Hindrances

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John Lee has a little poem in Thai that he quotes in one of his books. Or maybe he made it up himself. But it goes like this. When you study, you learn the text. When you practice, you learn your defilements. When you reach the goal, you let go. It’s in that second sense, that you let go. If you don’t think the mind has defilements, try to focus it on one object for a long period of time. You’ll see all kinds of other things coming up. It’s like you’ve got a whole committee in there. Each member of the committee has different plans. And so as you establish the meditator member of the committee, you’re going to find that some of the other members of the committee are not all that willing to go along. As soon as you decide you’re going to focus on the breath, other things come up. “Important” things that have been left dormant for a while, but all of a sudden they just have to fill up your attention. Or there’s that part of the mind that says, “Well, I’ve got a whole hour here. We can think about anything we want to.” Thinking about what you want to eat, what you want to look at, what you want to listen to, what you want to do, what you want to touch, what you want to smell. Or some old issues with people you’ve been angry at for a long time. You’ve got a good long period here just to hash over those old issues. Lots of different things the mind can suddenly find excuses to do when it’s offered the opportunity to sit here for a whole hour and meditate. And so this is one of the issues you have to deal with as you’re trying to develop concentration. Of course, there’s one way to deal with it, which is to give in and say, “Well, I’m just going to sit here and watch whatever comes up in the mind and have choiceless awareness.” But that right there was a choice, and you’ll find that the mind will choose to have all kinds of things. And it’s going to follow. Nothing really new gets developed, no new strengths, no new skills get developed, except maybe for a little bit of equanimity. But that’s not what’s needed right now. What’s needed right now is more mindfulness, alertness, more concentration, the ability to get the mind out of unskillful meditation. And as the Buddha says, if you keep thinking these things over and over again, that’s how the mind gets bent, that’s how it gets inclined. These habits build up and then they’re hard to break. Then you find them taking over. Like that image of the vine coming up the tree. The tree says, “What’s wrong with this vine? All the other devas of the forest came and they were concerned when the seed of this vine was brought right next to the tree. But now that the vine is growing, its tendrils are soft and downy.” Of course, eventually the vine winds its way around the tree and becomes a huge canopy and eventually pulls the tree down. So as you’re trying to focus on the breath, you find other things coming up and you’ve got to deal with them. You can’t just let them come in and replace the breath as the object of your meditation. At the very least, you keep them at bay. At this stage, you may not be able to uproot them, but at least you can fight them off, keep them off in the far corners so you have space to develop them. Develop the skills you need in terms of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment. This is one of the ways you practice discernment as you get the mind to settle down. As the Buddha said, “There is no jhana without discernment.” It’s the discernment in recognizing defilements and learning how to deal with them, recognizing the hindrances and learning how to deal with them, that makes concentration possible. There’s a traditional list of five hindrances—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty. And each of them has its antidotes. But the important element in all of those antidotes is awareness. You recognize that these thoughts, these mind states, are hindrances. They’re in the way of your meditation, and you don’t want to side with them. Because usually the big problem is that on the one hand you hardly know that they’re there. Or if you do know they’re there, you’re on their side. You don’t see them as a hindrance. The sensual desire comes up. The object that you’re desiring really is desirable. Ill will comes up. The person that you’re angry about, the person that you would like to see suffer, really does deserve to suffer. You start getting sleepy and drowsy. Well, it’s a sign that the body needs to rest. The things you want to worry about, they really are worrisome. You really have to think about them right now. The things you’re uncertain about, well, nobody’s really certain about these things. How can you know? The mind sides with its hindrances. And when that’s the case, no matter what tools you bring to bear on them, you’ve already undermined the tools. So the first thing you have to do is recognize that these really are hindrances in the mind. They really do prevent you from gaining the strength of concentration. One of the images in the text is of a stream coming down from a mountain. As it comes down the mountain, it’s strong, but then it gets down to the lowlands, and there are lots of different outlets. And the strength that it had as it was coming down the mountain is totally lost. It’s dissipated out in many different directions. This is what the hindrances do. They dissipate the strength of the mind. In John Lee’s image, the mind goes leaking out of its eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, leaking into the past and future. So whatever strength there was in the current of the water inside the mind just gets dissipated. So the first step in dealing with hindrances is to recognize that they are a problem. And that you really do want to get rid of them, or at the very least put them off to the side so you have space to do your work here. And with the first two, the techniques for dealing with them are pretty similar. On the one hand, you want to look at the object. Your essential desire, or look at the object of your ill will, and see that it really is not worthy of those mind states. In other