

Restlessness & Anxiety

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The Buddha didn't regard all the hindrances as equally dangerous. There's a passage where he says if you're obsessed with sensual thinking and you can't stop, go to sleep. Even though he doesn't praise sleeping, he says sleep is better than getting tied up in sensual thinking.

There's a passage where he's talking about advice you give to someone who's dying. The number one thing is to make sure that the person is not worried. Do everything you can to keep the person from being worried. Otherwise, those worries will pull the person down.

Instead, get the person focused first on the fact that they're leaving human sensuality but not to miss human sensuality because there are better kinds of sensuality: the sensuality of the devas. Then he would have you take them up, up, up, visualizing the pleasures of the different deva realms. Ideally, he'd have you get past that, but still, if the person happened to die in the course of that, the fact that the person was focused on deva sensuality is better than being focused on worry.

So when you're meditating and find yourself overcome by restlessness and anxiety, you've really got to do something about it, because this is one of those hindrances that can pull you way down.

Restlessness is basically having too much energy. You're antsy; you just can't settle down. A lot of it has to do with the quality of the energy in your body. This is where you can use the breath to calm things down, to soothe things in the body, so that you don't feel like you're sitting on ants.

Anxiety, however, is something more than just having too much energy. It can go in two directions: anxiety about the future, worry about what's going to happen to you or to your loved ones, to the world as a whole; or it can go to the past. You start thinking about some unskillful things you've done in the past and that just digs up old issues about how stupid you've been, how thoughtless you've been, how destructive you've been sometimes. You suddenly find yourself totally overwhelmed by these thoughts.

In either case, it requires a lot more than just a calming breath. This is one of those cases where you have to exert all three of the fabrications the Buddha talks about: bodily, verbal, mental. Bodily being your in-and-out breath; verbal being the way you talk to yourself, how you direct your thoughts and what you tell yourself about what you're thinking about; and mental, the perceptions and feelings you hold on to.

With the breath, of course, you try to calm it down. Try to be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Think of the breath as a medicine to soothe things inside.

Then you've got to give yourself a good talking to. If you're worried about things happening in the future, remind yourself a certain amount of planning needs to be done, but when you go over the same topic again and again and again, it's not helping anything. It's wearing you out.

What you're going to need when the future comes is more alertness, more mindfulness, more concentration, more discernment. The future's going to bring a lot of unexpected things, and these are the qualities of the mind that can deal with the unexpected, that can be sensitive to what's going on and see opportunities that you wouldn't see if the mind is all frazzled. So when there's a voice in the mind that says, "Well, you've *got* to worry about this, otherwise you won't be prepared," you can counter with another voice that says, "This is how you prepare, by developing the qualities of the mind that can deal with the unexpected."

As you're dealing with these thoughts, you'll find that certain perceptions come flashing into the mind. Look for those. Try to see what exactly is the perception that's got you all worked up, and try to provide an alternative that will change it.

After all, what's the opposite of anxiety? It's confidence. Have some confidence in the Buddha, when he said that you protect yourself through your virtue, you protect yourself through your generosity, through your meditation. So the more you can do these things now, the more protected you'll be.

In other words, make sure you're living in a world where there is a Buddha in that world, where the Dhamma holds sway, and the Sangha has carried the true Dhamma down for many generations. When you have that context in the world of your mind, it's a lot easier to hold perceptions that will calm the mind down, give you more confidence.

As for thoughts of the past, when you realize how you've harmed people in the past, or you've simply done things that were really foolish, remember the Buddha's teachings on remorse. Remorse can't go back and undo those things. The best thing you can do is to recognize that, yes, that was a mistake, and resolve not to repeat it: "I don't ever want to make that mistake ever again." Then, depending on the karma involved, you've got to do something now that's going to be useful to counteract that past bad karma. Worrying about it, being anxious about getting upset about it, is *not* the kind of karma that will compensate.

The compensation comes from doing things that are good in the present: being generous, being virtuous, developing goodwill for all. Because that's the second part of the Buddha's recommendation: Once you've realized you've made that mistake and you've resolved not to repeat it, have lots of goodwill for yourself, so that you're not down on yourself. As for other people—for the people you've harmed, and the people you *might* harm—remind yourself that by developing goodwill now for them too, you'll be less likely to do any more harm to them in the future.

This practice also helps heal the wounds that come when you get down on yourself too much. Otherwise, there will be part of the mind that will rebel at some point and say, "Well,

maybe it wasn't so bad after all." *That's* the voice you've got to watch out for, because that's the voice that's going to get you to do those harmful things again.

So of all the hindrances, worry is one of the most dangerous, and it's going to require the most work. This is one of those cases where discernment fosters concentration. You have to *think* your way past this particular hindrance if you're going to get anywhere with it.

But remember, you've got these tools. You're using them all the time anyhow. You're already fashioning things through the way you breathe, through the way you talk to yourself, through the perceptions you hold in mind. Simply learn how to refashion the way you do that. Take any unskillful thought apart and fabricate things in a much more skillful way to take its place. That way, you can induce more concentration *and* more discernment in the mind.

These hindrances are obstacles not only to concentration but also to discernment. To deal with them, you've got to first borrow the Buddha's discernment. Then, as you follow his recommendations, you start developing discernment of your own. You get quicker and quicker at recognizing when the mind is going to get sucked down into a vortex of worry and anxiety, and you get quicker and quicker at pulling yourself out.

In this way, you not only protect yourself as you're sitting here meditating, but you also develop the skills you're going to need as you approach death. At that point, what you're facing in the future is going to be very worrisome: the fact that you're going to leave this body and you don't know where you're going to go. It's all too easy to start thinking about the unskillful things you've done in the past, which is precisely the wrong time to be thinking about those things. You may not have someone hovering around you to remind yourself of the good you've done. So you've got to learn how to hover around yourself, to remind yourself of how to pull yourself out of this particular hindrance so that it has less and less power over the mind. Even as the body is weak, make sure that your habitual reaction to thoughts of worry is quick, skillful, and strong.