

Great-Wealth the Millionaire's Son

A very wealthy couple in the time of the Buddha lived in a household worth 800 million coins and had a son, who was later called Great-Wealth. The couple thought to themselves, "We have a vast store of wealth in our house, and there is no need for our son to do anything else than enjoy himself according to his own good pleasure." So they had teachers instruct their son in singing and playing of musical instruments, and that was all the instruction he received; he had no other education.

Likewise, in the same city, in another household worth 800 million coins, a couple had a daughter. The same thought occurred to her mother and father also, and they hired teachers to instruct her only in singing and dancing.

When the son and daughter of the two households became adults, they were married with the customary ceremonies. After some time, their parents died, so Great-Wealth and his wife lived together in a household worth 1600 million coins.

Great-Wealth always went three times every day to assist the king. One day, a group of roguish men who lived in the city thought to themselves, "If this millionaire's son would only get drunk, it would be a fine thing for us. Let's show him how to get drunk." So, they got some strong alcoholic drink and hid it along with some food in their clothing. Then they seated themselves in a convenient place, watching the path by which Great-Wealth would approach the royal palace. When they saw him approaching, they began to drink the alcohol. They said,

"Live for a hundred years, master millionaire's son! With your help may we be enabled to eat and drink to our heart's content!"

Hearing their words, Great-Wealth asked his assistant, "What are these men drinking?"

The assistant told him it was a certain drink, and Great-Wealth asked, "Does it taste good?"

The assistant said, "Master, in this world of the living there is no kind of drink to be had comparable to this."

"In that case," said Great-Wealth, "I must have some, too."

So he told his assistant to bring him a little bit of what the men were drinking. He drank it, and then told his assistant to bring some more. This he drank, and then asked for more.

After some time, the rogues discovered that Great-Wealth had taken up the habit of drinking alcohol. They flocked around him, and as time went on, the crowd that surrounded Great-Wealth increased. Great-Wealth would spend a hundred or two hundred coins at a time on strong alcoholic drinks. Great-Wealth developed a habit, wherever he would be, of piling up a heap of coins and calling out as he drank,

“Take this coin and fetch me flowers!” or “Take this coin and fetch me perfumes” or “This man is clever at dicing, and this man at dancing, and this man at singing, and this man at playing musical instruments! Give this man a thousand coins, and this man two thousand!”

This is how Great-Wealth spent his money. After a while, he squandered all the 800 million coins that formerly belonged to him.

The roguish men pointed out to him, “Master, your wealth is all spent.”

Great-Wealth responded, “Has my wife no money?”

They responded, “Yes, she has.”

He said, “Well then, fetch me that, too.”

And he spent his wife’s money in precisely the same way. As time went on, he sold his fields and his parks, his gardens and his carriages. He even sold the dishes he used at mealtimes, his bedding, his cloaks and couches. All that belonged to him, he sold and spent on drink and entertainment. In old age, he sold his house the property of his family. The family that bought his house took possession of it and immediately made him leave.

Taking his wife with him, he took up residence near the house-wall of other houses. With a broken bowl in his hand, he went out begging for food. Finally, he began to eat the leavings of other people’s food.

One day Great-Wealth stood at the door of a lodge, receiving leavings of food presented to him by young novice monks. The Buddha saw him and smiled. Venerable Ananda asked him why he smiled. The Buddha said,

“Ananda, just look here at Great-Wealth, the millionaire’s son! In this very city he has squandered 1600 million coins. Now, accompanied by his wife, he is begging for food. If in the prime of life this man had not squandered his wealth but had applied himself to business, he would have become the wealthiest man in the city; and if he had left the worldly life and become a monk, he would have become an arahant and his wife would have attained the third level of enlightenment. If in the middle of his life he had not squandered his wealth but had applied himself to business, he would have become the second wealthiest man in the city; and if he had left the worldly life and become a monk, he would have attained the third level of enlightenment and his wife would have attained the second level. If in the latter years of his life he had not squandered his wealth but had applied himself to business, he would have become the third wealthiest man in the city; and if he had left the worldly life and become a monk, he would have attained the second level of enlightenment and his wife would have attained stream-entry, the first level of enlightenment. But now he has fallen away from the wealth of a layman and he has likewise fallen away from the wealth of an ascetic. He has become like a heron in a dried-up pond.”