words, you look at something you’re desiring, look for its bad side, look for its ugly side, look for its undesirable side. If you’re lusting after a person, first look at your own body. What have you got in this body? It’s full of all kinds of unclean things. As we chant, go down the list, hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh. It’s important that you learn how to reflect on the body in this way. Do it at least once a day, if not more often, if you find that lust is a real problem. So remind yourself that the object you’re lusting for is worthy of lust only if you close your mind to a lot of aspects of the body. In other words, lust is lying to you. And all the fantasies you build up around the lust, those are lies as well. So you want to expand the range of your mental vision to realize all the drawbacks. First of the object, then you start thinking about the drawbacks of lust itself, all the crazy, stupid things people do. The harmful things they do because of lust, because of sensual desire. As the Buddha says, it’s because of sensuality that people get into fights. It’s because of sensuality that people have to work hard and then see all the things that they worked for leave them for one reason or another. It’s because of sensuality that we have wars. It’s because of sensuality that the divorce court is the most dangerous of the courts in the court system. If sensuality really were good, it wouldn’t be causing these things. So on the one hand you look at the drawbacks of the object, then you look at the drawbacks of the sensual desire. And that should reduce the strength of the desire. You can ask yourself, “What do you really get out of it? What do you really gain?” And then make a comparison. Are the gains worth the loss? But there must still be a part of the mind that wants pleasure of some kind or another immediately. This is why we offer it the pleasure of concentration. In the text it says that you have to get rid of the hindrances, and only then can you experience the pleasure of concentration. But that’s not the case. You find the mind going back and forth. So try to give it at least a moment of concentration, a sense of ease and well-being. Breathe in a way that gives a sense of ease. Think of the breath energy going through the different parts of the body, your hands, your feet, anywhere where you’re holding in tension. Try to remind the mind that it is possible to find pleasure that’s not based on sensuality, and it’s a lot easier to find and has a lot fewer drawbacks. Similarly with the old bell, try to look at the good side of the person that you’re hoping to see suffer. Ask yourself, “Are you the National Bureau of Standards deciding that certain people deserve to suffer?” Even the Buddha never said that certain people deserve to suffer. All he said was that certain actions tend to lead to certain consequences. But whether the person’s actually going to suffer when those consequences come is not a matter of just deserts. In the case of Angulimala, Angulimala killed all those people. Angulimala then became an arahant so that when the karma of having killed those people came to him, it was in a much weakened form, and his mind didn’t suffer. And as you’ve probably noticed, when evil people do suffer, does it make them good? Does it make them suddenly realize the error of their ways? No. Often they get worse. So it doesn’t really accomplish anything. You don’t gain anything. So again, you want to think of the person’s good side. What good qualities does this person have? And if the person has no good qualities at all, you really have to feel sorry for that person and just dig in their hole deeper and deeper and deeper. Sometimes you counteract the ill will with equanimity. Maybe nothing you can do for that person, but it doesn’t help you in any way to be sending thoughts of ill will. Turn and look at the ill will. Just see what it’s doing to your mind right now. What kind of person are you becoming as you focus on these thoughts? Would you like to be the recipient of someone else’s ill will? Have you ever noticed someone who’s had ill will toward you? What does that person seem like to you? Well, that’s the mind state you’re creating for yourself right now. Do you want that? Then again, there may be a little bit of pleasure in thinking, “Well, I’ve really got this person, and I’d like to see them squirm.” But that’s a pretty miserable pleasure. Then you try to breathe in such a way that gives you a sense of ease, fullness, well-being, that can pull you away from whatever allure that that kind of thinking had. You can give yourself a sense of ease and well-being that nobody else can touch, no matter how bad that other person may be. They can’t touch your concentration unless you destroy your concentration yourself. Do you want to do that? So it’s a combination of seeing the drawbacks and seeing what little pleasure you get from this hindrance, combined with the ability to find a sense of well-being right now through the concentration. So it’s not just a mental exercise that you’ve got a way of embodying the need for something nourishing that you have right now. You can supply that sense of nourishment through ways besides that particular hindrance. The remaining three hindrances are variations of delusion. Sloth and torpor is one that usually doesn’t have an object. It’s just a sense of dullness overcoming the mind, or boredom. The Buddha gives a long list of ways of testing it. Is this sense of drowsiness really based on a physical need to get some sleep, or is it just the mind’s being bored with the meditation? Or is the meditation object putting you to sleep? Sometimes when you focus on the breath it gets very refined, and your range of awareness gets smaller. It really does have a soporific effect. So the first line of defense, if you’re going to meditate and you find yourself getting drowsy, change the object of your meditation. Now this may mean simply changing the way you breathe. Breathe in a way that’s deeper, stronger, more energizing. Try to expand the range of your awareness, or move your awareness around. I found that if