

Hindrances to Clear Seeing

by Gil Fronsdal, March 26, 2005

Anyone who practices mindfulness knows that there are forces in the mind that can make it difficult to be mindful. Rather than reacting to these difficulties as somehow being “bad” or as “distractions,” it is important to investigate them. It is easier to find freedom from something when we know it thoroughly. Ancient Buddhist stories tell of Mara, the Buddhist personification of temptation and distraction, approaching the Buddha. Each time, the Buddha simply says, “Mara, I see you,” and Mara flees. Because the Buddha knew Mara thoroughly, his act of clear seeing was effective in bringing freedom.

Of the many forces of distraction, five are traditionally identified as particularly important for meditators to be familiar with. Known as the five hindrances, they are forces in the mind that can hinder our ability to see clearly or to become concentrated. The hindrances are: **1) sensual desire, 2) ill will, 3) sloth and torpor, 4) anxiousness and worry, and 5) doubt.**

As you can see, the list is actually made up of seven factors, but four are always paired. One explanation for the paired items is that they represent closely related but distinguishable physical and mental factors. Another explanation is that this makes it easier to show a one-to-one relationship between the five hindrances and another traditional list, the five mental qualities needed for the mind to become concentrated. Each of these qualities is said to be an antidote to one of the hindrances: one-pointedness overcomes desire, joy overcomes ill-will, arousing and engaging one’s attention overcomes sloth and torpor, happiness overcomes anxiousness and worry, and sustaining attention overcomes doubt.

The hindrances can be like “black holes” in the mind. A black hole is a collapsed star where the gravitational force is so powerful that even light is sucked in and trapped. When the hindrances are strong, the light of awareness is pulled into their gravitational field and we lose our ability to see what is happening. We may get lost in thought or fantasy fueled by a hindrance.

When they aren’t so strong as to act like black holes, the hindrances can still cloud our ability to see clearly, particularly to know what is harmful and what is beneficial to do, say, or think.

An ancient metaphor for how the hindrances obscure clarity of mind is that of a pond. When the pond is clean and the surface still, the water reflects our image. The effect of sensual desire is like looking into a pond that has been dyed. We are predisposed to see unrealistically – i.e., “seeing with rose colored glasses.” When the heat of ill will is present, it is as if the pond water is boiling; no reflection is possible. Sloth and torpor are like having thick algae growing across the pond; again, no reflection is possible except by the difficult work of pulling out the algae. Anxiousness is like the wind churning up the pond’s surface. And doubt is like the water filled with mud. Because we tend not to see clearly when the hindrances are present, Buddhist teachings strongly encourage people not to make decisions while under their influence. If possible, wait to make a decision when the mind is more settled or clear.

The hindrances operate in everyone; their presence is not a personal failing. Rather, it is useful see their occurrence as an important opportunity to investigate them. Sometimes it is wise to not attempt to quickly get rid of a hindrance but to use it as a chance to learn something. The stronger the hindrance, the more important it is to investigate it.

The Buddha taught five areas that are useful to explore when investigating a hindrance: the hindrance itself, its absence, how it arose, how it is removed, and how to prevent it from arising again.

Exploring the hindrance in and of itself involves recognizing the components of a hindrance, e.g. its physical, energetic, emotional, cognitive and motivational aspects. For example, strong desire may be experienced physically as a leaning forward, a tightening of the solar plexus, or a sense of lightness. Energetically it may be a rushing or lifting. Emotionally it may involve pleasant emotions like delight, excitement, eagerness, or an effort to fix unpleasant emotions such as emptiness, loneliness, or fear. Cognitively it may involve beliefs and stories that we tell ourselves. And, motivationally, it may come as a strong impulse to act or to cling.

Noticing a hindrance’s absence is also important. The contrast between when it is absent and when it is present can help us to perceive the different aspects of the hindrance more clearly. Noticing its absence can also help reinforce a state of being free of hindrances.

Appreciating the passing of a hindrance can be a source of joy that can feed the spiritual life. I believe the Buddha was pointing to this joy when he offered the following similes: being freed from sensual desire is like being freed

from debt; being released from the grip of ill will is like recovering from an illness; being free from sloth and torpor is like being freed from prison; freedom from anxiety and worry is like freedom from slavery; and passing beyond doubt is like completing a perilous desert crossing.

