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## Key strategies to effectively stay on the Path

Beginning our relapse Prevention Program, it is useful to focus on not only specific tactics, but to reflect on broader issues like:

- *How I can find the meanings in the Buddha's teachings in my life?*
- *How can I find wellbeing by developing wholesome habits?*
- *Where can I find nurturing, healthy relationships that will understand and support my wholesome lifestyle?*
- *What can I do to support and encourage others and myself on the path?*

In pursuing the Path to re-establish our 'original' mind, it is helpful to use the metaphor of a journey to describe the process that includes both uplifting and challenging experiences. Applying to a Relapse Prevention model, Larimer et al. (1999 Larimer et al.) [41] use the metaphor of a road with signs warning of hazards to indicate high risk, unwholesome situations that one needs to avoid on the journey. Road signs provide guidance, just as there are indicators in our life that high-risk unwholesome, unethical situations may be imminent. If we learn to be aware and pay attention– to be Mindful –of such situations, we will have a good chance of not relapsing or even lapsing. We can successfully make use of skillful cognitive and behavioral strategies to move forward on our wholesome path. For example, if one knows they will be meeting a person who they do not like and often react to in a nervous and angry way, practicing both stress management techniques as well as an attitude of metta to apply during the meeting can be very beneficial. We learn to trust in the soundness of the Eightfold Path by skillfully applying the basic ethical precepts underlying the Middle Way with firm motivation and effort, as well as seeking helpful guidance through a solid teacher/student/sangha relationship.

Even when we have developed a secure moral foundation and continue to follow

the ethical guidelines recommended by the Buddha, unwholesome thoughts and behaviors arise. In relapse prevention programs, this is called a 'lapse'. As a metaphor, a lapse means losing one's balance and falling but, then, getting right back up and continuing. In following the Eightfold Path, an example of a lapse can be allowing an unwholesome craving/desire to express itself, even as thought, but then recovering by quickly regaining stability of thought, emotion and action. In other words, following an occurrence of unwholesome/unskillful behavior, one promptly re-establishes wholesomeness. Being mindful or aware that a lapse is manifesting and then to recover quickly is an essential skill. Therefore, especially at the beginning of one's citta or mind development, as old negative habits and mind-sets are easily stimulated and re-activated, one needs to be mindful and vigilant of any lapses. Only through constant re-conditioning is progress achieved.

A fundamental precept of the Middle Way is the possibility for us to exercise control over our life by developing effective, wholesome virtues and skills and sustaining them through our personal choices. However, we will occasionally experience lapses or desires and cravings that are unwholesome, unskillful and contrary to our reaching the goal of Nibbāna. These lapses, supported by our ignorance of believing the dualities of 'I- mine' and 'Self -Other', if allowed to persist, become relapses (the complete return of unwholesomeness after a period of improvement) and will expand to become obsessions and fixations. However, by proceeding on the Path and determinedly applying the relapse prevention model with cognitive and behavior management techniques, we can eventually remove any hindrances, defilements and obstacles.

Several key relapse prevention principles that have been adapted to a Buddhist program include the following general guidelines and principles: [42, 43] (Addy & Ritter, 2000; Daley & Marlatt, 1997).

- The need to develop coping skills to manage unwholesome situations
- Using lifestyle changes to decrease the possibility of creating unwholesome thoughts and behaviors
- Replacing unwholesome activities with wholesome activities
- Interrupting lapses so that they do not lead to continued use of unwholesome and unskillful behaviors

Skillful managing of a lapse/relapse to minimize significant impairment and pave the way for repair or reversal.

To be successful in our development, it is necessary to define two unskillful high-risk experiences that often accompany each other: urges and cravings. An urge is a sudden attraction or repulsion toward something, whereas a craving for or an aversion against something is a 'subjectively intense, urgent, or abnormal desire to experience the effects of something or to cease experiencing them'. In fact, Taṇhā is a Buddhist term that literally means "thirst," and is a self-centered, unwholesome and compulsive craving. The Buddha identified taṇhā as a principal cause of our suffering. While intense craving is characteristic of addictions, we all can experience different levels of craving with accompanying attachment or avoidance. Modern psychology and relapse prevention programs have written extensively about cravings.

The following are general truths about craving:

- Cravings will pass.
- People with a more intense and extensive history of unwholesome actions will activate and experience stronger urges.
- Each experience of craving differs according to the object desired and the attitude about cessation.

Cravings lose their power each time they are not reinforced.

- Ignoring is an effective intervention to weaken cravings.
- Occasional indulgence only helps to keep cravings active.
- Cravings are most intense during the initial phases of practice.
- Craving management gets easier with practice.
- Craving intensity varies.

People, places, things, feelings, situations or anything else that has been associated with pleasant or unpleasant experiences in the past can trigger cravings. A useful framework to control cravings or urge-based thoughts include the following principles:

- Early in the change process, employ avoidance strategies, such as walking away from a situation, or avoiding specific people and places associated with cravings or aversions.
- Later in the change process, employ active coping strategies like thought

reversal or mindfulness of breath meditation.

- A combination of coping strategies is usually most effective.
- Planning, by identifying high-risk situations ahead of time and preparing coping mechanisms in advance, is often an effective coping mechanism.
- Precise interventions can help with particularly intense unwholesome mental or emotional states.
- Urge Surfing is a technique in which a practitioner understands urges or cravings as “waves in the ocean,” and treats them as transient experiences that initially increase in intensity, but then fades and passes away in time.

