

Effort against the Hindrances

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One of the Thai idioms for meditating is *tham kwaam phien*, which literally means “making an effort.” We’re not just sitting here, watching things arising and passing away. There are certain things we want to *make* arise and *prevent* from passing away. In other words, we want to make concentration arise and to provide the conditions for discernment. As for unskillful thoughts that get in the way of concentration, we want to make sure they don’t arise. If they do arise, we want to speed up their passing away.

As a group, those thoughts are called hindrances, and there are five altogether: sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty. These things, when they take over the mind, prevent us from getting into good concentration, which is why they’re called hindrances.

The problem is that, in ordinary life, we don’t see these things as hindrances at all. We actually like them. We think they help us attain our aims. So the first step in getting past them is to see that they really are getting in our way. We tend to side with the thoughts, we tend to find our thoughts really interesting, so it’s important that you learn to see them as not so interesting after all: just the mind chattering away to itself, often with no sense of responsibility. When you can see things in that way, it’s easier to pull yourself out.

The Buddha lists five ways of dealing with hindrances, and they can apply to any one of the five. The first is simply recognizing that your mind has slipped off into something unskillful. You replace it with something skillful, in other words, you just bring it back to the breath. And try to make the breath more comfortable than it was before. Get yourself interested in the breath again. Because that kind of thought can be cured simply by giving yourself something new to think about. It’s simply caused by a lack of mindfulness. Your mindfulness has slipped, you’re off someplace else. Well, you re-establish mindfulness back where you were before and then you try to make it extra strong.

But there are a lot of hindrances that are not quite so innocent. They come with an agenda. They tell you how important they are, that you’ve *got* to think about them or that they’re good to think about. This is where you have to use the Buddha’s second technique, which is to focus on their drawbacks. And you notice that each of the hindrances has a different set of drawbacks.

With sensuality, the drawback is that you waste all your time, thinking about pleasures that, when they actually come, are not nearly as good as you make them out to be. When the Buddha talks about sensuality, he talks less about the actual pleasures and more about the fact that we sit there and embroider the possibility of what *this* pleasure’s going to be like and what *that* one’s going to be like. And then, after you’ve had them, you talk to yourself about how

great they were. But when you really look at the actual pleasure, you see that all that talk is a bunch of lies. You can think for hours about food. When you actually eat it, it's in the mouth only for a little bit, then when it goes down past the throat then it's something else entirely. And when you can see how the mind's lying to itself so much about these pleasures, that helps you see that that kind of thinking is not something you want to get involved with.

As for ill will, the main problem, of course, is that if you have ill will for other people you're going to do unskillful things. You're going to mistreat them, and then that becomes your karma. There's no way at all that you benefit from ill will, wanting to see someone else suffer. You're just burning yourself up with anger at the moment, and setting yourself up to do unskillful things in the future. There's no reason you should want to be involved in that kind of thinking.

Sleepiness is very seductive, because when it comes on your first thought is, "Gee, I must be tired. Maybe I should rest." *You have to test it.* All too often, sleepiness is hiding something from you. Something may be coming up in the mind, some important insight, but part of the mind is afraid of it, so it pretends to be sleepy. So you've got to test it, because otherwise you'll miss out on things—after all, nobody even gained awakening while they were asleep. You've slept before, there's nothing really new about sleeping. So when sleepiness comes on, you want to fight it. Make yourself interested in the breath, make yourself more interested in the ways the breath can go in the body, give the mind work to do when you see that sleepiness is just getting in the way of training the mind.

Restlessness and anxiety: The main problem there is that you tell yourself you've got to think about something in the future, prepare for danger. But all too often, if you're carried away with restlessness, carried away with anxiety, you wear yourself out. And the mind doesn't have the strength it needs to deal with unexpected dangers that come up. All too often we prepare for dangers that never happen.

Like the cannons that the British set out to defend Singapore: They thought the Japanese were going to come from the sea, so they put the cannons in cement aimed out to sea. But then the Japanese came down the Malay Peninsula and the cannons were useless. All that money, all that time spent on the cannons that could have been spent for better defense, just went to waste. In the same way, a lot of our thoughts and worries about the future are a waste. They sap our energy and they don't protect us at all. We get better protection from the mindfulness, alertness, and concentration we could be developing by sticking with the breath.

As for uncertainty, remind yourself that it keeps you from committing yourself to anything, because you can be doubtful about anything at all. And what ends up happening is that you never commit yourself and so you never really find out what's true and what's not true in the practice.

So when you can see these drawbacks to these hindrances, that they really are not your friends, they're not even all that interesting, then you can pull yourself out. That's the Buddha's second method.

The third method is if the mind just keeps chattering away, you just tell yourself, "Okay, just let it chatter, but I'm not going to get involved in the chatter." It's like someone talking in one corner of the room, so you go in the other corner of the room. You focus on your breath and don't get involved in the chatter at all. Think of it as being like a crazy person talking to you, coming to ask for something from you. If you get involved with the crazy person, he'll pull you in, pull you into his crazy stories. You have to pretend like you don't notice him at all. The same with these thoughts. They can chatter away, but as long as you're not interested in them, you're not giving them any food. After a while they run out.

The fourth method is when you begin to notice, as you get more sensitive to the breath, that when a thought appears in the mind there'll be a slight pattern of tension in some part of the body. It might be in the arm, the stomach, anywhere in the body. And it's associated with the arising of that thought. If you can find out where the tension is, you breathe through it, dissolve it away. When the thought has no place to stand, it'll disappear.

If none of these methods work, the Buddha recommends that you put your tongue against your palate, bite your teeth, and then just keep telling yourself, "*I will not think that thought.*" If you want, you can use a meditation word, just really rapid fire, "Buddho, Buddho, Buddho," really fast so there's no time for the mind to think. Basically squeeze the thought out of the mind. This, of all the methods, is the one that uses the least discernment, but it's helpful at times. It helps to clear the air.

So you've got five approaches to use for the hindrances. Of course, it's up to you to want to use them. That's the most important part. Half the battle is realizing that something is a hindrance and you don't want to get involved. If you can get past your interest in your own thoughts, and the way you tend to side with the hindrances, then it's easier to put in the effort to fight them. In other words, base your persistence, which is the second base for success, on the first base: the desire to actually get the mind into concentration and to get past these things. That's half the battle right there. These techniques then can complete the job, so that the effort you put into the meditation really does bear fruit. The mind can settle down. You're not getting worn out by the effort. You use the effort to clear the obstacles from mental stillness, for the sake of the strength you're going to develop from the concentration. Because once the concentration gets solid, gets past these things, you end up having more energy than you had before. That's a sign that your effort is right.