

Going down the wrong garden path

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It all started with a garden

It all started with a garden. I was watching a show about beautiful gardens around the world – which sounds innocent enough, doesn't it? – when the thought suddenly popped into my head: I want a garden like that! After all, gardens are lovely and help connect us to nature. In a garden you can grow your own food, soak in some sunshine, maybe even contemplate your place in the universe. That's why I didn't challenge that little thought in my mind. I could see myself strolling from hedge to hedge, admiring the potted plants and spending quality time with my family. What's wrong with a desire for a pretty garden?

Desires are not pretty plants

But the unfortunate thing about desires is that they're more like fast-spreading ivy than pretty potted plants: they tend to get out of control very quickly. Before you know it, they escape the nice neat boundaries we set for them and expand outward, taking over everything in their path. In fact, desires for external things are a downright invasive species. If you don't root them out right from the beginning, they will disrupt your entire mental ecosystem.

The wrong garden path

Once you start thinking that anything external will make you happy, you've already gone down the wrong garden path. If you need a serene garden to be happy, what else will you also need? You've made your happiness dependent on something external to your character.

Well, *the garden is nice*, you might tell yourself, but *I also need a nicer house to go with it*. And while you're at it, why not a new car, a perfect spouse, fame, and fortune? Once you let the idea take root that something external to you will make you happy, your mental ecosystem is already at risk. These things will never actually satisfy you, and you will end up consumed by your own desires.

Eradicating the externals

Instead, what we need to do is eradicate any

thought that externals will make us happy. Get rid of that false judgment as quickly as you can. As soon as the idea comes into your mind – oh, isn't that nice? I wish I could have that – dig it up, root it out, and throw it out with the trash. Epictetus puts it in no uncertain terms:

Eradicate these judgments, and despise them, and banish them from your mind - Epictetus, Discourses, 2.22, 34).

Desires are sneaky

Remember, though, that desires can be sneaky. They usually don't announce themselves to you. They often slip in through the back door and establish themselves before you're even aware of them.

So try to be aware of where your mind is. Instead of seeing something nice and immediately wanting it for yourself, hold the impression at arm's length and examine it. Ask yourself some questions. Has something like this ever made you happy before? Now that you stop to think about it, do you think you will truly be happy if you get it? Will you become a better person if you acquire it?

Yet you can enjoy external things

If the object in question is external to you, the answer to all of these questions is always no. That doesn't mean you can't enjoy the things around you – you can and should enjoy them – but it means you enjoy them as they are, without allowing your mind to grasp for more.

There is a very fine line between making good use of external things and starting to desire them. So tend to your thoughts very carefully. Feed the good ones and weed out the bad ones. Keep a watchful eye out for intruders. And always remember where your true happiness lies: not outside you, but in the fertile soil of your own mind.