A classic relapse prevention strategy to resist the influence of cravings is

“**The Four D’s.**” These simple actions use a means of distraction when one experiences cravings and are helpful to temporarily avoid a long-lasting error caused by a momentary urge. They involve the following measures:

**Delay**–the practitioner is encouraged to delay the decision to indulge. Since cravings come in waves and will pass, if one delays a decision for 20 minutes, usually the cravings dissipate on their own.

**Distract**–the practitioner engages in an unrelated activity such as reading, going for a walk, practicing relaxation techniques, and thereby avoids doing the craving or urge. Drinking a glass of water is one of the distraction techniques.

**Deep Breathing**–the practitioner is encouraged to practice deep breathing exercises to help keep from making hasty decisions and maintain calm when having a craving or urge.

**De-Catastrophize** – While experiencing a craving one can panic and think, ‘I can’t control this; I will fail, so I might as well indulge now.’ Instead, one challenges inaccurate catastrophic thoughts and reframes them into ones that are more accurate, ‘This is really difficult, but these feelings will pass and I will be in more control again soon.’

The type of intervention to reprogram either an urge or craving will differ depending on the situation, intensity, and duration of each experience. For example, if cravings develop in response to stressful situations, relaxation

techniques and deep breathing exercises can be particularly useful by calming the mind and body. By relaxing the nervous system, the stress experience is reduced and often eliminated. Many different meditation techniques achieve relaxation including visualizing pleasant, wholesome imagery or deep breathing. By developing new skills, we learn to manage unskillful and unwholesome feelings and thoughts, thereby enabling us to cope more effectively with a broad range of hindrances on our journey. In addition, having a wise teacher and educational materials as well as positive relationships with family and sangha friends, can provide a tremendous support. Indeed, effective support systems are important factors for a practitioner's successful journey

### **Transforming Difficulties on the Path**

Mindfulness as described by the Buddha is like the modern psychological term of 'observing ego.' Here, we need to remember that the term 'ego' describes the conscious mind. The observing ego is the inherent mechanism of our consciousness that can monitor and know our thoughts, emotions, actions and behaviors in real time; as they are being created. The more we know and recognize when and how unwholesomeness comes into effect; the better is our ability to make the proactive changes necessary to eliminate them and instead develop wholesomeness. This is essential for us to stay correctly on our path rather than becoming distracted and putting energy into anything that quickly attracts or repels us. In addition, when we are mindful of something, we observe it in an objective, analytical manner, and not become reactive or identified with it. This adds greatly in the effective management of lapses.

While following the Path, we develop insight into our habits through awareness and analysis of everyday circumstances such as when we try to remain patient in a frustrating situation. By being mindful of our thoughts, emotions and body, we can first objectively witness our impatience increasing, and then apply the appropriate wholesome skills we have developed to remain calm and respond skillfully. The Buddha taught that being aware of the actions in everyday life leads to a crucial wisdom in our effort to reclaim our original mind. Indeed, everyday life is a wonderful teacher. Relapse prevention programs teach the necessity of monitoring and changing everyday unwholesome and unskillful actions and thoughts with skillful ones.

With development, we learn how to observe, 'monitor' and keep our mental contents under control, therefore, not allowing ourselves to become entangled

and reactive. In our life, we must develop both awareness and equanimity together to decide what to allow into as well as put out of our consciousness. In fact, when we are mindful or observant, we can gain new objectivity and insights about our thought, emotion, and behavior patterns or habits. The successful letting go of these, however, takes practice. Even when we attain effortless *sīla* and our egotistical desires cease to be primary determinants of our behavior, latent tendencies can remain and become active again when mindfulness lessens. In the suttas, even an accomplished arahant can have lapses in their development toward nibbāna as shown in S I 54, where Sariputta, who was one of Buddha's chief disciples, says: *'I stay mindful so that the obsessions no longer obsess me.'* Also, in S I 239 the Buddha states: *'Monks, even for the monk who is an arahant with his obsessions destroyed, I say that gains, favors, and flattery are a danger.'* So even arahants use constant mindfulness and wholesome interventions to maintain the highest states of mind.

Mindfulness monitors and aids in transforming the cognitive apparatus and is one of the most important applications for developing mental maturity. An initial meditation practice to develop mindfulness is maintaining awareness with the in-out breathing, which keeps thoughts out of mind and is conducive to the relaxation of body and mind. When developed and regularly practiced, it helps to establish both wellbeing as well as understanding the annicca doctrine that phenomena are ever changing and impermanent. In the suttas, there are many descriptions of monks' mental states and actions being mindful or aware and 'calmed' while performing numerous activities: meditating, receiving alms for their food, visiting new places, explaining the doctrine, settling disputes, etc. Lay followers also benefit from a calm and mindful mind while applying the precepts and skillfully doing the many everyday activities of life. By means of skillful mindfulness, unwholesome desires, stress, emotions, and worries are controlled and do not create detrimental effects in the now, therefore, in the future. By keeping hindrances out of consciousness through persistent attention and awareness in the present, their influence is lessened and perhaps even extinguished. Even the 'influxes', the most recurring of problematic thoughts that enter consciousness, can be eliminated by the insights that mindfulness provides, as stated in S I 54 where Sariputti says: *'I do not deny that if I live mindful that the influxes no longer flow.'* Therefore, with the ego maturing by mindfulness and paññā or insight, self-absorbed taṇhā or desire ceases to be a determining conscious force in behavior. However, also taṇhā can re-appear

through habitual thought processes as a lapse. Nevertheless, after one becomes dissatisfied to the suffering created by the constantly transforming and ultimately unsatisfactory self's 'thirsts' and cravings, they lose significant influence and control.