He then pronounced the following stanzas:

Having led neither the holy life
Nor riches won while young,
They linger like aged cranes
Around a fished-out pond.

Having led neither the holy life
Nor riches won while young,
They (cranes) lie around like worn-out bows
Sighing about the past.

- Dhammapada 155, 156

Dharma Discussion – Addictions:

The story illustrates that extreme addiction can happen to someone with the highest potential, someone who can become enlightened.

And it illustrates the tragedy of becoming heedless—and the resulting waste of time and money—due to conditions in our environment.

Although substance addiction is a typical cause of heedlessness, as it was for Great-Wealth, other kinds of addictions or distractions can waste our time, create hardships, compromise health and lead us away from a meaningful life. So, this story and discussion are instructive for those of us struggling with any kind of addiction, obsession, or unhealthy habit that hinders us from living up to our potential. For example, addiction to social media, videogames, porn, other screen activities, sex, shopping, or gambling; obsession with physical appearance or exercise; or habits of eating too much sugary or other unhealthy foods. In this discussion, the word “addiction” will be used to encompass all of these.

Great-Wealth’s addiction arose from his upbringing in which he had no goal, direction or purpose in life. In modern times, too, this can make a person vulnerable to addiction. But there are numerous other circumstances that can make us vulnerable to addiction, including experiencing abuse or neglect, mental health issues such as depression or anxiety, painful relationship breakup, job loss, financial problems, loneliness, or death of a loved one, or having a parent, friend, or romantic partner with a substance abuse problem or some type of addiction.

Even if you don’t have an addiction now, or if you only have a tendency toward a harmful habit, just knowing that you are in circumstances that make you vulnerable to an addiction is a good reason to find and use techniques to strengthen yourself.

If you already are experiencing symptoms of addiction, and even if the addiction has become extreme, the Buddha's teaching in this story gives you encouragement that once the addiction is overcome, you can be on track to reach your potential, including attaining enlightenment.

In today's world, it's much easier to become addicted, not only because of the many available temptations but also because of the frequent and intense stress we experience.

We need relief from all the pressures, demands and problems that bombard us, and we want something to look forward to.

So, we're often seeking activities that stimulate dopamine release in our brain's reward system. Enjoying tasty food, music, a new experience, dancing, a sport, exercise, comedy, sex, a game, playing with a pet and creating art all stimulate dopamine release, giving us a feeling of pleasure and causing us to repeat these activities. Even checking or scrolling on our smartphone causes small releases of dopamine.

But some of us seek immediate and reliable relief in bigger doses. Dopamine is stimulated suddenly in large amounts when we use intoxicating substances or engage in other addictive behavior, or even while planning or preparing to do so, motivating us to continue our addiction and eclipsing any desire to do healthier activities that only give us small amounts of dopamine. We crave that dopamine rush or "high" again and again, so the addiction is hard to stop. Simply forcing ourselves to abstain from it, beat it or go "cold turkey" usually doesn't work.

Instead, we need to sublimate our addictive desire—manage our brain's reward system—regulate our dopamine. We can do this by replacing the unhealthy habit with a healthy alternative "high."

Meditation is a healthy alternative in which we can experience dopamine release and bliss—a very tranquil but fully aware state that is deeply satisfying. With practice, one can attain deeper, intense levels of bliss and experience higher perspectives and insights of wisdom.

You can stimulate reward centers in your brain by making meditation enjoyable.

Meditation doesn't mean you force yourself to sit still on the floor, concentrate on something boring and endure it for a set period of time.

Maybe you've had an experience with a meditation teacher who focused on strict discipline and meditation techniques taught in ancient times to monks. However, this might not appeal to those of us who struggle with addiction or are simply trying to find something calming and enjoyable amidst the unpleasantness and stress in our lives.

It's best to explore and try different styles of meditation to find one that's most effective for you.

