

Hindrances to the Heightened Mind

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We sometimes think of the middle way as halfway between sensual pleasure and self-torture, but that's not quite right. It's halfway between two forms of devotion: devotion to sensual pleasure and devotion to self-torture. And the middle way is not devotion to a middling pleasure, a middling pain. It's devotion to the heightened mind—in other words, to the practice of concentration. As the Buddha said, noble right concentration is the heart of the path, and all the other factors are its requisites or its aids. So as we sit here meditating, trying to get the mind into right concentration, we're focusing right at the heart.

The problem is, there are large parts of the mind that want to do something else. We've got to clear them away. In Pali, they're called *nīvaraṇa*, or hindrances, and the standard list is of five. The Buddha describes how you get past them before the mind can settle down, but he doesn't talk about them just in the context of meditation. He says you have to deal with the hindrances in connection with the practice of sense restraint. In other words, as you go through the day, you have to watch over your thoughts. If you've been thinking about particular topics, or allowing the mind to indulge in certain ways of thinking, it's going to be hard for it to settle down and abandon them when you sit down with your eyes closed. In fact, when your eyes are closed and there's nothing much else to distract your attention, they'll come on in full force.

So your first lesson in dealing with the hindrances is: Don't wait until you're sitting here with your eyes closed. As you go through the day, watch over how you look at things, how you listen to things, how you taste things, how you think about things, and try to bring the mind under control. One way is simply changing the topic, changing the focus. If you see that looking at a certain thing gives rise to lust or gives rise to anger, ask yourself: Do you really have to look at it? In a lot of cases, no, you went looking for it: something to aggravate the desire for anger, the desire for lust.

That's an important principle to understand about the hindrances: Often you go looking for them. It's not that you're sitting here, perfectly calm, and then something comes in to incite lust or incite anger. You're out there looking. In the terms of the forest tradition, there's a current of the mind that's ready to go out and engage in things in this way.

So you've got to keep it in check, and one way of keeping it in check is to give the mind alternative things to think about. If you're thinking about sensual

pleasures, think about, on the one hand, the drawbacks of the objects that you're focused on. If it's food, think about where the food comes from: It comes out of the ground, out of dirt, and where does dirt come from? There's a lot of excrement in the dirt. Otherwise it would be just sand. So we're feeding off the excrement of our ancestors. Then think about where it goes into the body, what shape it's in when the body actually extracts nutriment from it, then where it goes after it leaves. You can develop a very strong sense of *samvega* thinking about these things.

Then you can turn around and look at the mind that likes sensual desire, that likes to be thinking about sensual pleasures, that likes to fantasize. A lot of times with lust it's not just the object, it's also the narrative, the role that you play in the narrative. And the narrative usually comes out with your playing a pretty cool role. Well, just think about how you're exposing yourself to all kinds of dangers as you focus on getting a sensual pleasure. Think about that passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about a person indulging in sensuality—in other words, a person indulging in sensual thoughts, needing to find happiness in sensuality—and the dangerous situations he puts himself in. He's like a hawk that's carried off a piece of meat, and other hawks are going to come and tear at it, kill it if it doesn't let go. Or a man who's gone up into a tree to gather fruits: Another man comes along and he doesn't want to bother climbing up the tree, so he's going to cut down the tree to get the fruits. Or the man with borrowed goods: The goods don't belong to him, he goes showing them off but they're not really his, and the owners can take them back at any time. So, as you go through the day, try thinking about these things.

As for ill will, the standard antidote when you're thinking about the object of your ill will, of course, is goodwill: looking for the good points in that person. But again, this has to go back to your asking yourself: Why did you like the ill will to begin with? What does it do for you? This shifts the focus away from the object to the hindrance itself. You can think about how you're putting yourself in a pretty miserable situation where you're feeding off of ill will. It's like dogs eating the rotten remains of dead birds.

Sleepiness is not so much a question of the object. Simply, it's something you have to test. And this is not just while you're meditating, but as you go through the day. Because in some cases, yes, the body does need to rest, but oftentimes it's bored, it's looking for something else, it can't think of anything else, so it just goes to sleep. At other times, there are things that are going to come up inside and it wants to avoid them, so it makes you torpid.

This is why the Buddha says you've got to test it. Get up, walk around. If you can think of a chant that you've memorized, run that through your mind. If it's nighttime, go out and look at the stars. Rub your face, pull your ears, rub your limbs, do walking meditation. If you're still sleepy, it's a sign that the body does need to rest, but even then, the Buddha says, when you lie down, make up your mind that you're going to get up as soon as you wake up again. You're not going to just stay there wallowing in the pleasure of lying down.

As for restlessness, that's simply an excess of energy. If you're meditating, you can tell yourself, "As long as I've got the energy to think, why don't I think about the different parts of the body?" Or how about thinking about the breath in different parts of the body, parts of the body that you usually don't focus on? In other words, as long as you've got the energy to think, think about something related to the Dhamma. You could think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, think about your generosity, think about your virtue. As long as you've got the energy to think, think about good things.

