

Hindrances Based on Delusion

February 27, 2008

Whenever you try to do good, you're bound to run into obstacles. In Thailand, the word for these obstacles is Mara. It's a form of temptation that stands in the way of what you're trying to do and pulls you away someplace else. In other words, Mara is not just a being who came to tempt the Buddha. It's also thoughts in your own mind that tempt you off in random directions.

So you have to be ready for these things. They're bound to be there. And prepare yourself to deal with them.

When you're practicing concentration, the big obstacles, the big Maras, are the hindrances. There are five of them. And they can be mapped against the three roots of unskillful behavior.

There's sensual desire, which corresponds to passion.

There's ill will, which comes out of aversion.

And then the remaining three come out of delusion: sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty.

Sloth and torpor and restlessness and anxiety: Basically the first one is delusion with a low energy level, and the second one is delusion with a very high energy level. And you often find yourself going back and forth between the two.

In ancient times, they talked about the difficulty of going through the straits between Italy and Sicily. There was a big rock on the Italian side and a big whirlpool on the Sicilian side. The rock was Scylla. The whirlpool was Charybdis. It was a real trick to get through the straits, because if you were too careful to stay away from the rock, you ended up in the whirlpool. If you did your best to stay away from the whirlpool, you ended up slamming into the rock.

Meditation is very much like that. You find yourself going back and forth between the extremes of restlessness and distraction on one side, and then sloth and torpor on the other. So you've got to learn how to deal with both of them.

And there is one way of dealing with both. Ajaan Lee's technique for analyzing the breath can actually be used against both sides. On the one hand, if you've got all that energy to think, you might as well think in the body. And one good way to think in the body is to try to figure out what's going on with the breath energy. Keep making a survey, making it as detailed as possible, down to all your fingers and all your toes, down each vertebra in the spine. So if you find yourself with a lot of energy to think, then think about the breath.

Or you can think about the parts of the body. Go through the bones. Try to

imagine: Where are your toe bones right now? And then your foot bones and the ankle bones. Like that old song, “This bone is connected to that bone.” Well, trace them through your body and try to develop a sense of where in your range of awareness right now, say, your thigh bone, your knee bones, your shin bones are. All the way up and down the body.

This gives you something to *do* that’s within the body. Again, if there’s all that energy to work with something, apply it to what’s going on inside you right now.

As for sloth and torpor, one of the ways of dealing with it is to energize yourself. This delusion plus a lack of energy can come from one of two things. One is that you simply don’t have the energy. The other is that you’ve got the energy but you’re not willing to apply it to the meditation.

So you’ve got to check to see which is the problem right now. If you simply don’t have the energy, it might be a good idea to rest for a while. But before you do that, check and make sure: Is it simply a matter of boredom and unwillingness to apply the energy? In which case, again, analyze the breath, analyze the parts of the body. Get the mind energized.

Traditionally, the Buddha talked in terms of the factors of awakening. Analysis of qualities helps to wake the mind up. And this is one way of analyzing things. Try to figure out what way of breathing is skillful right now, what way is not skillful. That’s the Buddha’s basic recommendation for how to analyze qualities: to ask that question of what’s skillful and what’s not.

A couple of years back, I was talking to a group of people from up at Spirit Rock. They’d learned that “analyzing qualities” meant simply just seeing everything as a momentary quality, a momentary event that arose and passed away. You sit there watching things come and go, come and go come and go, and you don’t anything about them.

But that wasn’t the Buddha’s way of analyzing. For him, analyzing meant watching to see which qualities in the mind are skillful, which ones are unskillful. And of course, once you know what’s skillful and unskillful, then the next thing is to put in energy, put in your effort to encourage the skillful ones and undercut the unskillful ones. Because effort, too, is one of the factors of awakening that helps wake you up. Ideally, it should lead to rapture, which is a sense of being energized in body, energized in mind.

