Five Hindrances, The

April, 2003

One of the prerequisites for getting the mind to settle down in concentration and stay there is a sense of well-being. This is why we work on the breath to make the breath comfortable and why we start out the meditation with thoughts of goodwill. Get the energy in the body flowing. Get the energy in the mind flowing comfortably, too, when you think thoughts of goodwill. It’s hard to hold on to thoughts of irritation, thoughts of ill-will. It just feels nicer to think thoughts of goodwill. May all beings be happy. There are not a lot of issues with that thought. There are a lot of issues, though, with thoughts of ill-will. You don’t want to see them suffer. That’s a lot of complication. When you dwell on thoughts of goodwill, it’s easier to let those thoughts go and to realize that there’s nothing there that you really want. It’s like somebody else’s garbage that you’ve been gnawing on and realize you don’t want to go there. So this is the prerequisite for getting the mind to settle down. The problem is that simply having comfortable breath energy and simply having nice thoughts of goodwill for yourself, for the people around you, is oftentimes not enough because there are a lot of other events going on in the mind to dissipate your concentration. The image in the canon, when they talk about the five hindrances, is of a river flowing swiftly down the mountain. Then, as it hits the plain, instead of flowing in a single channel, all of a sudden it spreads out into five channels. The water loses its strength. It can’t keep going. It just seeps into the ground and that’s it. The purpose of closing off the five hindrances is like closing off five different channels that lead away from your central channel so that the flow of water can maintain its strength and keep flowing. So you have to know what those five hindrances are. A simple rule of thumb is that anything that pulls you away from the breath is a hindrance. Sometimes simply noticing that other thought is pulling you away or a mind state is pulling you away is enough to drop it and get back to the breath. Other times, though, you need specific techniques, and that’s why you need to know the different kinds of hindrances. Sensual desire, ill will, corporal and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty. Those are the five. Sensual desire doesn’t necessarily have to mean lust. It can mean thoughts of desire for any sensory stimulus—things you’d like to see, things you’d like to hear, to smell, to taste, to touch. All that comes under sensual desire. And if you find your mind going back and back and back to those thoughts, then you have to stop and ask yourself exactly how much substance is there to getting your sensual desire fulfilled? It’s just the contact, and that’s it. That’s what all boils down to—contact at the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, and the body. Is it really worth getting all worked up about? If you’re dealing with thoughts of lust, you can do the analysis of the thirty-two parts of the body. But sometimes it’s other types of desire. Simply just reflect on the fact that there it is. Just contact. That’s all you want—contact at the ear. What’s so special about particular types of contact? That they’re worth destroying your concentration. That they’re worth pulling you away. And once you get them, what happens? They go. Then you get all upset and you want to strive after them again. And then you get them for a while, and then they leave you again. It goes around and around and around like this. John Fulham once said that the sensual pleasures that we want in life, that we really hunger after, it’s a sign that we’ve had them in the past, either in the present lifetime or previous lifetimes. We’ve had them before and we miss them. We think about that for a few seconds. If you get them again, well, you lose them again and you miss them again. It goes around and around and goes nowhere. When you can think in this way, it’s easier to let go of those sensual desires and get back to the breath. The second hindrance is ill will. It’s a form of aversion. Ill will here specifically means you’d like to see somebody suffer. You’re sitting here thinking about how much you would like to see so-and-so get their just desserts. And even though there’s a fair amount of concentration in that kind of thought, you can spend a whole night, a whole week, thinking those kinds of thoughts. But where do they get you? They get you nowhere. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about people whose concentration is based exactly on that ill will, how much they’d like to see somebody get repaid for their evil deeds. He says it is a kind of concentration, it is a kind of absorption. The mind can just burn continually with that thought. But where does it lead? It leads nowhere. It wears the mind down and makes you more and more prone to do things that you’re later going to regret. So if you see your thoughts heading off in that direction, develop thoughts of good will first for yourself, realizing that allowing yourself to focus on these thoughts is not very good for yourself and you’re not really helping yourself in any way at all, even if that other person does get his just desserts, what do you get? Nothing. That’s a pretty miserable kind of satisfaction. Then you start to try to think thoughts of good will for that other person, seeing that no matter how much wrong they’ve done, they must have done something right. Try to open your eyes to both sides of the person. Rather than just the side that you’ve been focusing on. And if the person’s done nothing good at all, well, you kind of feel sorry for the person. Because of the law of karma, they’re really going to suffer at some point. So you don’t have to do anything to make sure they get their just desserts. It’s the way of the world. Simply, in some cases, it seems a little slow. Well, do you want to bring the kind of karma on yourself for settling old scores? That doesn’t help at all. So you let it go. The remaining hindrances are forms of delusion. In other words, the first hindrance is related to passion, the second is related to aversion, and the last three are delusion. First, they’re simply sleep and sloth, sloth and torpor, and lethargy. In many ways, this is the hardest of the hindrances to deal with because you’re so sleepy. You can hardly even notice what’s going on. But if you find this happening, the Buddha does have recommendations. Change your meditation object to begin with. Many times you find the breath getting really, really refined, and you go to sleep. So if you notice this happening, breathe more heavily. Change the focal point in the body. You can move it around. Make a survey of how the different parts of the body feel right now, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. In other words, give the mind something to do. When the breath gets comfortable, you can’t just leave it there. There’s work to be done. The Buddha said that once you’re in touch with long and short breathing, the next step in breath meditation is to breathe in and out aware of the whole body. So make that your next task. Be aware of the whole body as you breathe out. This is a way of preventing sleepiness from slipping in over that kind of blurry state that comes on when you’re just comfortable and lazy and fade