Noticing how hindrances arise, how they are removed and how they can be prevented from arising is the same as knowing how you got into trouble, how to get out of trouble, and how to avoid getting into trouble in the future. It requires attention and discernment to overcome the hindering effect of the hindrances. With enough experience with them we learn not to be tricked into giving up our presence of mind no matter what hindrance may appear.

To be present without being hijacked by the hindrances is a joy. Unhindered attention is a treasure. It is what allows mindfulness to begin doing its most penetrating work of liberation

Sensual Desire as a Hindrance

adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal, November 7th, 2004

As rain penetrates an ill-thatched house,
So lust penetrates an undeveloped mind.

As rain does not penetrate a well-thatched house,
So lust does not penetrate a well-developed mind.

Dhammapada (13-14)

It is sometimes said that practicing mindfulness is easy; what is hard is remembering to do it. To help us remember, it's useful to have a clear understanding of the forces in our minds that contribute to our forgetting. The one that the Buddhist tradition focuses on most is desire.

Desire is ubiquitous in human life. Living without wants, wishes, motivations, and aspirations is inconceivable. Some desires are quite healthy, useful, and appropriate; some are not. One function of mindfulness practice is to help us distinguish between these. And differentiating helps support the beautiful aspiration for liberation and compassion.

Any desire, healthy or unhealthy, can easily manifest as a compulsion. Wherever there is compulsion, we are not free. In the West, we sometimes call particularly strong desires "addictions." Buddhism often refers to compulsive desires as cravings, clingings, or "thirsts." Careful attention to our inner life, through meditation, for example, will quickly reveal that compulsions are deeply rooted in the mind.

Because desire has such an important role in human life, we need to understand its nature, dangers, opportunities, and workings. It is helpful to notice the difference between simple desire and craving, and the tension that comes with craving. It can also be useful to notice how preoccupation with any desire contributes to an alienation from ourselves, from the present moment, and even from others, such as when we are lost in fantasies fueled by desire. People caught in the web of desire often live only on the surface of life.

Sometimes we are caught between competing desires. Healthier desires are all too easily crowded out by desires for comfort or pleasure. For example, some people would like to eat healthfully but give in to the attraction of junk food.

The conflict between desires is particularly evident when people meditate. One common hindrance to mindfulness that becomes evident in meditation is our propensity to think. Thinking can be quite compulsive, sometimes because of the power of a desire that we are thinking about, and at other times because we are simply addicted to thinking itself. The wish to remain mindfully present has to contend with the tendency to get lost in the mind's desire to think.

Sensual desire is the first item on the many Buddhist lists of obstacles to awakening and spiritual freedom. It is the first of the Five Hindrances. The Pali word for sensual desire is *kama-chanda*. *Chanda* simply means desire. *Kama* is a strong word referring to sense pleasure, sensual passion, and sexual lust. Together they refer to compulsive preoccupation with sensual pleasure and comfort.

Perhaps sensual desire is singled out as particularly hazardous to meditators because reaching for pleasure and avoiding pain are more basic than other desires. Even when the mind is still enough not to be caught up in other desires, the enticement of pleasure can still be operating. When the grip of sensual desire is strong, it often pulls us

into the world of fantasy and imagination. Sometimes it is the pleasure of fantasizing itself that holds us more than the object of our wants.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with sensual pleasure, the desire for it is called a hindrance when it interferes with our ability to stay present. During meditation, even the most innocent desire can distract awareness from the razor's edge of the present moment. If we want to stay on that edge, we need to let go of anything that causes us to slip off it.

In mindfulness practice, there are three common approaches for overcoming sensual desires that are hindering mindfulness. All three require choosing not to pursue the desire, even by actively thinking about it.

First, sometimes it is enough to apply ourselves more diligently or energetically to the meditation. The effort of practice may then become stronger than the pull of sensual desire.

The second approach is to take a careful look at the object that we desire. Are we really seeing it accurately? If we are spellbound by the object, it can be healthy to become "disenchanted" with it; i.e., see through any unrealistic projections and expectations. It is also helpful to see what happens when the desire is fulfilled. Did it fulfill our expectation? Are we now content? Is it replaced by other desires?

