

Hindrances

It is our habit to want to avoid the present moment. For that reason, as we meditate, as we try to put our mind on the breath, we're going to come up against resistance. The mind will resist. The mind will make an effort to deter us from the present moment.

The Buddha identified five primary ways that, as we attempt to be mindful of the breath, we lose the thread, venture off, abandon our present moment experience. These ways that we obscure ourselves from the present moment are known as the five hindrances.

It's important to realize that the teaching on the five hindrances is not an analytical assessment or conceptual framework but rather that it is strategic: the teaching provides a strategy that dharma students learn to implement in an effort to get beyond the obstacles that stand between them and their ability to develop concentration.

The five hindrances to developing concentration, the Buddha said, are:

- 1- Desire – the desire, specifically, for external sense pleasure. When meditating, desire manifests in thinking about sense pleasure, like breakfast or television or sex.
- 2- Aversion – this includes anger, disliking, resentment, etc. The hindrance of aversion frequently arises in the form of aversion to some aspect of the meditation, the way the body feels, the unsettled or dull nature of the mind, etc. Aversion often takes the shape, simply enough, of not wanting to meditate. It's a good indication that you're afflicted with aversion if you want the meditation to be over.
- 3- Dullness or Sleepiness – this includes more subtle forms of dullness, fuzziness in the mind, a mind that's drifting in a vague, dreamlike state.

- 4- Restlessness – generally this refers to restlessness in the mind; it manifests as a proliferation of thinking, a mind that’s churning out a seemingly endless, unstoppable stream of thinking. Often times restlessness entails random, discursive thinking.
- 5- Doubt – this includes doubt in your ability to practice meditation and doubt in the meditation practice itself.

As dharma students, we’re asked to be mindful of these hindrances when they arise, obstruct us, hamper our efforts to keep the mind on the breath. As dharma students, we’re alert. We notice when we’re having difficulty staying with the breath. We recognize the hindrances when they appear.

Let’s say that you’re “disliking” the meditation. Your task, first and foremost, is to notice that you’re caught in an aversive state and that it’s getting in the way of your ability to keep your mind on the breath. Mindful of the hindrance of aversion, you take a step back from it. And, for a moment, you observe it, as if you’re observing words and pictures on a billboard. Observing the aversion, you might label it: “aversion.”

This is the key movement in working with the hindrances. You move from being caught in the hindrance to observing it. You go from “I don’t like this meditation” to “there’s aversion.”

When we establish this kind of subject/object relationship to the hindrance, we get some distance from it; we detach, to some extent, from it. In turn, the hindrance loses some of its strength. Another way of putting it is, when we play the role of the observer, we’re no longer “feeding” the hindrance. If we don’t feed it, it loses strength, and eventually it dies. This is essentially the Buddha’s instruction with regard to the hindrances: to starve them.

As the dharma student observes the hindrance, she ascertains that it is, in fact, a hindrance. It's preventing her from developing concentration, from doing what she needs to do to get to where she needs to get; it's preventing her, ultimately, from being able to move toward a greater happiness in her life.

As she observes the hindrance, and engenders disenchantment with the hindrance – the whole process shouldn't take more than a few seconds – the dharma student creates some “space,” a pathway through to the breath. The hindrance may still be there, to some degree, but it's been relegated to the background, it doesn't have the same impact. And, accordingly, she's able to get some purchase on the breath.

It is especially important to be mindful of the hindrances of sleepiness/dullness and restlessness. These are the two hindrances that will most frequently plague us in our efforts to practice mindfulness of breathing. In any given period of meditation, it's a good bet that we'll be assailed by either sleepiness/dullness or restlessness.

Which of these two ubiquitous hindrances will appear usually depends on the quality – specifically, the energy level – of the mind as you enter the meditation. If there's lots of energy in the mind, you'll be afflicted, in all likelihood, by the hindrance of restlessness, the hyperactive, thought-spewing mind. If there's a lack of energy in the mind, you'll probably have to deal with the hindrance of sleepiness/dullness.

