

Overcoming Obstacles

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The mind has an amazing ability to create obstacles for itself, even when it's doing something that it knows—at least part of it knows—is really good for it: strengthening your powers of concentration, giving the mind a comfortable place to stay in the present moment, a place where it can stay at home, feel at home, gain nourishment. We got this practice, and yet the mind keeps finding other things to get in the way. It wanders off in the search of interesting sensual pleasures or it gets worked up from being angry about something—all the hindrances: sleepiness; restlessness and anxiety; doubt and uncertainty. The question is, why do these things have power over the mind?

Obviously, they don't offer any long-term good to the mind. Yet we have a tendency to get fooled by them. One reason is that we don't recognize them as hindrances, and actually think that they're our friends. When they come along, we fall in with them. Even though we may know in the abstract that these things are bad for us, when they come, they have their ways of making themselves attractive. Or *we* have ways of making them attractive. So we have to be very careful to watch out for them when they come in and overtake the mind. Sometimes you have to reason with the mind to pull it away. At other times, you simply have to be firm with it and say, "This is the time to settle down; this is not the time for wandering around, looking at this, looking at that, getting involved in different emotions, getting involved in different abstract ideas."

We've got a very basic down-to-earth practice, one that's so easy to underestimate because it is so down-to-earth. And yet if it's not down-to-earth, how is it going to help get you in touch with reality? You've got to learn to recognize distractions for what they are. That's the first step.

There are lots of techniques given for overcoming sensual desire. If it's sexual desire, you can contemplate the 32 parts of the body. If it's just plain old desire for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, think about all the sensual pleasures you've had in the past. Where are they now? Ajaan Suwat used to like to ask this question time and again: All the happiness you got from sights and sounds

and smells and tastes and tactile sensations last week, where's that now? It's all gone. It comes and goes. It's extremely superficial. If it were really satisfying, we would have had enough a long time ago. But because it's not satisfying, we keep grabbing more and more and more, until we begin to realize that in this basket of hot peppers there are no sweet ones.

The antidote for ill-will is to reflect on what anger does to you. The Buddha has a nice passage where he talks about how when you're angry you do precisely the things that your enemy would like to see happen to you. You look ugly. You destroy friendships. You destroy things. You get confused as to what's in your own best interest and what's not. Do you really want to do those things to yourself? Do you really want to give your enemies the satisfaction of seeing you harm yourself? That's one way of looking at it.

The other is to look at how the mind is burning up over what somebody else did. And who's getting burned by your anger? *You're the one* who's getting burned.

As for sleepiness and drowsiness, who has ever attained awakening through sleepiness and drowsiness? Who has ever attained anything extraordinary? Of course, there are times when the body needs to rest, but you have to test your drowsiness first, to make sure it's not just boredom, a subterfuge for distracting you and pulling you off someplace else. If you're sitting meditating and you get drowsy, get up and walk around. Or if you find that one particular way of breathing is making you sleepy, change your breath. If you're getting bored with the breath, start exploring all the precise little details of the breath energy in the body. Go through the toes, one by one by one; the fingers, one by one by one; and all the little parts of the body. Divide the body up into little tiny sections and try to make a survey of every one. In other words, give the mind work to do right here to keep it interested.

Often the cure for restlessness and anxiety is the same thing: Give the mind work to do right here in the present moment. As long as it has the power to think, make it think about what's going on inside. If it doesn't like to think about the breath, you can think about the bones, you can think about any of those 32 parts of the body that we chant about, until the mind has had enough thinking and is ready to settle down again.

As for doubt and uncertainty, Ajaan Fuang often said that it's a lack of truthfulness in ourselves. We don't give ourselves to anything to really test it properly. You say, "Well, this might be true, but is it really true? I don't really know." But you're not willing to put yourself on the line to test it. So you go around holding on to your doubts. The only way you can overcome doubt is to test things seriously. "Will this work? Will this take me where I want to go?" And then give yourself to the practice. See what it does. You're not asked to sign on with total conviction to begin with. But you have to give it a fair chance, a fair opportunity.