Third, we can turn our attention away from the object of desire and instead become aware of the subjective experience of desiring. How strong is the wanting or the impulse to act? How long does it last? What are the physical sensations of desire? Where in the body do we feel them? What is the quality of the mind caught up in desire? Often our preoccupation with the object of desire masks the discomfort of the compulsion.

To explore the nature of desire itself, it is important neither to inhibit nor to act on the desire. Rather, the desiring is allowed to flow freely.

By turning to the subjective experience of desire for sense pleasure, we may discover what else is linked to the desire. We may have strong beliefs about pleasure and discomfort. Desire may be tied to ideas about security, success, or status, or to a need for reassurance. The desire may come with compelling arguments and feelings about why it needs to be pursued.

Or we may discover that we are trying to use sense pleasure to fill some emotional hole, such as sadness or loneliness. It is instructive that the English word "want" has two meanings. In addition to being a synonym for desire, it can also indicate an absence, for example, in the old saying, "for want of a nail..." At times, addiction to sensual pleasure can be a misplaced attempt to fill an absence or emptiness within. In mindfulness, we learn to fill our inner emptiness with awareness.

When a meditator has become quite familiar with his or her tendency toward sensual desire, freedom may only require a few moments of mindfulness: looking at desire head on, naming it for what it is, and feeling how it is experienced in the body.

It also is helpful to clearly acknowledge whatever sense of freedom, well-being, or ease comes when the grip of sensual desire lessens. This shows that we can actually avoid succumbing to the pull of the desire. It also helps us to value feeling free from that pull.

As we touch into the deep satisfaction of being present, settled and concentrated in meditation, sensual desires become less and less powerful. Such satisfaction can even help to heal the compulsion behind some desires.

The more strongly the desire for sense pleasure hinders mindfulness, the greater is the value of learning to be free from it. And the more we value that freedom, the more likely we are to use that freedom to decide wisely which desires or aspirations we will allow to guide our life.

The Hindrance of Ill Will

3rd of 6 essays on the Five Hindrances by Gil Fronsdal

The first two of the five hindrances are sensual desire and ill will. They are paired in that they are opposite compulsive desires. The first wants something; the second does not want something. Both are mental forces that obstruct our ability to remain mindful and free. It is hard to be calm and settled when we are in their grip. When strong, they obscure our ability to see clearly and choose wisely.

These hindrances relate to an interesting topic: Where do we put our attention? Why does the mind sometimes fixate its attention on what we want or don't want? Rather than allowing this mental activity to continue unchecked, mindfulness examines this impulse to preoccupation. Through sufficient investigation, understanding, and non-reactivity, the hindrances can lose their power to hinder us or take control of our attention. With enough insight, we can even become free of them.

Ill will, or *vyapada* in the Buddha's language, is the desire to strike out at something. It is motivated by hostility. It manifests as wanting to hurt, attack, push away or turn away from something. It can operate in a range from the subtlest inclinations of mind to the grossest behavior. It is common to call this hindrance "aversion," which is a reasonable translation, for this word mostly means a strong dislike. However, there are healthy forms of averting that are not motivated by hostility. It can be a kindness to turn away from something that is causing pain.

Being caught up in ill will is itself painful. It constricts the mind and heart. Our viewpoint can become narrow and hostile. Ill will can predispose us to focus on whatever is undesirable or going wrong. We become more reactive and are more likely to act impulsively. For some people, the discomfort that comes from having ill will is fuel to keep it going; aversion to aversion perpetuates aversion.

In extreme forms, this hindrance can lead to a very alienated life. People can feel isolated, having difficulty connecting to others. Aversion can be self-fulfilling; when people feel our ill will toward them, they are more likely to act in ways that give us further reason to have aversion toward them.

Aversion, together with desire, is the "caffeine of the soul." Some people depend on these for their energy, motivation, and even enthusiasm for life. Without either, life can feel flat, boring, lonely, or, at times, frightening. There are people who depend on ill will because it can be an easy way of creating companionship or community with people who share in the same hostility. As with giving up coffee, some people go through a "withdrawal" phase when they stop giving in to these hindrances.

One of the tasks in meditation is to become very familiar with the hindrances. Rather than rush to get rid of them, it can be helpful to take the time to understand them well. In the case of ill will, this means we have to be willing to shift our attention away from whatever we are hostile toward and instead turn our attention to investigating the ill will itself. Without that willingness, it's hard for mindfulness to do its work.

