

Dealing with Indulgence

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Helena: Intellect speaking: I have a question about Helena and her eating. Helena is not really overweight but she does quite often eat more than her body needs and this is quite uncomfortable for me! I think she does this to stuff her feelings/thinking. Any suggestions on how to help her with this?

Ted: Hi, Helena.

It sounds like you understand the reason why you overeat. Now the question is whether you are willing to address the thoughts and emotions that you use overeating as a means of avoiding.

In this regard, you have basically two options.

Your first option is to resist the impulse to stuff yourself, and “look the devil in the eye,” so to speak. That is, sit with the discomfort of the thoughts and emotions that are arising. Rather than resisting them, allow them to wash over you. Feel the pain, and really look to see to what degree that pain applies to you (i.e. the witnessing awareness in which the thoughts and feelings are arising). Self-inquiry is based on the discrimination between the self and the “not-self,” the real and the apparent. This discrimination enables you to create some space between you and the objective phenomena (i.e. thoughts, feelings and sensations) that constitute your experience, for the fundamental principle of experience is that the experiencing subject cannot be the experienced object. In short, you cannot be what you see.

The fruit of this discrimination is the realization that you are not the objects of your experience. You are not actually the body-mind-sense complex with which you are presently identifying – or with which you are identifying at least during those moments when you feel that you are overeating in order to avoid your thoughts and feelings. While this identification seems natural, it is actually nothing more than a thought, a belief, an erroneous conviction. Certainly, you (awareness) are associated with a particular body and are illuminating the thoughts and feelings arising within the scope of a particular mind. But that does not mean that you are that body and mind. We call a house in which we live “my” house, but we would never say the house is me. Similarly, we can refer to the body and the mind with which we are associated as “my” body and “my” mind, but as a result of discriminating between the self and the “not self” (i.e. anything I “see” cannot be me) we are able to recognize that the body and mind are not who I am.

This option, then, begins with the willingness to accept the thoughts and feelings arising within you as if they were your own and then engages you in a process of unblinking scrutiny that enables you to separate yourself from these thoughts and feelings and see them as the phantom nemeses they really are. By simply observing the thoughts and feelings and not indulging the desires to which they give rise, you allow their energy to exhaust without replenishing it. If you can maintain this disciplined approach, the disturbing thoughts and feelings and consequent tendencies will gradually weaken and eventually either become so weak that they will no longer disturb you or wither away altogether.

Your second option is to indulge the desire to eat, but to do so consciously and use the process as a platform for inquiry. In this case, you begin by admitting that you (i.e. Helena) are helpless in the face of this binding *vasana*, that there is no way she can resist it, and so she is going to seek to satisfy its demands. Then, as you indulge the desire, do so with full attention. Watch Helena partaking of the experience. Notice the affect each bite has on the mind, to what degree it distracts Helena from dealing with the thoughts and feelings arising within her. Consider what Helena is getting out of this deal. Does she feel better after having eaten? Does the full belly solve the problem? Continue to track the post-digestive effects of the indulgence. What is the affect on Helena's self-esteem and energy level?

In making these observations, it is easy to fall into the trap of self-judgment. But that is not the point. The point is to make a mindful evaluation of whether the behavior is serving your best interests in regard to your goal – which in your case I'm assuming is *moksa*, liberation from dependence on objects for happiness and security.

This option can be a little more perilous than the first in that you are indulging, and thus fortifying, the binding *vasanas* that you actually want to neutralize. But the idea here is that by engaging in a mindful examination of the indulgence, you will come to realize that it is incapable of providing lasting satisfaction itself, and moreover, that by distracting you from facing your fears, it only serves to keep you psychologically imprisoned by the notion of limitation, incompleteness and inadequacy, which is the cause of the compelling desires and consequent indulgences in the first place. Such a clear understanding of the ineffectiveness of this approach will then better enable you to resist its beck and call.

Both the first and second options involve two aspects: the real you (i.e. pure limitless awareness) and the pseudo you (i.e. the apparent person you take yourself to be). Whether you overeat has no effect whatsoever on your true nature as pure awareness. Just as the waking state entity remains entirely unaffected by the experiences of the dream state entity, so awareness is not affected by the experiences of the apparent person. Still, the experiences of the apparent person matter a great deal to the apparent person, and moreover, it is the mind of the apparent person that must be sufficiently pure (i.e. undisturbed by binding desires that extrovert its attention and prevent it from turning within) to recognize its true nature. Therefore it is not necessarily enough to say that one should disregard the experience of the apparent person with the understanding that one's true nature is pure awareness, which remains ever unsullied by experience. For this reason, it is important to initially embrace the experience of the apparent person.

Lay your cards on the table. Look at yourself and acknowledge all the limitations and inadequacies that trouble you. Be honest about what you wish you were, what you don't like about yourself, how you feel you don't measure up, etc. Once you've ceased avoiding these matters, then you can begin to look into their validity. You can begin to see that every apparent individual is fraught with limitations, and that being an apparent individual in fact depends upon the limitations (i.e. characteristics, qualities, attributes) that define the apparent person. Relatively speaking, therefore no one is perfect, and in fact there is no such thing as perfection. Every "costume" is unique and every "character" plays its unique role in the grand drama of the apparent reality. Once you recognize this fact, the issue becomes to what degree you are going to identify with the reality and to what degree you are going to identify with the role.

Understanding that you are not the role enables you to accept the attributes and circumstances connected to the role without feeling compelled to overcome or avoid them. Thus the apparent

person won't be compelled to engage in behaviors subconsciously designed to deny her experience or consciously undertaken in the attempt to "correct" it. The apparent person of course may still choose to modify her habitual tendencies in a way that more accurately aligns her thoughts, words and deeds with what she understands to be her true nature in light of her exposure to the teachings of Vedanta, but she will know that no action, experience or attribute will ever make her a "perfect" person or serve to enhance or diminish her essential nature. In other words, the apparent person will know that she doesn't need to do anything in order to become something better than what she already is.

Consequently even though thoughts and feelings will continue to arise within the mind, the apparent person will cease to be distracted by the forms of these modifications and thus will be able to "see" (i.e. recognize or understand) their underlying content (i.e. the "substanceless substance," or pure awareness, of which they are made) as her own true nature.

The bottom line is that when you no longer choose to distract yourself from the limitations inherent in the experience of being human and no longer choose to deny your true limitless nature as the self, you will no longer be compelled to indulge gratuitous desires that cause you discomfort.