Hindrances

June 1, 2024

In Jhansa we often say that when you begin to meditate, you should make a survey of your mind to see if there are any hindrances there. Then you clear out the hindrances and then focus on your meditation. Now sometimes it works in that order. Sometimes you’ve got to start with the breath and then be prepared to see what comes in to get in the way. Either way, you’re going to have to deal with the hindrances. So it’s good to know their faces. Essential desire is one. Consider thinking about all the sensual pleasures you would like to have. Tomorrow’s meal, when you leave the monastery, what kind of things you would like to watch or listen to. What do sensual pleasures give to you? They give a little bit of pleasure and then they’re gone. And Jhansu, I used to make that comment, those sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now? They’re mostly just memories. Many of them you’ve forgotten. What may be left over is the karma of having pursued them, which is not always skillful. So was it a good trade? And you remind yourself, the pleasures themselves are not the problem. It’s the mind’s fascination with thinking about them. And why does it think about them? What’s the allure? The Buddha gives all those analogies. The dog chewing on a bone. And Chandli expands on those analogies. It’s chewing on the bone. It has nothing to taste except for its own saliva. That’s the pleasure you get out of your sensual thoughts, your saliva. There’s nothing really there, nothing of any nourishment. And oftentimes the pleasure itself is not the point of the fantasies. It’s your role in the fantasies. And what’s the allure of making up a role for yourself like that? And how much satisfaction does it really give? Often the reasons we go for sensual fantasies like this is because we have nothing else, no other alternative, that we see to pain and boredom. So you remind yourself, as you meditate, you can create a sense of well-being by the way you breathe. This is why it’s important to focus on parts of the body that are really sensitive to the breathing process. The tip of the nose is not all that sensitive. There’s nothing really gratifying about a long breath or a short breath out the nose. But there can be parts of the body that feel nourished by longer breathing, shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, whatever feels good, down around the heart, in the stomach, in the throat, or wherever you’re really sensitive. And remind yourself that that pleasure is a lot less harmful. Remember the Buddha after his years of torture, self-torture, and he saw that he was going to die and not achieve anything at all. So he asked himself, was there an alternative path? He thought of the pleasure of concentration at the time he had, as a child, gotten spontaneously into the first jhana. And he asked himself, was there anything blameworthy about that pleasure? The answer was no. It doesn’t blind you to what’s going on in the mind. In fact, it actually makes events in the mind a lot more clear. So pursue that pleasure instead. As for ill will, sometimes you can justify that by saying, well, someone really did something wrong and justice has to be done. And they have to be punished. But how many people respond well to punishment? There are some. But a lot of people just get more entrenched in their sense of rightness, that they’ve been unjustly treated. So the best way to resolve issues where someone has behaved in a bad way is not to have ill will for them and not to want to see them suffer. It’s to want to see them recognize that they’ve been doing wrong, involuntarily changing their ways. So that way you can spread goodwill to them, because that’s what goodwill means in that situation, without any sense of hypocrisy or that it’s make-believe or you’re pretending. It’s something you can genuinely feel. But you have to ask yourself, but your ideas about justice, whether they really are just or just make-up on top of plain old desire to see somebody suffer. As for sloth and torpor, there are two kinds. There’s the kind that comes when you really are tired, in which case you have to work on breathing in ways that are more energizing or thinking about something that’s more energizing. Think of that image the Buddha gives of the fire. You’re trying to start a fire, but the fire is weak. And if you think about just calming things down, calming things down, it’s like putting ashes on top of the fire. Of course the fire is going to go out. You have to give it fuel. So in some cases you’re focusing on the breath and it’s making you sleepy. Switch your topic. Try to find something else that’s more energizing, that requires more active thought. Then there’s the sloth and torpor that comes from boredom. In which case you have to ask yourself, why do you find watching your mind boring? Well, because nothing much is happening. Well, is nothing much actually happening? There’s actually a lot of stuff happening right now. As long as you have a sense of you sitting here and doing the meditating, that’s a lot of activity right there. Because one of the purposes of getting the mind in concentration is getting it to see the steps that lead up to that point where you create a you around something, a sense of me or mine around something. I’m the one who’s doing this. I’m the one who’s experiencing this. But it’s also possible to see these processes, and this is what dependent co-arising is all about, simply as events. That arise because of other events, that arise because of other events. But you can look at them simply as events. So the fact that you’ve created a sense of me around that means there’s