Investigating ill will includes dropping into the body and feeling the ill will physically. How is it energetically? What are its sensations? Is there physical discomfort associated with it? It can be very helpful to stop thinking about the ill will and instead allow the whole body to be a container that provides space for the many sensations and feelings.

Sometimes ill will is used as a cover for something deeper. The Pali word for hindrance (*nivarana*) literally means something that covers over. So what is ill will covering? It might be frustrated desire. Possibly it is fear or embarrassment, and the cover of ill will is a way of protecting our self. It might also be discomfort; as long as we fixate on what we don't like, we won't feel how uncomfortable we are.

Another aspect of investigating ill will is to discover the beliefs that support it. Why do we believe it is important or pertinent to remain with these thoughts and motivations? How might we believe that aversion will benefit us? Why might we believe that ill will is justified? What views do we have about ourselves that trigger anger? What assumptions do we carry about how things are "supposed" to be?

Besides investigation, an alternative approach to the mindfulness of aversion is to remain attentively and non-reactively present to it until it passes away. While this is not easy, doing so helps strengthen many of the qualities that help the Buddhist spiritual life: e.g., mindfulness, resolve, patience and stability. In the process, we might have to face strong emotions, impulses, and the pull of discursive preoccupations. To mindfully ride out ill will without giving in to it can build confidence in our ability to remain present without needing to be hooked into the pull of aversion.

As with the other hindrances, having ill will is not a personal failing. It is an ordinary part of life. There is no need to define or judge oneself by its presence. It is also not necessary to be under its sway. There are healthier motivations we can act on in order to do what needs to be done. Learning to be mindful of ill will is one of the effective ways to free us from its influence. It is also a way to help us act with wisdom and compassion instead.

The Hindrance of Sloth and Torpor

by Gil Fronsdal

Sloth and torpor follow sensual desire and aversion in the list of the five hindrances. Accustomed to the stimulation of constant desire and aversion, some people become tired or deflated when these stimuli are absent. After meditation has calmed the mental activity of wanting and averting, sloth and torpor may be the hindrance that needs to be overcome. Doing so renews a healthy state of energy and alertness.

The five hindrances are key psychological forces that obscure the natural luminosity and healthy functioning of the mind. Because they hinder attention, it is important for people practicing mindfulness to become wise about them.

Sloth and torpor are forces in the mind that drain vitality and limit effort. Sloth manifests as a physical absence of vitality. The body may feel heavy, lethargic, weary, or weak. It may be difficult to keep the body erect when meditating. Torpor is a mental lack of energy. The mind may be dull, cloudy, or weary. It easily drifts in thought. Being caught in sloth or torpor can resemble slogging through deep mud. When this hindrance is strong, there is not even enough mindfulness to know we've fallen in.

Discouragement, frustration, boredom, indifference, giving up, hopelessness, and resistance are some of the psychological causes of sloth and torpor. Mental and physical tiredness may resemble sloth and torpor, but differ in not arising from a psychological attitude.

The presence of sloth and torpor does not mean that energy is not available. It means we are not accessing it. With a change in conditions, energy may reappear in a moment. This can be seen clearly in young children who switch from being "tired" (while shopping, for instance) to being energetic (about an offer of ice cream, for instance) in a matter of seconds. The energy level depends on whether they evaluate the situation as boring or exciting.

Mindfulness practice can help us understand how our evaluations and reactions lead to lethargy. We might notice the role resistance plays in the sinking of energy. Shutting down energetically can be a strategy to prevent something from happening or from having to experience it. Occasionally, falling asleep in meditation can be a deep, almost unconscious form of resistance.

Sloth and torpor may arise from evaluating something as boring. But nothing is inherently boring; boredom is a judgment—an activity of the mind. It commonly arises from self-identity. People who feel highly energized when their self-image is being enhanced or diminished may deem an experience boring if it does nothing for their self-image.

Other evaluations that drain energy are discouragement, self-pity, and ideas of futility. These can come with well-honed defeatist stories about how "I can't do it," "It's too hard," or "It's too dangerous." Learning to mindfully watch our thoughts instead of actively participating in them can effectively stop them from draining our energy.

A more subtle cause of sloth and torpor can be complacency. This can occur when we are lulled by comfort or misguided acceptance. Complacency may arise when meditation feels easy and comfortable. With the warm, fuzzy feeling that everything is okay, the mind can even drift off into sleep.