Some forms of meditation are particularly enjoyable, such as Jhana meditation, with eight levels of bliss. The first four, called the "form jhanas" are described as follows:

- (1) free from thoughts of desire or anything unwholesome, the meditator focuses on and investigates a meditation object, in a state of joy and pleasure;

- (2) the meditator stills the thoughts of investigation and concentrates in a state of joy and pleasure with stillness and unification of mind;
- (3) the joy fades away but the pleasure remains, and the meditator maintains a state of equanimity, mindful with knowing awareness;
- (4) abandoning the desire for pleasure and aversion to pain, the meditator enters a neither-pleasurable-nor-painful state, with completely pure equanimity and mindfulness.

The next four are the “formless jhanas”: infinite space, infinite consciousness, infinite nothingness, and neither-perception nor nonperception.

Another particularly enjoyable type of meditation is Vajrayana deity meditation, which involves visualization and developing increasing levels of bliss.

However, in order to successfully practice these types of meditation, you first need to fully understand their purposes and context and practice basic meditation skills.

For optimal results in any meditation practice, create an inviting meditation space at home and do a relaxing routine before you start meditating. This makes the experience enjoyable and special, something to look forward to in a comforting environment.

First, set up a clean, uncluttered place for meditation with a simple shrine.

It can be very small, just enough room for you to sit comfortably, but that part of the room shouldn't be used for anything else—not used for work, watching TV, sleeping, etc.

Make a comfortable place to sit cross-legged on the floor with as many firm cushions, folded blankets and/or rolled up towels as you need to sit with your back perpendicular to the floor, perhaps with your back against a wall. In the alternative, use a meditation bench or sit on a chair with firm back support so your back is straight.

Place a picture or statue of Buddha and/or a Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhist deity in front of you on a table, such as a nightstand, dressing table or coffee table dedicated for use as a shrine. If you like, add a candle, incense, and/or an essential oil diffuser and/or flowers.

Next, prepare the body to meditate.

Wear comfortable clean clothing. You may want to first shower or wash your face to feel fresh.

Do some gentle stretches, yoga, Tai Chi or Qi Gong if you have time.

Especially if you feel tense, do progressive relaxation: for each body part, one at a time (face, neck, shoulders arms, hands, torso, legs, feet) clench or tighten muscles as much as you can as you breathe in deeply, and then release and totally relax them as you breathe out completely.

Sit up tall, shoulders relaxed and slightly back, one hand resting on the other palm.

Then, prepare the mind to meditate.

If you like and if you have time, listen to a recording of Buddhist chanting, or whatever music is soothing, healing and calming for you.

Recite prayers, such as a refuge prayer (taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and the four Brahmaviharas (also called the Four Immeasurables), and a lovingkindness prayer or Mahayana bodhicitta prayer.

The next step is to close eyes and practice one or more short, simple meditations, for example:

1. *Mindfulness of breathing.* Focus on exactly how it feels to breathe in, and to breathe out. You can focus specifically on the sensations in your nose, or on the movement of your belly, or on the feeling in the chest as it expands and contracts with each natural breath. Try to notice in minute detail each subtle sensory feeling, moment by moment, as the breath passes in and out, and the moment between exhaling and inhaling.
2. *Mentally chant with each breath.*
As you inhale, mentally chant “I breathe in peace” and as you exhale, “I breathe out stress”; or “freshness,” “staleness”; or any other paired words that feel right to you. If you prefer Vajrayana Buddhism, mentally chant “Om” as you inhale, “Ah” in between inhaling and exhaling, and “Hung” (“hoong”) as you exhale.
3. *Visualize a waterfall.* Imagine you are sitting under a small waterfall which flows over your head, shoulders and body—cooling, soothing and cleansing. Imagine it clears all your stress away. Imagine that the waterfall becomes white light flowing down inside your whole body, purifying and healing.
4. *Visualize a favorite peaceful place.* Choose a real or imaginary place such as a beach, forest, lake, mountain, river or field and imagine you are sitting there. Imagine everything you would hear at that place, then everything you would feel (breeze, sun, ground underneath, sand on your feet, water on your toes, etc.) and anything you would smell (ocean, pine, lake water, earth, grass, leaves, flowers, etc.).
5. *Mindfulness of the body.* With eyes closed, notice all the tactile sensations (such as warmth, contact, pressure, weight, clothes, tension, pulse) in one section of your body at a time: face (such as eyelids on eyes, tongue against teeth and palate, lips together, breath in nostrils), neck (weight of head, air passing through windpipe, angle of jaw,) shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, torso, buttocks and upper legs, lower legs, feet, toes.
6. *Healing light in the body.* Visualize a bright white light moves very slowly around inside your body, starting at the heart and stopping at various points, soothing, purifying and healing each part, and then returning to the heart. Then send the light out from your heart to heal all beings in the world. Imagine they become well, happy and peaceful.
7. *Chant a mantra aloud.* For example, “Namo Buddhaya” (homage to the Buddha), or if you prefer Vajrayana Buddhism, “Om Mani Padme Hung.” Focus on the sound as you chant and on the silence between chanting each mantra.