There are so many dilettantes in the world who have opinions about all kinds of things but haven't tested anything at all. Their opinions, their knowledge is worthless. If you want to know the truth, you have to be true to the practice. If you want to know the truth about the practice, you have to be true to it. Truth is not a quality of statements as much it's a quality of the heart and mind. If you want to know the truth, you have to make yourself into a true person.

So, when any of these hindrances come along, one, remind yourself that they are hindrances. All too often sensual desire comes along: "Yes, wouldn't it be nice to have some pretty pictures?" and you go with the pretty pictures. Anger comes along and you can see how justified it is. It's very easy to justify anger. Sleepiness comes along: "Ah, yes, it's time for the body to get some rest." Restlessness and anxiety come, and yes, there are things that you really have to worry about. Doubt comes and "This is really worthy of doubt, really unreliable." Your mind can create all sorts of reasons to jump in with the hindrances. But where do they take you? Think about that.

We've been living with these hindrances for so long that we've mistaken them for friends. But ask yourself, are you really satisfied with where you are in life? Would you like something better? Would you like to try something new? Okay, if you want to try it, *really* try it. Give yourself to it, to see what it can do. Because there are other obstacles that we don't create for ourselves: aging, illness, and death. They make it really difficult to practice. And nobody knows how much time they've got left.

In one of the few Dhamma talks by Ajaan Fuang that was recorded and transcribed, he makes just this point: that you've *no* idea how much time you've

got to practice. If you fritter your time away—the time you *do* have, which is the present moment—you're really going to regret it when you suddenly discover obstacles coming in your way. Seven years after he gave that Dhamma talk, he was dead, and he was sick in the meantime, many, many times. And many of the people he gave that Dhamma talk to are now dead, too.

We're alive. But again, we don't know how much longer it will be before we go. So take advantage of the opportunity you've got. Be strict with yourself. This is the time to practice. You can't dawdle. You can't dip your toe in and then pull out, dip your toe in and pull out. You've got to plunge right in, to see what the practice can do.

This doesn't mean that you have to rush, rush, rush through the practice, because the practice does have its own rhythms: when to be still, when to be inquisitive, when to question things, when to be still again. That's a rhythm you have to discover on your own, as you practice—what rhythm is working for you. But if you don't give yourself to the practice, you're won't to be able to discover that rhythm.

So give this issue your full attention. What's needed to be done to get the mind to settle down? What's needed to understand this process of fabrication that's constantly going on in the mind with which we create our experience out of the raw materials that come from the past? This process, the Buddha said, is so stressful but it only gives inconstant results, and nothing that you can claim as your own. We have that chant every evening: *I am the owner of my actions*. But you're not the owner of the results.

What are the results? The results are the aggregates. The results are the sense media. And that, as the Buddha keeps saying, is *anatta, anatta*—it's not-self, not-self. So focus on that issue. What you really have is this process of fabrication that's work, work, work—all the time. And yet the work you do doesn't produce any results that you can hang on to, unless you master what the Buddha said is that fourth type of karma, the fourth type of action—the action that leads to the end of action, which is the noble eightfold path.

That puts you in touch with something that goes beyond the power of fabrication. And because it's not fabricated, it places no weight on the mind at all. So there is that possibility, but to get there requires training—heightening your

virtue, heightening your concentration, heightening your discernment. So try to be very clear on who your internal friends are, who you want to be spending time with inside. Because it really does make a difference.

Just because a feeling comes into the mind doesn't mean that it has to be *your* feeling. See it simply as an event that comes, an event that goes. It comes from causes and it has its results. It's up to you to decide which events you want to encourage and which ones you don't. When you can look at these obstacles that keep coming up in the mind in that light, then it's a lot easier to pull yourself away from them and to get down to business.