So you give the mind work to do. Often the problem of sloth and torpor arises in what’s called access concentration. You’ve been able to drop the distractions that keep interfering with your concentration, and your moments of concentration get longer and longer and more and more continuous. Things get comfortable and then you want to drift off and go to sleep.

That's the way we're programmed. Ever since we were little children, ever since we were babies, as soon as things got relaxed, we felt, "Let's go to sleep." That's what the mind is used to.

So you've got to fight that tendency. As things settle down, you've got to give the mind work to do; you've got to keep it energized, engaged. Otherwise, it drifts off into what's called delusion concentration. You're not asleep. You're quiet, and there's a certain amount of awareness, but you're not really sure where you are. Sometimes you'll come out of a state like that and ask yourself, "Well, wait a minute, was I asleep just now? Well no, I wasn't quite asleep but I didn't really know where I was." That's delusion concentration. It's not what you want.

So as soon as things get comfortable—as the breath gets easy and the mind begins to settle down—you've got to keep it energized and engaged to get through access concentration so that you can get all the way to fixed penetration, where you're really one with the object. There's a strong sense of energy and it's centered. Focused. Continuous. That's the kind of concentration you're working toward.

So concentration is not just resting and relaxing. You relax all your thought-formations, you relax the body, you help clean up tension in the breath energy in different parts of the body so that you can undercut a lot of the nervous energy that keeps you distracted. But then, within that sense of being rested and relaxed, you've got to give the mind work to do. Otherwise it'll drift off.

And it turns out that uncertainty, the other delusion hindrance, is also undercut by analyzing things into skillful and unskillful. Because that's what the problem with uncertainty is: You're unsure about what to do. You're not sure whether you're on the right path or not.

So you ask yourself that question: "What's skillful right now? What would be the skillful thing to do?" And then you check for the results of your actions, look for cause and effect. In other words, really apply yourself to observing. Don't just sit there and wonder. You've got to test things.

This is what Ajaan Fuang meant when he said that the cure for uncertainty is to be true in the practice. In other words, you really put an effort into it and then you check the results you're getting. And it's by checking your results that you can cut through your uncertainty and you see that, Yes, focusing in this way is useful, focusing in that way doesn't work. You begin to get a sense of the skill of meditation: what yields results and what doesn't. That's the knowledge that cuts through uncertainty.

So in all the cases of the hindrances that come out of delusion, you want to start asking questions—the right kind of questions. In the texts this is called appropriate attention: raising the right issues and then examining things in terms

of cause and effect. Where's the stress? What leads to the stress? Where does stress end? And what do you do to make stress end? This takes the issue of skillful and unskillful and turns it into questions around the four noble truths. The only way you're going to undercut these hindrances is through developing this kind of discernment.

So watch over your meditation. See if it's heading off into too much energy or too little energy. The cure for too much energy, the Buddha said, is getting things concentrated, getting them serene or tranquil and developing a sense of equanimity. But to get the mind serene, you've got to analyze things a little bit, to see what's working and what's not. Especially when it's restless like that.

Now, some people do find that simply repeating a meditation word will lull the mind down. But if you're really entangled in your thoughts, you've got to analyze them, dissect them, so that they lose their appeal.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a nice image. Some people, he says, are like a tree standing out in the middle of a field. If you want to cut down the tree, it doesn't take much in terms of strategy: You just cut the tree and it falls. Other trees, though, have their branches entangled with other trees. It's possible for you to cut through the trunk and you find that the tree is still standing because it's so entangled with the other trees. So first you've got to figure out which branches to cut and then what angle to cut the trunk so that it falls where you want it. This requires more analysis, more ingenuity, more of a strategy.

Most of us are that second kind of tree. We take our thoughts very seriously. So you've got to learn how to cut through them, analyzing them in terms of cause and effect as to what's skillful and what's not. As long as you've got that energy to think, use it in this direction: to see what kind of thinking leads to calming the mind, centering the mind, so that you can get past these obstacles and get the mind into a good, solid state of fixed penetration.