The mental states of sleepiness/dullness and restlessness are rooted in delusion. Which is to say, they're deluded states. They're states, therefore, that we're apt to go into when making

an effort to be in the present moment. They serve a quite specific purpose: they provide an exit from the present moment.

Sleepiness/dullness and restlessness, we could say, are means by which we defend ourselves from the present moment.

Sleepiness or dullness of mind is the main way by which many of us seek to avoid the present moment. It's a way of checking out. When meditating, there may be the tendency, when there's sleepiness in your mind, to think that your difficulty is due, simply, to the fact that you're "tired." You haven't been getting enough sleep, you might say. But the truth, more often than not, is that your sleepiness/dullness is attributable, primarily, to your desire to be somewhere else other than the present moment.

In any case, when faced, in meditation, with the hindrance of sleepiness/dullness, it's important to do something, take action in an attempt to remove yourself from the deluded state. Meditating with the eyes open – slightly open, cast downward, letting in a little bit of light – is generally the most useful antidote to sleepiness/dullness.

Restlessness, excessive thinking, is another "effective" way that we steer ourselves away from the present moment. In order to avoid the moment, we enter into streams of thinking; we lose ourselves in thought worlds. Often the thinking we engage in, when afflicted with the hindrance of restlessness, is quite frivolous, trivial, arbitrary. We may find ourselves thinking about the ballgame we watched yesterday or imagining what sort of costume we're going to wear to an upcoming Halloween party. Our purpose, in pursuing this thinking, is simply to take ourselves out of the moment; the content of the thinking doesn't matter so much, what matters is that we find a way out of the present moment.

It's important to make a strong, wholehearted effort to put aside restlessness, this deluded state, this hindrance that's primary purpose is to take us away from the present moment. In an attempt to keep your mind on the breath, and away from the profusion of thoughts, it's good idea to use mental noting. In practicing mental noting, you simply repeat certain words in conjunction with the breath as a way of keeping the mind on the breath. As you focus your mind on the breath, you might, for example, say "in" as you breath in, and "out" as you breath out. Some of the Thai Ajaans recommend using the word, "Buddho," saying "Bud" with the in-breath and "dho" with the out-breath. Buddho means "awake," so it's a good way to assert present moment awareness.

When confronted with sleepiness/dullness and restlessness you may be inclined to have an aversive reaction. You may "dislike" the hindrance and your inability to develop concentration. It's important to watch out for this sort of disliking. When you relate to the hindrance by disliking it, you're adding on a second hindrance. It's as if you've been hit with an arrow – the sleepiness or restlessness – and then, in response, you shoot yourself with a second arrow. The result is, you move even further away from the breath.

As dharma students, we learn to recognize when we've shot ourselves with this second arrow. Recognizing the disliking, we observe it, we stop feeding it. Then we might replace the disliking with something more skillful, a skillful fabrication. We might, for instance, acknowledge that the hindrance that we're coming up against – the sleepiness or restlessness – is part of the process, that in making an effort to be mindful of the breath, to be in the body, we're going to come up against obstacles.

The dharma student, learning to relate skillfully to the hindrances, reminds herself that in practicing mindfulness of breathing, she's engaging in a noble endeavor, and that every noble endeavor is challenging. She acknowledges her goodness, as it's expressed in the effort she's making to train her mind. She takes joy in her good qualities.

And she urges herself on. The dharma student, afflicted with sleepiness, reminds herself that it's important to stay awake, that in staying awake, in keeping her mind on the breath, in the body, in the present moment, she's moving toward a greater happiness.

In the same vein, the dharma student afflicted with restlessness remembers that it will be to her benefit if she doesn't let herself get carried away by currents of thinking; she reminds herself that if she doesn't venture off, if she stays with the breath, she'll be heading in the right direction, toward true happiness.

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