

The Five Hindrances

April 7, 2009

When you meditate and there's a Dhamma talk at the same time, make sure that the Dhamma talk stays in the background. Your breath should be in the foreground because that's what you're here for: to find the Dhamma that can appear when the mind settles down and stays with one object.

We think of the Dhamma as being words, but that's only one aspect of the Dhamma—and it's only a very beginning aspect. Traditionally, there are three kinds of Dhamma. There's the Dhamma that you memorize. These are the words put down in books. Before there were books, there were palm leaves. And before there were palm leaves, the words were memorized.

This kind of Dhamma is like a map. But just memorizing the words—looking at the map—is not going to get you to where you want to go. First, you have to think about it, to try to understand the map and figure out what it corresponds to. Those little symbols on the map: What do they correspond to, when you look out around you? It's like taking the map with you as you drive down the road and try to figure out which symbols on the map correspond to which roads, which turnoffs you come to.

That's thinking about the Dhamma. But driving down the road is the actual practice, and it's only through the driving that you get to where you want to go. So as you're focused on the breath, that's the driving. And you refer to the map only when you're doubtful and things don't seem to be right. Or when the navigator, sitting next to you in the right-hand seat, says, "Whoops! No, we missed that turnoff," that's what the Dhamma talk's for in the background. In case you slip off the breath, we're right here to say, "No, you missed the turnoff. You missed that little turn in the breath. Let's go back."

Try to make sure that the talk is not a hindrance to your meditation, because the mind has enough hindrances on its own. The traditional list is five. Those are five large categories. As you've probably noticed, the mind has all sorts of ways of elaborating the different ways it pulls away from the breath. But the five categories are useful to get a handle on what's happening. They make it easier to figure what to do about it.

Sensual desire and ill will: These two derive from the unskillful roots of greed and aversion as unskillful roots. The last three hindrances that derive from delusion. There's sloth and torpor, a type of delusion that comes when your

energy level is too low; restlessness and anxiety, the delusion that comes when you energy level is too high; and then, uncertainty.

Ajaan Lee has an interesting analysis of uncertainty. He says this is what happens when you're not really true in committing yourself to the practice. Part of your uncertainty may have to do with your past experiences. You're not really sure of what's the right way to handle things. Sometimes you're not even sure you're on the right path, or if this is the right meditation technique for you. But the only way you're going to find out these things is to commit yourself. Just say, "Well, let's go ahead and just give it a try." Do your best.

In the Canon, uncertainty is said to be caused by not looking in an appropriate way at what's skillful and what's unskillful in your mind. The appropriate way of looking at these things is to see what's causing suffering and what's not. You look at your thoughts as part of a cause-and-effect pattern. When you can deal with them in the proper way—with this ability to see them simply as events in the mind rather than your entering into them as worlds—then you find that the other hindrances begin to fall away as well.

When you enter into your thoughts as worlds, you start siding with them. The things for which you feel sensual desire: They really are worthy of desire. They're really desirable. The things for which you feel aversion really are bad. When you're sleepy, well, it's a sign that the body really does need some rest. When you're worried about something, restless and anxious about something, you can find all kinds of reasons for why you should be restless and anxious. That's precisely what you've got to see through: this willingness to side with these things. And one way to cut through that is to keep reminding yourself to look at these thoughts as events in the mind, part of a chain of causes and effects.

Where do these thoughts come from? Where do they lead? Why are they taking over the mind? Sometimes it's through your views. Buried some place in the mind is the idea that you're really going to find happiness through these things. You've got to ferret out that assumption and question it. This is why a lot of the techniques for dealing with the hindrances have you look at the object of the hindrance in such a way as to discourage your fascination with it.

In other words, if there's sensual desire for something, look at the drawbacks of that object. Then if it's lust for a person, look at the drawbacks of lusting for that person. If it's greed for an object, look at the drawbacks of what would be involved in trying to gain the object, keep the object, and maintain it. If it's aversion for somebody or something, well, try to look for the good side of that person or thing. In other words, you're focusing first on the object so that you can

loosen up that strong fascination with it. That's what enables you to turn and look at the mind state simply in and of itself.

You can ask questions: If these mind states were movies, would you pay to watch them? Most of the time, you wouldn't. Or do these mind states really have anything new and interesting to tell you? Most of the time they just rehash old stuff over and over again. Wouldn't it be better to try and see if there's something new, something different? And where is the new and different thing? It's right here, seeing what new and different things can happen in the mind if you really get it to settle down and stay concentrated. As the Buddha said, we're here to attain the unattained, reach the as yet unreached, to realize the as yet unrealized. In other words, there are new things that we don't yet know about. We haven't experienced them yet. When are you going to have enough of your old rehashing of your desires, your aversions, and the things that you worry about?