you can change the object of your meditation and move it, say, three breaths in this spot, then three breaths in the next spot, then three breaths in the next spot, just going around and around and around the body, give the mind something to do, that can often wake you up. If that doesn’t work, then you can rub your arms, pull your earlobes, go out and look up at the sky. You can do walking meditation, and if you find that if you’re walking you’re still getting drowsy, that’s a sign that you really do need some sleep. But the Buddha reminds you that you lie down to sleep. Promise yourself that when you get up, you’re going to get right up. You’re not just going to turn over and have an extra ten minutes of snooze. Sometimes you find that drowsiness comes from a sense of boredom. You’re sitting here watching the breath, nothing seems to be happening, and the mind gets bored. In that case, you give the mind something to do. Again, go around surveying the breath energy in the different parts of the body. Where do you tend to hold it in? Where do you tend to block it off? Where does it get tense? Try to be really precise in your survey. You can think of the bones in the body. Make a mental survey. Where are all the bones in your body right now? Start with the bones at the tips of the fingers, work up the arms, then the bones at the tips of the toes, work up the legs, up the back, through the neck, into the skull. Or when you’re drowsy, you can think of death. Again, if it’s a case of boredom, remind yourself that there’s work to be done here. It’s not just sitting here zoning out. You’ve got to develop qualities of mindfulness, alertness, clarity, so that if death suddenly comes at any time—and that’s the nature of death, it comes at any time—at least you go with a sense of clarity. Contemplation of death can also help. The next hindrance is restlessness and anxiety. The mind gets worked up about how stupid things you did in the past. Suddenly a wave of embarrassment comes over you, “Oh my gosh, I said that or did that,” or worries about the future. One of the ways of dealing with these things is to remind yourself that you may not live to see the future. When death comes, the stupid things you did in the past aren’t going to have any meaning at all. Otherwise, there’s something you’re worried about in the future. You remind yourself that you don’t really know what’s going to happen in the future. But you do know that you’ll need extra mindfulness, extra alertness, extra concentration and discernment to deal with whatever problems come. When aging comes, illness comes, death comes, you’re going to need these qualities. When society collapses, you’re going to need these qualities. So focus on what you know you’re going to need. Then again, reward the mind with a good bout of comfortable breathing. A lot of times the restlessness comes because you’re feeling frazzled. Your nerves are overexcited, so they need to be soothed. So use the breath to soothe all the nerve endings. Just hold that image in mind. As for uncertainty, it’s interesting that the Buddha’s cure for uncertainty is not just to say, “Well, I believe,” and try to pretend that that’s the end of the matter. It’s that you look at what’s skillful and unskillful in the mind. If you’re uncertain about things, why ask yourself, “Do I have a breath right now? Yes. Is it better to be focused or not focused?” It’s better to be focused. At least you know that much. As John Fuehring would say, “Start with what you really know for sure.” Again, you do know that you’ll need better states of mind, better skills of mind. So you work from there. You actually investigate what’s going on in the mind, what you’ve learned about skillful and unskillful mind states. And take that as your beachhead. There may be a lot of things out there that you’re uncertain about, but focus on what you can be certain about, what you can observe, and build from there. In each of these cases, there’s a certain amount of analysis that goes on to see the drawbacks or the hindrances. But it also has to be strengthened by your ability to focus on comfortable breathing, so that when you have opportunities to clear up some space in your mind, that’s something you really want to work on. There’s a sense of ease, fullness, refreshment that can come from the breath. Because a lot of the hindrances come from a desire for pleasure, and the pleasure is not being found in the present moment, so they’re going to look for it someplace else. So you learn to offer yourself some immediate visceral pleasure, this pleasure of form, as opposed to the pleasure of sensoriality. And although these techniques may not be enough to uproot the hindrances, at least they can keep them at bay. So you have space in the mind to do the work that needs to be done, directing your thoughts to the breath, evaluating the breath. It’s the evaluation where the discernment gets strengthened. And then you use that power of evaluation against the hindrances. So when the mind comes up with what it thinks is a really convincing case for sensuality, sensual desire, or ill will, or whatever, you can come up with a convincing case against it. Because sometimes it’s enough just to note the fact that the hindrance is there, and then it’ll go away. But there are other times when you really do need to analyze it to get a sense of the drawbacks. I’m going to go on and on and on. So you need the techniques of seeing the drawbacks, you need the techniques of working with the breath. But above all, you need to remind yourself that the hindrances really are problems. And when a particular hindrance seems really convincing, you have to remind yourself because you’re in a state of delusion. That’s not going to help you in the meditation. It’s not going to help you in anything in life, is to be deluded like that. So learn to step back from whatever state of mind says, “This really is worthy of desire. This really is worthy of ill will.” That’s your first line of defense against the hindrances. Once that’s clear, then the other tools can really do their work.

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