Weariness can be closely entwined with sloth and torpor. Chronic excitement and tension, especially when expressed through the muscles, can leave a person deeply exhausted. Because the tension masks the weariness, people may not realize how deeply fatigued they are until they go on a meditation retreat. For such people, it can take a few days on retreat to recover sufficient energy for the practice.

When sloth and torpor appear in meditation, it is important to find ways to practice with the condition, not struggle against it. It is especially important not to abandon a meditation session because of sloth and torpor. Our energy level and effort naturally rise and fall, and this hindrance can be expected to appear sooner or later.

If sloth and torpor is mild, it may be overcome by arousing more energy. Options include brisk walking meditation; sitting up with a more erect, energized posture; opening the eyes; washing the face with cold water; avoiding being too warm while meditating; and increasing the frequency of mental noting.

Another approach is investigation. It can be fascinating to actually feel the subjective experience of sloth and torpor. This includes exploring where and how the physical feelings of heaviness or dullness show themselves. One can become curious about how they manifest in the mind.

Investigating this hindrance can also include understanding how particular thoughts, beliefs, and evaluations feed into sloth and torpor. Sometimes it is possible to change what the mind is thinking about so as to awaken more energy. A traditional Buddhist approach is to reflect on death and dying. Done the right way, this can arouse healthy energy and motivation, freeing the mind from preoccupation with insignificant things.

Chronic sloth and torpor may represent a lack of meaning or purpose in life. In this case, the antidote might involve taking time for deep inner reflection or thoughtful conversations with wise friends.

When sloth and torpor are present and energy is weak, we do the best we can. When they are absent, energy will naturally be stronger. Rather than berating yourself when you are tired or praising yourself when you are alert, just keep practicing. Certainly it will help reveal the precious beauty of your own mind.

The Hindrance of Restlessness & Worry

adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal

To concentrate and see clearly, we must overcome restlessness and worry, the fourth of the five hindrances. The wise way to overcome the hindrances is to understand them well, rather than getting rid of them quickly. Investigating them is a bit like learning to farm instead of accepting food. Investigation may take time, but what is learned will support us for a long time.

The Buddhist word translated as “restlessness” is *uddhacca* meaning to shake. It is a state of agitation and over-excitement. Some people live restless lives. Constant activity can channel the restlessness at the expense of neither confronting it nor settling it. Because restlessness is uncomfortable, it can be difficult to pay attention to. Paradoxically, restlessness is itself sometimes a symptom of not being able to be present for discomfort. Patience, discipline, and courage are needed to sit still and face it.

When physical, restlessness may appear as compulsive energy bouncing throughout the body. We can't get comfortable. There may be incessant impulses to fidget or even to bolt. It can also appear as shakiness or agitated vulnerability, as when we have had too much caffeine.

When mental, restlessness can manifest as scattered or persistent thinking. It is present whenever we are caught in distraction. There may be an inability to focus – the mind recoils from being directed anywhere, or it jumps from one thing to the next, incapable of settling. This is sometimes called monkey mind. As a swinging monkey grasps one branch and immediately reaches for the next, so the restless mind focuses on one thing and immediately reaches out for the next, never satisfied with anything.

During deep meditation, restlessness can manifest as excitement about states of peace. Many meditators have been pulled out of such states by their amazement in experiencing the stillness. When the mind is quiet, restlessness can be as subtle as thinking, “I am not thinking anything.” It can be triggered during deep calm, when breathing seems to stop or when perception of the body ceases. Even more subtly, restlessness is present whenever there is the slightest clinging or pride in such states of calm.

Worry, or *kukkucca* is the other half of the fourth hindrance. Classically it is explained as the agitated feelings of regret for what one has done or not done in the past. Nowadays it seems useful to expand the meaning to include the broader concept of “worry.” Concern over imagined futures can cause much worry. And people may carry a disquieting self-concept, giving rise to agitation over “who they think they are.” There can be anxiety that one's self-image will be threatened. Many people can feel shame or guilt without any reason.

Strong regret and worry hinder being quiet and focused during meditation. Occasionally they can be powerful enough that meditation is counter-indicated. For example, with some regrets it might be necessary to make amends before doing meditation. Or when worry is overwhelming, psychotherapy may be more useful.

