

Hindrances to Meditation

Friends of the Western Buddhist Order

The five hindrances

There are five kinds of hindrances to concentration. These are distractions that impede our efforts to engage fully in our meditation practice. The five hindrances are:

- 1) **Desire for sense experience.** Our mind keeps getting drawn back to the sense-world. Sounds interest us. Colors distract us. Fascinating ideas may come up that we want to explore. We focus on people we know, the pleasures we seek, our plans for the future, and so on.
- 2) **Ill-will, hatred or negative feelings.** We are irritated by something or someone and can't let it go. A sound is irritating, or a person angers us, and we cannot let go of these negative thoughts.
- 3) **Restlessness and anxiety.** Our mind is occupied by things we ought to be doing or would rather be doing. We have pressing concerns (real or imagined) that keep us from concentrating. We feel physically restless and want to fidget or move about.
- 4) **Doubt and indecision.** We have doubts about the meditation. Is this kind of practice a good one? Is the teacher competent? Can it actually do anything for me? Could I do the practice anyway? Because it often seems that something is not perfect, we convince ourselves that the meditation won't work, and we lose the motivation to practice.
- 5) **Sloth and torpor.** Dullness of mind (torpor) and heaviness of body (sloth) can be generated by a resistance to an unacknowledged emotion or simply from physical or mental exhaustion.

Working with hindrances

It is important to recognize the hindrance as a hindrance. We should acknowledge it, accept it and then do something about it. Sometimes just recognizing a hindrance as it arises helps us to let it go. The five antidotes or methods of working with hindrances are:

- 1) **Sky-like attitude.** The mind is like the clear blue sky, and the hindrance a passing cloud. Watch it and play with it, but don't become involved with it. By being more open and accepting of our experience, we'll be able to relax and let go of our attachment to the hindrance.
- 2) **Cultivate the opposite quality.** If we're feeling tired, cultivate energy. If in doubt, foster confidence. If restless, nurture peacefulness. Cultivate a positive (opposite) quality to overcome a negative one.
- 3) **Consider the consequences** of allowing the hindrance to go unchecked. Where will it lead? If we did nothing, what would happen?
- 4) **Suppression.** Simply say "no!" to the hindrance and push it out of our mind. This works best if the hindrance is weak. Too strong an effort to suppress the hindrance can create tension.
- 5) **Going for refuge.** This is not the same concept as taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Recognize or acknowledge that the hindrance may be too much to deal with *this time around*. Reflect on the notion that since everything changes, things will not always be so difficult. This approach helps cultivate a positive regard for ourselves despite our shortcomings with that particular meditation, and helps foster a more positive attitude for future meditation practice.

Balanced Effort

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Integration of the mind through meditation cannot be hurried. The various aspects of our psyche need both stimulation and freedom to come together into a unified state of concentration. We need to balance effort with an appreciation of the experience of the meditative state. All of us tend to oscillate between laziness and willfulness. Within a meditation period, and during different periods of our lives, we tend to waver between willful resistance and willful insistence.

Laziness

Characteristics. The general tone of laziness is that we feel soft-headed and hazy, and are easily distracted. If we are lazy, we fail to apply antidotes to hindrances. Perhaps we lack a clear sense of the purpose in our practice, and so do not engage with it clearly or strongly. Or we may be out of touch with our emotional connection with the practice. Look for obvious factors that cause laziness, such as too much food and warmth, or not enough sleep. Attitudes that accompany laziness are “Meditation is too much for me, I can’t do it”, “I haven’t time this morning, I’ll meditate later”, or “I don’t want to change my habits”, and so on.

Results. Through insufficient application, we not only fail to gain the benefits of meditation, but also perpetuate bad habits. We may fail to acknowledge that our meditation practice is not good.

Willfulness

Characteristics. The general tone of willfulness is an inflexible persistence. There is often a lack of sensitivity toward oneself, and an unforgiving attitude. When being willful, we push ourselves too hard in our meditation. Perhaps we sit for too long and set up an unconscious reaction to the idea of meditating. Perhaps we are driven by unconscious motives that overrule our sensible ability to choose when to practice. We may force ourselves to concentrate because we wish to achieve a particular result in our meditation. We are too concerned with the goal to enjoy the practice of getting there. Not surprisingly, there is often a lack of real inspiration or zest in our practice.

Results. Meditation becomes a chore or rigid habit rather than a regular and enjoyable refreshment of the mind. Negative reactions to practicing may arise if too willful an attitude rules for too long.

Balanced effort

Characteristics. Balanced effort is marked by a tone of progress in meditation. We may not be reaching dhyana states regularly, but there is a general feeling of satisfaction with our practice. It is our gentle and patient yet persistent effort that brings us fully into the meditation. It starts with recognizing clearly where we are in the practice. What hindrances and tendencies do we encounter? How do we respond to them? Do we err towards being swept along by them? Or do we err towards pushing them aside, or using some stock antidote without regard to its success rate?

Results. When effort is balanced there is a feeling of mental and physical pliancy, rather than dullness or rigidity. We are able to work quickly with difficulties in a creative, imaginative, appropriate manner. We are aware of positive qualities growing in our meditation, even if they are only there in germinal form. There is clear thinking engaged in and guiding the practice, not just rambling. We find positive stillness and pleasure in body and mind.