

Not Siding with the Hindrances

December 29, 2010

It's inevitable that when you make up your mind to do something, something else is going to get in the way. Then you have to decide which is more important: the original intention or the new one. When you're meditating, it should seem obvious that your intention to actually do the meditation should take first priority. But somehow, after four or five minutes, you find yourself someplace else. You're thinking about something else. Then you get back to the breath, and then you find yourself wandering off again.

So you've got to look into why. Why does the mind suddenly find the new idea so attractive? Part of the reason is simply that mindfulness is weak. The habit of the mind is that it tends to flit around. It tends to forget very easily. You have to consciously sew one moment of alertness to the next one, to the next one, to the next one, if there's going to be any continuity at all. Partly it's a matter of interest: If you find something really interesting, you tend to find it easy to sew things together. So that's where the second issue comes in, interest.

We spend so much time being interested in our own thoughts that when we make up our minds to stay with the breath and just be observant and not really think about anything, it goes against the grain. We have to tell ourselves that our thoughts are not all that interesting, but it hurts. It's almost an insult. But stop and think of the things you used to think about, say, twenty, thirty years ago, things that had you really fascinated. Do they fascinate you now? Not necessarily. You've outgrown them. And in fact, there's part of the mind that's never really interested in those things.

We've gotten so used to selling them, advertising them to ourselves, that we get upset when our advertisements are not having any affect. This is why one of the most difficult parts of dealing with the hindrances or other distractions in the mind is to recognize them simply as that, as hindrances, and to realize you don't want to side with them. You're not going to fall for the advertisements that the sensual desire is for something really worthy of desire, or the ill-will is for somebody who's actually awful, who doesn't deserve any happiness at all. Or when sleepiness comes up, you interpret it as a sign: "Oh, the body really is tired. It's time to get some rest." You can think about all the lack of sleep you've had for the past who knows how many days, and that becomes part of a narrative that convinces you, "Yes, it is time to take a little rest here." Or if you're worried about something, it really is a serious problem that you've got to worry about right now, even though five minutes ago it wasn't even on the radar. Or when you're uncertain about things—you're starting to have uncertainty about the practice, uncertainty about your own ability to do this—you say, "Yes, it really is doubtful."

In other words, you side with your hindrances. That makes it difficult for any of the techniques or any of the traditional techniques to work—and the Buddha gives all kinds of

techniques.

Just one is catching yourself, realizing, “This is a hindrance,” and coming back to the breath. Another one, if that doesn’t work, is to contemplate the drawbacks of that particular line of thinking: that it’s getting in the way of your concentration. Or if you were to think with that line of thinking for a long time, what kind of behavior it would lead to, seeing that takes you someplace that you don’t really want to go. Or you can consciously ignore the hindrance, knowing that it’s there but letting it be in some other corner of the mind, while you can still stay with the breath in this corner. Or you can notice that when you’re thinking about things, there’s going to be tension in the body. Recognize the tension that corresponds with that particular thought and breathe right through it. When that part of the body is relaxed, the thought has no foothold and it vanishes.

These are just some of the techniques the Buddha recommends. And if you learn how to recognize the hindrance as such, the techniques work, but if part of the mind is still siding with the hindrance, you’ve got to learn how to ferret it out.

This is where the mind gets tricky, because it knows that it’s supposed to be here meditating so it won’t admit openly that it wants to think about something else. As a result, it resorts to subterfuge. And it has its little whispering ideas. Number one is, “This is boring, this breath business, I’d much rather be entertained.” You have to remind yourself that sometimes some of the best discoveries in your life have come to you when you were bored.

The other day we were over at the Palomar Observatory, and they were showing the pictures of the first sightings of those dwarf planets way out beyond Pluto: Sedna and Eris. And all it consisted of was two little tiny dots. One spot in one picture that it moved slightly in the next. That was it. That was how they knew there were dwarf planets there.

Nowadays, of course, they have computer programs that will compare pictures like this and detect these things. But think about the time they were discovering Pluto—Clyde Tombaugh, I think was the guy’s name. He had to sit pouring over pictures of the night sky, flipping them back and forth, back and forth, to see if there was any movement. He did this for days and days and days on end, months on end. It was not interesting work, and yet he was able to break through the boredom that would develop around it and stick with it, and he found something important.

That’s a part of the trick, wanting to learn how to make the breath as interesting as possible, but at the same time realizing that there are going to be times when it’s not interesting, you’re not learning anything new, and you seem to have hit a fallow period. That’s why you’ve got to remind yourself that when it seems like nothing is happening, there are two reasons. One is nothing is happening; the other is that the mind is hiding things from itself.

It’s like those politicians who would have us believe that when they wake up in the morning, all that they can think of is, “What can I do today for the public good?” and pretend that nothing is going on. Well, it’s not just politicians. Every mind does that to itself.

All the workings of the mind are hidden because we hide them from ourselves. They're right there. They're happening right there in the mind, but we have this tendency to hide them, one way or another. So you have to remind yourself when things seem fallow and nothing's happening, it's because you're not looking carefully enough. So instead of allowing yourself to get deflected by that thought of being bored and wanting some entertainment and finding your thoughts so much more entertaining, remind yourself: We're here on detective work, investigative work. The mind is pulling a fast one on itself, and you want to see through its subterfuges, see through its tricks, see through its smokescreens. That's going to take patience.

You have to sharpen your powers of observation and your will to be observant. It's like hunting. You have to be very still and very observant at the same time, because there's something you want to catch. And this requires a shift in your values, because we do want to be entertained. We find our thoughts very fascinating, and our usual narratives are very fascinating to part of the mind. But remember, there is that other part that's just watching and it's actually functioning all the time. You can be off in a nice dream world and then something will jolt you back to reality because there's another part of the mind that's watching for other things going on and it'll detect them.

So you have to learn to highlight that part of the mind, the heedful part, the part that doesn't want to be fooled, that realizes you've been fooling yourself for a long, long time and you'd like to see through it. Learn how to activate that side of the mind, the side that really wants to figure things out, that wants to connect A to B. When there's A and then there's B, why is that? Is there a connection? You want to see that. You've got to watch carefully. Think of any skill you've developed that has required that ability to watch consistently. Like a potter who has to be totally concentrated on the clay and the movement of the hands up the clay, who can't let herself think of anything else at the time. Or the photographer who has to be totally involved in the shot. That's the kind of interest, that's the kind of attention you've got to develop.

That part of the mind is there—the part of the mind that doesn't need to be entertained, that just wants to know, to be aware. That's the part you want to activate, to learn the skill required to keep it going. Don't let yourself be fooled by all the old ideas: "I need entertainment" or "I'm just here for the fun." Because remember, the fun is not always fun all the way through. A lot of our narratives, a lot of the interests of our lives, are going to turn on us someday. So we need to cultivate the part of the mind that's immune to those effects. We have to develop the skills that we're going to need when we can no longer think about those things.

I think of my father. As he got older, his main pleasure in life was woodworking, having that opportunity just to go down into his shop, often to get away from a lot of issues with his second wife. But then he developed Parkinson's and couldn't be allowed near the equipment. It really took a lot out of him. He didn't have that opportunity anymore. And he didn't have

any alternative. That was the problem: There was no alternative.

So you want to work on the alternative, the part of the mind that can still function and can still take care of itself even without the entertainment, even without the sensual desires, or the ill-will, or any of the other activities that we usually use to entertain ourselves. When you can learn how to highlight and activate that part of the mind, then you've got a refuge.