

## *Dealing with the Hindrances*

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Ajaan Lee talks about directed thought and evaluation in the meditation as dealing with the breath: figuring out what kind of breathing feels best for you right now, where you can create a sense of well-being in the body, and then how you can make the best use of that sense of well-being, letting it spread down the nerves, down the blood vessels, bathing the whole body, maintaining your focus with the breath so the mind is willing to settle down.

But sometimes you're dealing with hindrances, things that get in the way of your concentration. Here you can use directed thought and evaluation as well, trying to figure out why the mind is attracted to a particular hindrance, such as sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty, all of which are aggravated in times of stress like this. Try to figure out why the mind is attracted to these things and what it can do to get past them.

Here it's good to remember that concentration comes in several different lists in the Buddha's teachings. It's in the list of the factors for awakening, it's in the list for the five faculties, and the Buddha says that each of these lists has a particular mental quality that develops it. In the five faculties, concentration is developed by heedfulness. In the factors for awakening, it's developed by appropriate attention. So let these two qualities provide some guidance to your directed thought and evaluation as you're dealing with the hindrances.

Appropriate attention is when you look at your actions and their consequences. In other words, when you see there's a problem, something's weighing down the mind, you don't go looking outside to blame things outside. You look inside to see how the mind is processing things, how it's fabricating things, and what the results are, whether they're skillful or not. When the Buddha was teaching Rahula about the practice as a whole, the image he used was of a mirror. You look at your actions as a mirror to see what's going on in the mind. And you keep in mind that these are actions.

Take, for instance, the hindrance of sensual desire. The desire's focused on an object or on a narrative, and we can get very focused on these things. As the Buddha said, there is the kind of *jhana* that's focused on desire and all the different hindrances. It's not right concentration, but it is a type of concentration, though. It's a concentration with blinders. It focuses so much on the object and particular details of the object that you're blinding yourself to a lot of other its other aspects.

So here the function of appropriate attention is to take off the blinders, to look around at what you're doing, to be more circumspect. First, look at the object: Is it really as desirable as you like to make it look in your fantasies? Try to look for the bad side as well. If you're lusting for a body, you know what to do. You take it apart into its 32 parts in your mind. Imagine all the parts laid out on the floor, and then ask yourself: Which is the part that you're lusting for? The mind might say, "Well, those aren't the things I'm lusting for. I'm lusting for the body as it's all put together." But when it's all put together, it's made up out of these things. You can't lack any of these things and have a healthy body. You may decide that livers are unattractive, but can you imagine a human being alive without a liver? It's essential to there being a body. And you can also think of the body as it grows older, as it dies, what it's going to be like.

There are lots of ways of taking off the blinders and looking more completely at what's going on. And of course, what's going on is not simply the object, it's the mind's activity in focusing on the object. Once you get a little bit of disenchantment with the object itself, then you can start looking at the activity the mind is creating around it. How are you feeding on this? How are you lying to yourself? Is this something really skillful?

This is the point where heedfulness comes in. Someone asked the other day what heedfulness is, and I think the best answer is that it's the opposite of being intoxicated, the opposite of being drunk. When you're drunk, you have no powers of judgment. You don't think about the consequences of what you're doing. When something comes into the mind and you want to do it, you just do it. Your judgment as to whether you'll get some satisfaction out of doing that, even in the short term, is really impaired. With heedfulness, however, you look at the long term. And you look carefully to see what you're doing, what's motivating what you're doing, and where it's taking you—and whether it's worth it.

As the Buddha said, we tend to be intoxicated by three things: by youth, by health, by life. So when you're intoxicated, thinking about sensuality, you may see that you're wasting your time, but part of you will tell yourself, "I've got a lot of time, I've got a lot of energy, I'm not going to die anytime soon, it doesn't matter if I waste a little time right now." But then of course it turns into lots of right nows, right nows, right nows getting wasted, wasted, wasted away. Meanwhile, you develop bad habits in the mind.

As the Buddha said, the things you tend to think about a lot bend the mind. So every time it thinks, its thinking gets bent in that direction, like ruts in a road. The deeper the ruts, the harder it is to get out. Heedfulness works together with appropriate attention to keep the mind from getting bent in the wrong direction.

As you think about actions and their consequences and how what you're doing right now is going to make all the difference in the world, you'll want to do it skillfully.

So these are the terms in which you think in order to get past hindrances like sensual desire. You analyze the object, look at it fully, take off the blinders to see that it's not worth the desire. The same thing with ill will. If you really understood the person or the thing for which you have ill will, you'd realize that the ill will is not worth it. As the Buddha said, when you have ill will for anyone it's a sign that you have wrong view. You're not looking at the person fully. You're not looking at your relationship with the person fully.

When your obsession with the person begins to fade, then you can turn to look at the action: what you're doing. You begin to see where the hindrance is coming from and where it's going to go and how it's something you really don't want to get involved with. In this way, you overcome your intoxication and develop some dispassion. And from that dispassion the hindrance can fall away, because no matter how much the object of your ill will may be there right in front of you, still you're the one who's creating the hindrance out of it—from your passion for the hindrance itself, actually. So once the passion fades away and that particular hindrance goes, you can get back to the breath, back to your concentration.

As long as the mind is fascinated with thinking about things, think about the breath: all the ways you can play with the breath, times when you want the breath to be comfortable, times when you want it to be uncomfortable. Because sometimes there are conditions in the body that require that you breathe in a way that doesn't feel immediately that good. I noticed in my own case, back when I had migraines, that there were times when I would breathe and expand the abdomen as much as I could to the point where it was painful, breathe quite heavily, and that got me out of the cycle of breathing that had been nurturing the migraine and reset the cycle.

There's a lot to learn about the breath if you pay attention and if you use your imagination. So instead of using your imagination to think thoughts of sensual desire, thoughts of ill will, whatever the hindrance, allow the breath to capture your imagination. Apply your appropriate attention and your heedfulness to the breath, realizing that this is going to be your friend. Because heedfulness is not just about the dangers that are out there, it's also about the safety that can be found if you change your actions.

So try to get really familiar with the breath—its ins and outs—because you're going to need this as a friend. As you get to know the breath, you get to know all

the processes of fabrication going on in the mind, so that even when you have to leave the breath at the time of death you'll have gained some familiarity with the mind itself. And that way you'll be prepared.

That's what heedfulness is all about: being prepared. And appropriate attention points you to the fact that the work has to be done by you. You can't hope for someone else to come and do it for you, and it doesn't get easier with time, so you might as well do it now.