some activity going on there that you haven’t been investigating. This is one of the ways of getting past boredom and getting past sleepiness, is to take an interest in what’s going on in your own mind. Learning to question some of the ideas that you think are just kind of, of course, ideas. Of course, I’m here doing this. Now the Buddha doesn’t say there’s nobody here doing this, but you can look at it without having to impose that idea of you on top of it. It’s like different scientists, scientists from different fields, talking about the same phenomena. Say you’ve got a rock. You ask a geologist, the geologist will talk about the rock. In terms of the categories of geology. If you ask a quantum physicist, he’ll talk about it in other terms. It’s not that the geologist’s terms are not true. It’s just they’re true for a different purpose. And here you want to learn how to look at the events in the mind simply as events, for a different purpose, for a purpose of developing dispassion for them, so you don’t create a sense of you around them, a sense of desire that creates a state of becoming. So there’s a lot going on here, even as you just sit here quietly watching. So you want to get more sensitive to that. A similar principle applies to restlessness and anxiety. You think about things as you’re done. The words, you think about possibilities in the future that worry you. You remind yourself. Things that you’ve done in the past, you have to have goodwill for everybody. If there’s remorse, it’s not going to help anything. Just recognize the mistake as a mistake, resolve not to repeat it, and then spread lots and lots and lots of goodwill to the people you’ve harmed, to yourself, all beings. Realizing we’re in a samsara. As someone says, it’s not a wandering on, it’s a bumbling on. Everybody’s making mistakes. Everybody’s got things they can think back on where they’ve harmed others. So it’s not just you. Of course, you don’t want to think that way as an excuse and say, well, let’s continue acting harmfully. But you don’t want to realize that you’re not especially bad in that regard. But you do want to learn how to stop. As for anxiety about the future, you remind yourself that there are a lot of things that could happen in the future, and you spend a lot of your time planning and worrying about one eventuality. It’s not going to really help you in case something else comes up. So what you want to do is develop the skills of the mind that can deal with anything that’s unexpected. That, of course, requires mindfulness, alertness, ardency, discernment, concentration, the things that you develop as you meditate. So when you meditate, focus on the breath. It’s not like you’re running away from your future responsibilities or future dangers. You’re actually preparing for them. As for doubt, doubt about yourself, doubt about the Dhamma, the best way to deal with that is to test the teachings. The Buddha says if you focus on the breath, you can rise to a sense of stillness. It’s really good for the mind. It’s something that is possible. So you test that. And you don’t give up after one failed attempt. You keep at it, because after all, think about the example of all the Ajahns and all the monks and nuns in the Canon, who kept at it again and again and again, finally found that yes, it does work. The Buddha says the best way around doubt is to pay attention to what’s skillful in the mind, what’s unskillful in the mind, and what happens if you develop the skillful qualities and abandon the unskillful ones. So you don’t overcome doubt by just swearing on a stack of the Pali Canon, saying, “Yes, I believe.” It’s more you look into your mind. See, when the Buddha says, “This is good,” is it really good? “This is bad,” is it really bad? Learn how to be a fair judge. Again, this of course will require more mindfulness, more alertness. So a lot of this thinking about your hindrances is designed not only to get you past the hindrances, but also to see the value of getting the mind to settle down. Because that often is what feeds the hindrances. They say, “Well, I’ve got other things I’ve got to think about, other things I have to worry about, other things I have to go for for my entertainment, things I’ve got to prepare for, things I have to doubt.” And the Buddha is saying, “You don’t need those things. You’re better off getting the mind to settle down.” That’s a better way to prepare for the future. It’s a better way to deal with thoughts of remorse over the past. It’s a better way to deal with whatever is coming up in your mind. So it’s important that you see the value of concentration. Remember that verse that we repeat. Those with respect for the Buddha, respect for the Dhamma and the Sangha, respect for the training, i.e., the triple training, respect for concentration, It’s interesting, he talks about the triple training, which includes concentration, and then he emphasizes concentration again. Because it’s so easy to overlook this, so easy to discount concentration. You get a lot of people saying, “Well, I want to go straight for insight.” Well, where are you going to get any genuine insight unless you get the mind still and where it can watch itself? So have some respect for concentration. And see, there really is a better alternative to the hindrances. When you see that there are hindrances that are getting in the way, and the concentration is something that’s actually opening up the way, then you’re coming from the right sense of values. When your values are right, then the various techniques for dealing with hindrances are a lot more effective. you

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