Usually, however, restlessness and worry can be worked through in meditation. Simply being mindful is a big step. Having a hindrance is like wandering through a maze staring at the ground. Being mindful is like standing above the maze to get an overview. Without eliminating a hindrance, mindfulness gives us better perspective of what is happening.

To be mindful of restlessness, it is useful to feel it physically. If there is a lot of energy coursing through the body, imagine the body as a wide container where the energy is allowed to bounce around like a ping pong ball. Accepting it like this can take away the extra agitation of fighting the restlessness. Sitting still with the restlessness often allows it to settle down on its own.

Because the settling can take a while, patience is needed. Sometimes the mind will marshal myriad arguments to convince you to act on some restless impulse. During meditation it is important not to give in to irrational compulsions, such as the notion that it is important to defrost the freezer immediately.

Once we have studied restlessness and worry, it is useful to notice when it is not present. Physically, emotionally, and mentally, what is the felt sense of being, at least temporarily, free of restlessness? The knowledge of what it is like to be still, calm, or peaceful is very nourishing. It can dissuade us from believing restless thoughts, and it can give us an appreciation of healthy alternatives to being caught in a hindrance.

The classic Buddhist instruction for restlessness and worry includes noticing what triggered it. This includes looking back over what might have been the cause and condition. By understanding an ongoing cause, we may be able to remove the cause. We can wisely avoid activities that bring restlessness or regret.

Frustrated desire and pent-up aversion are common causes of agitation. Fear and resentment are others. Dissatisfaction is a cause that can keep the mind restless with searching. Trying too hard in meditation can also stir up the mind. When any of these are primary, it can be more useful to be mindful of them than the restlessness. Ignoring the causes can keep us skimming the surface; being mindful of the underlying causes can help with the settling.

Once we have a better understanding of restlessness and worry, it is important to learn how to prevent them from arising and how to let go of them when they are occurring. For instance, it is important to have enough exercise, sleep, and good nutrition because their lack can cause restlessness. It is also important to live one's life ethically, so that our behavior and speech do not give us cause to be agitated. This is using our intelligence to become skilled in working through these challenges. Developing confidence in such skill can weaken the power of restlessness.

Learning to breathe through restlessness is a great skill. Breathing consciously with the whole body, or focusing on the ongoing rhythm of breathing in and out, can calm the body. The more attention given to breathing, the less is available to fuel the restlessness or worry. Paying attention that we aren't holding or constricting the breathing can be helpful.

When physical pain is triggering restlessness, it is important to address the pain. When appropriate and possible, try to alleviate the pain. When the pain can't be alleviated or when we see the opportunity inherent in meditating with it, then learning to separate the pain from our reaction is the first step to settling the restlessness.

When thinking is a big part of restlessness, it can be useful to relax the "thinking muscle," softening any tension or pressure associated with thinking. There may be strain in the eyes or tightness in the forehead, jaws, shoulders, or stomach that can be slowly released on a series of successive out breaths.

One of the more profound skills for working through restlessness and worry is to let go of the beliefs that keep them going. Strong opinions about what is or is not supposed to be happening incite the mind; judgments of good and bad seldom lead to calm. Attachment to a self-image also tends to be agitating. It can be liberating to realize that we don't have to believe every thought we have.

We live in a restless age. While we might be overcoming restlessness for our own benefit, it is also helpful to the people around us. Hopefully we can all support each other in being nourished by a heart deeply at rest in itself.

Doubting Doubt: Practicing With the Final Hindrance

adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal, December 5th, 2004

Sooner or later all meditators practice with the hindrances. For most, it will be sooner and later-as well as in between. These obstructing mind states should not be seen as unfortunate occurrences. Rather, they are opportunities for strengthening practice-for developing mindfulness, concentration, understanding, and non-clinging.

Without a dedication to practicing with the hindrances, any one of them can derail a person from practice. This is especially so for doubt, the fifth and final hindrance. Whereas the other four can arise from concerns about anything, doubt as a hindrance is directly related to the practice itself. When one's uncertainty about the practice or about one's own ability is strong enough, it is possible to give up on the practice.

