

Hooked!

*Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire,
and the Urge to Consume*

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How We Get Hooked, How We Get Unhooked

Pema Chödrön

This essay was delivered originally as a teaching on the process of attachment. In it, Pema Chödrön addresses how habits and addictions are cumulative forms of attachment protecting us from the insecurity of living in a changing world. Although she is not addressing consumerism directly, her comments offer useful Buddhist teachings on the fundamental processes at work around desire and craving. She explains how refraining from being hooked can open up the possibility for wisdom to arise, allowing more spaciousness in dealing with ourselves and others. With practice, this wisdom becomes a stronger force than attachment, helping us practice goodness and equanimity, Buddhist virtues that counteract the values of consumerism.

YOU ARE TRYING to make a point with a co-worker or your partner. At one moment her face is open and she is 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 as if

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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 are likely to get stuck. We could call *shenpa* “that sticky feeling.” It is 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, of not wanting to be where we are. That is the hooked quality. That tight feeling has the power to hook us into self-denigration, blame, anger, jealousy, and other emotions that lead to words and actions that end up poisoning us.

Do you remember the fairy tale in which toads hop out of the princess’s mouth whenever she starts to say mean words? That is how being hooked can feel. Yet we don’t stop—we can’t stop—because we are in the habit of associating whatever we are doing with relief from our own discomfort. This is the *shenpa* syndrome. The word *attachment* doesn’t quite translate what is happening. It is a quality of experience that’s not easy to describe but that everyone knows well. *Shenpa* is usually involuntary, and it gets right to the root of why we suffer.

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 may have 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.

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 are willing to die getting this short-term symptomatic relief. The momentum behind the urge or craving is so strong that we never pull out of the habitual pattern of turning to poison for comfort. It does not necessarily have to involve a substance or a particular thing; it can be saying thoughtless words or approaching everything

with a comparing mind. That is a major hook. Something triggers an old pattern we would rather not feel, and we tighten up and hook into comparing or criticizing. This 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 is known as renunciation. What we renounce or refrain from is not food, things, sex, or relationships per se. We renounce and refrain from the *shenpa*. When we talk about refraining from *shenpa*, we do not mean trying to cast it out; we mean trying to see the *shenpa* clearly and experiencing it. If we can see *shenpa* just as we are starting to close down, when we feel the tightening, then the possibility exists to catch the urge to do the habitual thing and to choose not to do it.

Without meditation practice, this is almost impossible. Generally we don't catch the tightening until we have indulged the urge to scratch our itch in some habitual way. And unless we equate refraining with loving-kindness and friendliness toward 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 and relax to whatever arises, without picking and choosing. It teaches us to experience the urge and the uneasiness fully and to interrupt the momentum that usually follows. We do this by not following after the thoughts and by learning to come back to the present moment. We practice staying with the uneasiness, the tightening, the itch of *shenpa*. We train in sitting still with our desires, with our conditioned hooks. This is how we learn to stop the chain reaction of habitual patterns that otherwise rule our lives. This is how we weaken the patterns that keep us hooked into discomfort that we mistake as comfort. We label the spin-off "thinking" and return to the present moment. Yet even in meditation, we can experience *shenpa*.

Let's say, for example, that in one meditation session 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 present moment without a sense of struggle. Afterward

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you are 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 are hooked on the “good” one. You sat there obsessing about something at home or 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 is only yourself 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* toward how it’s not “supposed” to be. Yet the meditation is just what it is. We, however, get caught in our idea of meditation: that’s the *shenpa*, that root stickiness. This is ego clinging or self-absorption. When we are hooked on the idea of good experience, self-absorption gets stronger; when we are 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. 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 are 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 are willing to practice this way over time, prajna begins to kick in. Prajna is clear seeing, 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 is not ego involved. It is the wisdom found in basic goodness, openness, and equanimity—all of which cut through self-absorption. With prajna we can see what will open up space for less attachment. Ego-bound habituation is just the opposite—a compulsion to fill up space in our own particular style. Some of us close down space by hammering our point through; others do it by trying to smooth the waters.

As students of Buddhism we are taught that whatever arises is fresh, the essence of realization. That is 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 are tensing or hooked or “all worked up.” That is the essence of realization. The earlier we catch it, the easier *shenpa* is to work with, but even catching it when we are already all worked up is good. Sometimes we have to go through the whole cycle even though we see what we are 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 rerun the story. Maybe we start with remembering the all-worked-up feeling and get in touch with that. We can look clearly at the *shenpa* in retrospect; this is very helpful. It is also helpful to see *shenpa* arising in little ways, where the hook is not so sharp.

Buddhists are speaking 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. To engage this training on the cushion, where it is relatively easy and pleasant to do, is a way to prepare ourselves to stay calm and clear when we get all worked up. Then we train in seeing *shenpa* wherever we are. Say something to another person and maybe you will feel that tensing arise. Rather than get caught in a story line about how right or wrong you are, you can take it as an opportunity to be present with the hooked quality. You can 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 are silent, you get hooked by 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 will be intrigued by how you will involuntarily shut down and get hooked, one way or another. Just keep labeling these thoughts and coming back to the immediacy of the feeling. That is the way to break the chain reaction.

Once we are aware of *shenpa*, we begin to notice it in other people. We see them shutting down. We see that they have been hooked and that nothing is going to get through to them. At that moment we are experiencing prajna, the basic intelligence that comes through when we are not caught up in escaping our unease. With prajna we can see what is happening with

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others; we can see when they have 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 Gampo Abbey we are very fortunate that everybody is excited about working with *shenpa*. So many words I've tried have 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 is happening with clear seeing, without aiming it at ourselves. Since no one particularly likes to have *shenpa* pointed out, people at the Abbey make deals like this: "When you see me getting hooked, just pull your ear lobe, 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 Rs: *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 are left with your urge. That is 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 is no way to be arrogant. The trick is to keep seeing. You don't want to let the softening and humility turn into self-denigration. That is just another hook. Because we have been strengthening the whole habituated situation for a long, long time, we can't expect to undo it overnight. It is not a one-shot deal. It takes lovingkindness 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 with various degrees of intensity, but there is really only one root *shenpa*: ego clinging. The branch *shenpas* are all our different styles of scratching that itch.

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I recently saw a cartoon of three fish swimming around a hook. One fish is saying to the others, "The secret is nonattachment." That is a cartoon about *shenpa*: 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 is happening. As we practice this way, we gain confidence in our own wisdom, and it begins to guide us toward the fundamental aspect of our being—spaciousness, warmth, and spontaneity.