out. If changing the object of meditation doesn’t help, you can pull your earlobes and rub your limbs with your hands. Go out and do walking meditation to see if this sloth and torpor really is a mental state, or if it’s a physical state, or if it’s a mental state. If it’s a physical state, you find that no matter what you do, you’re sleepy. It’s a sign that the body needs to rest. So you give it some rest. But you’ve got to test it first. You can’t give in to sleepy feelings all the time. This is the basic problem with the hindrances. When you’re in a certain hindrance, you don’t see that it’s a hindrance. You see that it’s perfectly reasonable, perfectly desirable. But little signs of sleepiness come on and you immediately give in to them. Thoughts of sensual desire sneak in and you immediately give in to them because they seem to be so good. It’s the delusion that underlies all of these hindrances. That’s the big problem. So you’ve got to test them. Are those thoughts really good? Are they really worth thinking about? Those physical signs of tiredness, are they really a sign that you’re sleepy? Or is your boredom just going to take advantage of them? If you’re bored, pay more careful attention to what you’re doing. Try to get really, really detailed, all the little spots in the body where the breath can be flowing. Have you checked them all out? Are there any even minor blockages in the body someplace? If there are, work on them. Give the mind work to do so that it doesn’t get bored and doesn’t look for an out in sleepiness. Restlessness and anxiety go in the other direction. With sloth and tarpaulin, your energy level is down and delusion takes over. With restlessness and anxiety, delusion takes over and the energy level is up and you get manic. So this is when you have to focus on the qualities that calm the mind down. Focus on a sense of ease in the body. Usually when there’s a lot of restlessness and anxiety, it’s because the body is not a comfortable place to stay. The mind goes bouncing off like a ping pong ball. So you try to soften things up with the way you breathe. If there are so many restless thoughts, you can’t follow them, simply stay here with the breath and say, “Allow the mind to think those thoughts, but you’re not going to follow them.” In other words, they can be just a thinking process in the background, but you don’t have to focus on them. Pretend like they’re not happening. You know they’re happening. You don’t deny that they’re happening, but you just let them stay in the background. Again, with restless and anxious thoughts, worries about the future, worries about this, exactly how much good do you get out of them? If it’s rational planning, that’s one thing. You can save that for the end of the meditation. If it’s really rational, it will be willing to wait until the end of the meditation. The restlessness and anxiety is the more irrational side. You have to look at it for a while. If simply ignoring it doesn’t make it go away, you look at it and see where its drawbacks are. Many times, worries are things that you’ve been through many, many times before you know where that movie is going. So why watch it again? It’s not an especially good movie. Can you imagine what would happen if all your metal movies were put out on movie theaters? Would anyone want to watch them? So why are you watching them here? The final hindrance is uncertainty. You’re not sure about this. You’re not sure about that. It can either be doubts about yourself or doubts about the practice, or just a vague sense of doubt and uncertainty. John Lee has an interesting analysis of this. He says it’s because you’re not being true. That’s why there are doubts in the mind. So be really sincere in staying with the breath. If you have genuine doubts about where the breath is going to take you, how are you going to settle the doubts unless you really follow the breath? Take the doubt seriously and do what you can to prove it right or wrong. If you’re going to put the Buddhist teachings to a test, that requires a lot of dedication. Sometimes, of course, you may feel you’re not up to it. In which case, you can remind yourself of all the people in the past who had that same doubt, but then they overcame those doubts, put the practice into practice, and came out with Awakening. They were human beings. You’re a human being. They can do it. You can do it. Just sit down and do it. It’s kind of a Nike ad for meditation. So the reason we analyze these hindrances into five is that each hindrance, if you find that it’s really insistent, requires a specific treatment, a specific technique, a specific antidote. But if they’re not that absorbent, they’re simply vagrant distractions coming into the mind. All you have to do is remind yourself, “That’s pulling me away from the breath. I don’t need to go there.” In that case, you don’t have to label the hindrances or analyze them much. Just be insistent on coming back to the breath, back to the breath, no matter what crazy thought comes through your mind. If they’re insistent, learn to question them. Why on earth would you want to believe that particular type of thinking? Why would you want to give in to sleepiness when you’ve got the chance to meditate? I mean, if it’s absolutely overwhelming and if you’ve tested it, that’s one thing. But you’ve got to fight against that impulse to give in to sleepiness the first time it appears or the first time there’s a sign. Even before the sleepiness comes, many times there’s a sign in the body. There’s this physical sensation. Sometimes it’s around the eyes, sometimes it’s in the face someplace. You associate it with sleepiness and just go with it. So you’ve got to test that one. To solve it, you have to have a question mark. “Why would I want to follow this? Why would I want to follow that?” If you can keep that question mark going, then you’ll find that you learn a lot of things about the mind. You begin to sense when the mind is going to jump off into hindrance. You actually feel it before it happens. If you’re quick enough, you can nip it in the bud. This way you don’t lose your balance. It’s in this way that you keep the energy of the mind channeled on the breath. So it doesn’t start dissipating, or as the John Lee says, it doesn’t start flowing out your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. It stays right here. The more you can keep your awareness focused on this one topic, the more of an impact it will have. You’ll discover that the power of the mind is a lot greater than you could have thought. The problem has been that we’ve allowed it to dissipate its energy in all sorts of different directions. As a result, it doesn’t seem like it has much power of its own. But if you get it focused in one spot like this, you begin to see the mind has a lot of potential. This is what concentration practice is all about. It’s to get the mind centered, to get that power focused, so it can apply it to good ends. Putting an end to suffering. Putting an end to ignorance. Putting an end to craving. Those are tasks that require a lot of focus and a lot of stability. Strong, concentrated energy of the mind. We keep it concentrated by not letting it go flow out through the fields. By making sure the hindrances don’t dissipate that energy before we can put it to good use.

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