Doubt as a hindrance is a mental preoccupation involving indecision, uncertainty, and lack of confidence. It causes a person to hesitate, vacillate, and not settle into meditation practice. Its simplest manifestation can be a lack of clarity about the meditation instruction, which may be settled quickly with further instruction. More dramatically, doubt can involve deep, fiery inner conflicts and fears stirred up by the practice. All along the spectrum, doubt can keep the mind agitated, perhaps simmering in discursive thought and feelings of inadequacy. Alternatively it can deflate the mind, robbing it of interest and energy.

"Hindering doubt" is not the same as "questioning doubt." Doubt as a hindrance leads to inaction and giving up. Questioning doubt inspires action and the impulse to understand. It can, in fact, be helpful for mindfulness practice. A questioning attitude encourages deeper investigation. It is a healthy doubt that can overcome complacency and loosen preconceived ideas.

Hindering doubt takes many forms. It can be doubt in the practice, in the teachings, in one's teachers, and, most dangerously, in oneself. Doubt may not appear until one is actually beginning to practice. A person may spend months happily anticipating a meditation retreat only, upon arrival, to doubt whether it is the right place, time, or retreat to be on.

Doubt is often accompanied by discursive thinking. Sometimes thoughts can appear reasonable and convincing enough to mask the underlying doubt prompting them. But regardless of whether it is reasonable or not, the discursive thinking can interfere with the meditation practice and so confirm doubts that the practice is not working. In other words, doubt can be self-fulfilling.

The most insidious doubts are those about oneself, especially when they involve a lack of confidence in one's ability or worthiness. The practice can appear too difficult, or one can't imagine having the inner capacity required. Sometimes such doubt arises when one is intimidated by a distant, grand goal. It is easy to forget that a mountain is climbed one step at a time. Other times the doubt relates to managing the changes that come with practice. One may be buffeted by thoughts such as, "Can I take care of myself if I am more open and relaxed?"; "Perhaps my family and friends won't accept how I might grow"; or "I won't be able to earn a living if I honestly look at how I am driven by fear and ambition."

It is difficult to recognize doubt when caught in it. The challenge is to have enough distance or objectivity to see it for what it is. Doubt may be easier to identify by noticing our indecisiveness or holding back in the practice. Sensing any accompanying physical tension or pressure may help pull us out of the orbit of the doubting thoughts. Clearly noting doubt as "doubt" can be helpful. With enough distance we may be able to stop believing the thoughts: it can be freeing to doubt the doubts!

Once hindering doubt is recognized, there are various ways of working with it. Occasionally a period of careful contemplation may resolve the doubt. When doubt involves uncertainty about the practice or the teachings, it is helpful to study, learn and reflect on the Dharma itself. Asking a teacher or having a talk with a dharma friend may also help in this regard. Having a clear understanding of the Buddha's teachings on what is skillful and what is unskillful can go a long way toward overcoming doubt.

When doubt involves a hesitation to commit to the practice, in some cases it can be useful to apply discipline and resolve to overcome it. This is especially beneficial when the doubts are minor and perhaps don't warrant any attention. This is also a good approach when practice itself is what most effectively disproves a doubt. In the case of major or persistent doubts, however, discipline may not be helpful when it entails unhealthy suppression. Major doubts may need to be dealt with directly—such as by questioning deeply held beliefs, attending to unresolved feelings, or challenging ingrained convictions about self-identity. Some people have a strong tendency to resist change of any type, including new perspectives and understandings. Doubt can become a tool of resistance by inhibiting change.

Confidence in one's ability to practice is very important. For people plagued by doubt in their own ability, it can be useful to develop self-confidence. Many people overlook what they are capable of and focus instead on what they think they cannot do. Taking time to consider and feel happy about what one can do— even the smallest things—can strengthen confidence. Approaching one's practice in small increments may slowly develop confidence. For instance, resolving to be aware of each breath throughout a meditation session is unlikely to build confidence, whereas resolving to stay with two breaths at a time may be more effective. Once one has confidence in two breaths, one can move on to three breaths. Surprisingly, spending less time thinking about oneself can help with confidence. This is because self-preoccupation tends to undermine healthy self-regard.

Finally, it can be helpful to remember something that inspires you in the practice, such as a teaching, a person, or some experience you have had in the practice. Bringing this to mind may remind you of why you are doing the practice and how much you value it. It may gladden the heart enough to clear away the clouds of doubt. It may even encourage you to rededicate your efforts to transform everything into your path to freedom, including the hindrances.

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