

# Retiring from Work

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In recent months I have retired from employment because of ill-health, an event which has been both difficult and freeing. It has been difficult because it involves letting go of a number of goals, ambitions and practices linked to the career that I had teaching and researching the care of older people in a university in the north of England. For instance, I was not able to achieve what I wanted to achieve, which included the altruistic aim of making life better for older people and the not so altruistic goal of becoming a famous and influential person who could change the way in which people thought and acted. I have retired without meeting many of these goals. Alongside this I have changed my everyday routine; I no longer go to the same places, meet the same people, or carry out the same duties. All of this has been difficult.

Retiring has also been freeing because it has meant that I haven't had to do any of these things—I am free from the obligations and requirements of my working role. I don't have to go to meetings, comply with organisational rules, or meet goals. All of these freedoms are advantages; it is a good position to be in when it is possible to let these go. There are no sanctions or punishments which can be taken against me. These two different perspectives—freedom and stress—are both at play, and

I find myself trying to understand what is happening and my responses to it. In this I have found some ideas helpful: the ideas of the unskillful actions stemming from the poisons of greed, hate and delusion. Applying these ideas to the process of retiring has given me the following thoughts:

*Greed.* One of the things I will have to let go of is the greed for power and recognition evident in my ambitions at work and in some of my unwillingness to retire. The power to shape events and processes rested partly on the way that others responded to me, and could result in a degree of gratification. I would congratulate myself on having pushed things in the right direction, on having the right ideas and the power to influence others. It is difficult to determine, however, if this is a wish for the well-being of others, or for myself.

*Hate.* I will also have to let go of my disparagement of others with different ideas. In a competitive work environment this is a key part of achieving ambitions, as we negate ideas which we see as rivalling our own. There is an additional complexity when hatred is directed towards ideas that we think are wrong. An example of this in my work was the ageism expressed by some, which I felt was justifiably hated. Not to hate ageism could be seen as a form of support and approval. Letting go of this hatred is therefore difficult as it seems to me that it may also mean I need to let go of values that I hold dear—in this case an anti-ageist stance.

*Delusion.* This is, for me, the most difficult element to let go of, partly because it is difficult to notice. I have, however, started to think about people who behaved as if they were still working when they were not—spending time in the work environment and doing work-like activities. An example of this is a colleague whose career at the university had ended, but he acted as if he were still involved in the activities there. Part of this may be the cultural push to be productively employed. This makes letting go a defiant act—one that challenges this exhortation.

These thoughts are the beginnings of understanding, and they are useful to me in deepening my awareness of events in my life. I expect that the things they refer to will change over time, get bigger or smaller. The three poisons are presented as a barrier to development, but it may be necessary to look beyond this notion of ‘barrier’ and, indeed, stop digging things up according to these three headings of greed, hate and delusion. They are, therefore, a call to exploration, rather than a destination. In other words, the processes of reflection and meditation are not just steps towards an end, where something is ‘achieved’ and finished with, but are continual activities and ways of being that have no end.

Writing this down is part of exploring my ideas, but paradoxically it also reinforces them, as writing things down was part of the work that I have done in the past, but am now retiring from. Pushing this work away seems like a denial of a fundamental experience, and so I will have to find a way of acknowledging both my previous work and my retirement. This

exploration has no end point, in the sense that everything will be finally resolved and that my past work life will be jettisoned. Instead, it is good to continue to try and focus on being in the moment, and this process will, hopefully, be aided by the direction that contemplating the three poisons of greed, hate and delusion brings.

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