If sloth and torpor is the problem, do what you can to energize yourself. The first thing is to change the object of your meditation. If it's the breath, you can start by changing the way you breathe: stronger, more forceful, more energized. See if that helps. If that doesn't help, maybe you have to find a topic to think about that you find more interesting, more engaging. Look through those ten recollections: recollecting the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, the times you've been generous in the past or the times you've been virtuous in the past. Those last two are to give you a sense of confidence.

Or you can contemplate death. Ask yourself, when a particularly gross hindrance is going through the mind, would you be happy to die right now with this sort of stuff going through your head? Well, no. What would you like to have as your mind state when you die? You never know when death may come. As the Buddha said, the person who says, "May I live for one more in-breath and out-breath so that I have a chance to practice the Buddha's teachings during that amount of time": That's the sort of person who counts as heedful.

If those topics don't wake you up, get up and do some walking meditation. Give it a few minutes. If you find that you're still sleepy, okay, that's a sign that the body really does need to sleep. It really does need some rest. Lie down, but before you fall asleep, remind yourself that as soon as you wake up, you want to get up and continue practicing. In other words, drowsiness is something you have to test to make sure that it's not simply boredom or the mind playing tricks on itself.

With restlessness and anxiety, one of the traditional recommendations is to try to breathe in such a way as to give a strong sense of rapture—real fullness throughout the body. Think of every little cell in your body being really full with energy as you breathe in. And then when you breathe out, the energy doesn't get

squeezed out; it still stays full. Then more energy comes in to make it even fuller, more saturated. Ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel really gratifying right now?”—even it’s just one really good breath. See if you can let that sense of gratification pull you away from your restless and anxious thoughts.

Another way is to deal with the reason for your anxiety. There’s probably part of the mind that’s telling you, “You’ve got to worry about this. If you don’t worry about this, you’re leaving yourself exposed to lots of dangers.” Well, remind yourself that going over and over and over these thoughts is going to wear you out. There’s a certain amount of preparation that’s prudent. But a lot of it is just excess spinning of wheels, which, instead of putting you in a better position to deal with future dangers, is actually going to put you in a worse position. You’re going to be worn out. So remind yourself of the wisdom of charging the batteries of the mind so that regardless of what happens, you’re ready for it.

As we were saying this morning, there’s so much change in the world. It’s particularly evident right now. But the wisest way to prepare for all this change is to make sure that the qualities of your mind are really strong. Your concentration is strong. Your discernment is strong. You can sit down to read the newspapers and have no idea what’s going on. As we’ve seen, there’s a lot that goes on behind the scenes. Most of the important stuff goes on behind the scenes. It comes out only when things begin to unravel. We have no idea how much more is still left behind the scenes.

So you can be thoroughly informed, read all the newspapers, get all the information off the Internet, and still not be prepared for what’s going to happen. Your best preparation is to charge the batteries of your mind. Stoke up on those qualities of mindfulness and alertness, virtue, generosity—the things you’re really going to need regardless of what happens. And you can do that only by meditating.

These are some of the ways of dealing with the hindrances. If you find them getting in the way of your concentration, keep the fact in mind that they’re not your friends. All too often, we view the practice as our enemy, something that lies as a big responsibility that we try to avoid. That’s an attitude you’ve really got to question. You’ve got to take it apart because the attitude itself is an enemy. It destroys the wealth that you could develop inside and the preparations you could make for having an inner stronghold. When the situation outside gets difficult, unpredictable, or turbulent, you want this stronghold inside so that you have a safe place to keep all your good qualities, near to hand when you need them.

As the Buddha pointed out, the way we feed our hindrances is to apply inappropriate attention to them. In other words, we don’t look at them in terms

of the four noble truths. We don't see what suffering they're causing. We just ride with them. The way to starve them is to develop appropriate attention. Look at these mind states simply as that—as mind states, part of a chain of cause and effect. See where these chains of cause and effect cause harm and suffering. Keep looking in this way to the point where you get tired of them. You want something better, something new, which can be found only through the concentration.

You may have hit a plateau. Your concentration doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Sometimes a necessary part of the practice is to learn how to consolidate a particular state of mind, a particular level of concentration, before you can move on. Sometimes it's simply a matter of learning to look more carefully. When things get boring, it's a sign that you're not looking carefully enough—because actually, there's a lot going on. The mind is engaged in a lot of different kinds of fabrication, making a lot of choices all the time.

When your mind is still, that's the ideal opportunity to look more deeply, more precisely. So use more sensitivity. Try to get more and more to the details because that's where the action is.