situation for a long, long time, we can't expect

to undo it overnight. It's not a one-shot deal. It takes loving-kindness to recognize; it takes practice to refrain; it takes willingness to relax; it takes determination to keep training this way. It helps to remember that we may experience two billion kinds of itches and seven quadrillion types of scratching, but there is really only one root shenpa—ego-clinging. We experience it as tightening and self-absorption. It has degrees of intensity. The branch shenpas are all our different styles of scratching that itch.

I recently saw a cartoon of three fish swimming around a hook. One fish is saying to the other, "The secret is non-attachment." That's a shenpa cartoon: the secret is—don't bite that hook. If we can catch ourselves at that place where the urge to bite is strong, we can at least get a bigger perspective on what's happening. As we practice this way, we gain confidence in our own wisdom. It begins to guide us toward the fundamental aspect of our being—spaciousness, warmth, and spontaneity.