Overcoming Sense Desire

Sense desire is termed *kamacchanda* in Pali and is an ongoing preoccupation with pleasant feeling. Every moment of experience is “toned” with feeling, either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. There is nothing inherently dysfunctional regarding pleasant feeling when the experience is “depersonalized”, that is, the mind’s process isn’t affected by craving and clinging into something “*I”* want.

Any hindrance disrupts the ability of the mind to smoothly and accurately attend to the changing circumstances of life. A Buddhist simile for this is the nature of a pond that is dyed with attractive colors; the dye prevents a clear awareness of what is immersed in the water. Another simile compares the drain on internal resources that desire imposes is indebtedness.

How do these similes relate to sense desire in terms of how the brain functions? When pleasant feeling occurs, the brain and body generate neurochemicals that induce pleasurable experience. When the experience is just that without some sort of story that is accompanying the feeling, the neurochemical load metabolizes out of the system. However, when a “selfing story” emerges that becomes preoccupied with the pleasure, the system keeps pumping more pleasantness. This mental enchantment clouds one’s perceptions regarding in two important ways: First, the preoccupation overrides alertness to new data input—if I’m so caught up in eating an ice cream cone that I cross the street without checking, I might be hit by a car! Second, the mind misperceives the nature of happiness as being created by the combination of ingredients in the ice cream, mostly the sugar. In Buddhist terms, this process of misperception is called *ayoniso manasikara, unwise attention*.

In the brain, the part of the brain called the nucleus accumbens, that orients one’s attention and behaviors towards positive reinforcement is activated by sense desire. Contemporary neuroscientific research on addiction suggests that the nucleus accumbens and other neural systems associated with learning become hypersensitized to being saturated with pleasure and with environmental cues associated with the pleasure. For example, someone with alcoholism is vulnerable to the visual, auditory and even the odor cues of a bar, and that compels him or her to want to drink. This persistent dependency is what the This ties in with the misperception that happiness is generated by external circumstances rather than internal ones.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, sense desire as a hindrance is mentioned:

“…Here, there being sensual desire in him, a bhikkhu understands: ‘There is sensual desire in me’; or there being no sensual desire in him, he understands: ‘There is no sensual desire in me’; and he also understands how there comes to be the arising of unarisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the abandonment of arisen sensual desire and how there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned sensual desire.”

The descriptive formula investigates mindfully to discover the *presence* or *absence* of sense desire, how the *abandonment* of sense desire occurs, and how to *minimize the likelihood that sense desire will intrude again*.

The routine practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation encourages present moment awareness, an essential skill for overcoming any hindrance. When the mind is distracted from breath awareness, present moment awareness and investigation discerns whether sense desire is evident (or other mental phenomena), and if that is the case, the mind is trained to disregard the pleasant urgency of the distraction and redirect attention back to the breath sensations. That represents the abandonment of the arisen sense desire. This process is termed *yoniso manasikara, wise attention*. With enough practice, particularly through the cultivation of samadhi/passadhi (stability of focus/inner tranquility), the recurrence of sensual desire diminishes.

Of course, the “non-arising of abandoned sensual desire” is easier to understand conceptually than to actually realize. In the Satipatthana Sutta’s First Foundation of Mindfulness there are recommendations to contemplate the loathsomeness of the body and to contemplate the rotting away of the body to counter sensual desire. This doesn’t seem to resonate with most contemporary lay mindfulness practitioners, so we must come up with some other strategies for overcoming sense desire. We live in a culture that has deeply conditioned the mind to want pleasant stimulation through food, entertainment, drugs, etc., so it’s important to be patient and persistent in noting and letting go of the impulsive reactivity we are accustomed to. It can be useful to consciously renounce some experience that you are conditioned to want, and that might involve deliberately no watching a favorite tv show in order to observe the urgent internal narrative that seems to protest and rationalize giving in to the urge.