And finally, uncertainty: Ask yourself, what's wise about uncertainty? You're looking for the allure of these hindrances, that's basically what it comes down to. Why do you go for them? You think it's wise to be uncertain, to not commit yourself? Uncertainty is actually a form of commitment, you know: committing yourself to standing aside, standing aside, and not doing anything, not taking any risks. Ajaan Lee says it's basically a lack of truthfulness. If you really want to know whether the path works or not, you don't just sit there and wonder about it, you try it. You test the path—and you test yourself in the process.

So you're trying to find what the allure of these things is, because all too often when a hindrance arises, we side with it. You could think of all kinds of beautiful things and, yes, you can convince yourself that they are worthy of desire. You can think of some really awful people out there, get yourself all worked up and, yes, "They really do deserve my ill will." Well, they may be awful, but what business do you have trying to add suffering to theirs? They're already suffering enough, creating the causes for suffering for themselves. Why do you need to add anything on top of it? Sleepiness of course is very attractive to the lazy mind. Restlessness is sometimes attractive to the mind that says, "I've got to plan for the future, I've got to think things through before some danger comes." In which case, you've got to remind yourself: You don't really know what's going to happen, but you *do* know that you're going to need the qualities that you develop in meditation in order to deal with the unexpected—things like mindfulness, alertness, ardency. So the best way to prepare for the future is actually to get yourself to meditate, rather than thinking, thinking, thinking about whatever has you worried.

So you try to see the drawbacks of the hindrances, you try to see their allure. Then, as one of the psychotherapists I know says, try to poison the fantasy. Whatever makes these things attractive, point out the fact that it's not really all that attractive, it's not really all that entertaining. Because a lot of the hindrances are that: They're entertainment. The mind entertains itself as it goes through the day, thinking about this, thinking about that. You sit down, your eyes are closed and all it can see is more space to entertain itself.

So on the one hand, we try to counteract that tendency by making the breath entertaining, getting sensitive to the fact that it's not just in, out, in, out, but there are lots of ins and outs to the breath, different qualities of breathing, different depths of breathing, different ways of visualizing the breath coming in and going out of the body at different spots. There's a lot to play with here. You try to make the breath engaging so that when a hindrance comes up, you don't have the hunger of a bored mind to go for whatever. Then it's a lot easier to see the drawbacks, and to see that whatever allure it may have is pretty empty, pretty shallow, pretty hollow.

So there are lots of techniques for dealing with the hindrances, but the first order of business is to get yourself on the side where you actually recognize that it is a hindrance.

Then, try to develop your mindfulness, develop your repertoire, so you can think of various ways of dealing with it, because there are a lot of things that will simply go away when you note them—"O yeah, my mind is distracted"—and you get back to business. At other times, you have to think through the drawbacks, compare them with the allure, until you realize that there's not much allure there after all.

You can decide that even though the mind is chattering away, you don't have to pay any attention to it. This is where a lot of the hindrances get us. Just because something comes up in the mind, they make us feel that we're committed, that we have to think the thought through. There's also the problem where one part of the mind says, "Well, as long as I'm trying to get the mind into concentration, I can't let there be any thoughts at all in the mind," and so you go chasing them around to chase them out. It's like Whack-A-Mole: One pops up here and you try to hit it, and then another one pops over there, you hit that, and you have no time to just sit and be still. So remind yourself that the thoughts don't destroy the breath. The breath is there. And you have to see the thoughts as uninteresting, see them as strange—strange that anyone would want to think these things.

As you get more sensitive to the breath, you realize that the fact that the mind is engaged in the hindrances takes energy. Four of the five require energy:

Sleepiness doesn't require energy but the other four do. So find where in the body there's tension associated with them and then relax that tension. As for sleepiness, it's the other way around. What can you do to focus on the parts of the body where there is energy and maximize those potentials?

If none of these techniques work, then, as the Buddha said, you press your tongue against your palette, grit your teeth, just tell yourself, "I will not go there." You can use a meditation word really rapid-fire: *Buddho Buddho Buddho*, really fast, to jam the circuits.

So, once you see that the hindrance really is an enemy and not a friend, there are a lot of techniques you can use, so that you're not sitting here devoted to sensuality. You're devoted to heightening your mind, lifting it above these things.

These things have been pulling us around by the nose who knows for how long. That's an image that Ajaan Fuang used to use a lot. In Thailand, they put a ring in the nose of the water buffalo. When they want it to go someplace, they just pull on the ring. Even though the animal's much bigger than they are, all you have to do is get it in its sensitive spot and it'll obey. So try to figure out: What is your sensitive spot? Why do you like these hindrances? That's what they use to pull you around. Hold that image in mind. Do you want to be their beast of burden, or do you want to be free?

When you learn some strategies for dealing with them—not only the strategies for dealing with them directly but also the strategies for making the breath interesting, or, if you can't find anything interesting in the breath, finding a meditation topic that does capture your interest—then you get to the point, as the Buddha said, when you can think the thoughts you want to think, don't have to think the thoughts you don't want to think. And your standards for what kind of thinking is worthwhile will grow higher. You'll be able to lift yourself out of these things as the mind itself gets heightened.