Take your time with these meditations. Do them very slowly and carefully, with moment-by-moment awareness, resisting the habit of rushing.

If you have time, you can do a longer meditation, such as a recorded guided meditation from a well-respected teacher, perhaps on a meditation app or video. Or, do one of the following:

1. *Flame meditation.* Look at a candle flame and memorize its appearance (size, shape, colors, movement, surrounding glow). Close your eyes and visualize the flame clearly in front of you. Open eyes to look at it again and then close them and try again (as many times as you need) to visualize it more clearly. Visualize it moving slowly toward your forehead. Imagine it enters into your forehead and illuminates your whole head, then very slowly travels down into your heart, illuminating it. Then imagine that the flame fills your whole body with white light. Then imagine the light from your body shines out into the area around you, then fills the room. Try to visualize the light spreading out further and further in all directions until it fills the universe. Imagine the light heals and brings peace and happiness to all beings.
2. *Visualization of the Buddha or a Mahayana or Vajrayana deity.* Gaze at a statue or picture of Buddha, or if you prefer Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism, a statue or picture of a deity such as Amitabha, Avalokiteshwara (Chenrezig), Vajradhara, Vajrasattva, Medicine Buddha, Quan Yin, or Tara. Gaze at the image and then focus your gaze from the top of the image's head to the feet, and then close your eyes and try to visualize the image, from one part of the image to another part, in front of you. Open your eyes and gaze again when the image isn't clear, and then close your eyes and practice visualizing the image in front of you, again and again. Imagine the Buddha or deity blesses you, filling you with peace, happiness and well-being.

To complete your meditation session, recite a prayer dedicating the merit. For example, "May all beings be well, happy and peaceful."

Try the different types of meditation to find which ones feel best for you. Different ones might work better at different times.

Those who have a mental illness should first consult their therapist about practicing meditation. Especially for those with symptoms of hallucinations, delusions, or anxiety, meditation involving prolonged concentration is not advisable; instead, it might be best to practice a grounding tactile sensory meditation such as mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of breathing, or mindful walking.

Don't force yourself in meditation; don't try to achieve a certain result. Instead, try to keep a good balance of enough effort to stay alert and enough relaxation to deeply calm the mind.

Don't try to experience an altered state, open the "third eye," raise kundalini, or obtain psychic powers, which can be very dangerous, harming you mentally and/or physically. Also, such attempts generate desires, expectations and disappointments and often increase egoism.

Buddhist meditation means allowing your mind to relax and expand into its blissful, pure natural state, free from mental obstructions. Any psychic phenomena happen on their own without desire or expectation.

Technology assisted meditation and other secular or non-Buddhist meditation might be effective but they don't lead toward lasting peace and happiness if such techniques aren't practiced along with Dharmic principles.

For meditation to give us ongoing calmness and deep satisfaction, we need to gradually clear our mental obstructions—anger, hatred, jealousy, craving, arrogance, egoism, fears and so forth. We all have at least subtle levels of these emotions; they manifest to some degree when we are provoked, when we lose our patience, or when we face challenging situations, including during addiction recovery.

Even when we aren't actively feeling these emotions, they cause subtle tension in our mind that prevents us from attaining a deep meditation. So, we need to practice the Dharma to process and sublimate these emotions.

In addition, practicing the Dharma gives our life meaning and direction, which counteracts some of the factors that lead to addiction.

After some time of practicing meditation along with the Dharma, we will notice benefits in our daily lives, such as more confidence and better coping skills, more patience and flexibility, better concentration and clearer thinking.

Then we can practice meditation for the virtues, insight and wisdom that it brings rather than simply for a way to feel better.