The Five Hindrances (outdoors)

September 30, 2018

Start with thoughts of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for everybody else. Remind yourself that you’re here to find happiness in a way that causes no harm to anyone. So if any thoughts come up in the course of the meditation that are not related to the meditation, just spread thoughts of goodwill to whoever, whatever, it is. Get back to the breath, because that’s going to be the object of the meditation. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the feeling of breath in the body, and focus your attention there. See if you can stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out, and ask yourself, “Is it comfortable?” If the long breathing isn’t comfortable, you can change it to shorter. You can make it deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Experiment for a bit to see what kind of breathing feels best right now, being aware that sometimes it may change. What’s comfortable right now may not be comfortable in five minutes, so keep on top of what the body needs. Each time you breathe in, you can ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” and see how the body responds. The more you can get interested in the way the breath flows in the body, the easier it’ll be to say “no” to distractions. But sometimes just saying “no” is not enough. That’s where you need to know a few tools, a few weapons to use with different kinds of distractions as they come up. The Buddha lists five altogether. They’re called hindrances, niwanana and pali. What they do is they hinder the mind from settling down, having a sense of clear well-being, clarity in the mind, well-being in the body and the mind, right here in the present moment. These things get in the way. The first one is sensual desire. You start thinking about sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations that you’d like to experience or that you did experience in the past that you want to experience again. You can find yourself fantasizing about that for a long period of time. The antidote here, as in with all the hindrances, is having to recognize that it is a hindrance. This is actually getting in the way. Because all too often we like our hindrances. Sensual desire comes and it seems attractive. You think of it as an entertaining way of spending the next day. But you have to remind yourself that you want something better than that. Because when your sensual pleasures or fantasies come in the mind, go out of the mind, what do they leave? They leave hunger. They don’t give you any real satisfaction. You don’t really gain anything from these fantasies. It’s like investing a lot of money in something and then finding nothing is left. So the first step is to remind yourself that this is a hindrance, this is something you want to get past. And then you look at the drawbacks of the sensuality. If you actually were to get the things you wanted, you’d be put in a position of having to fight other people off. In the meantime, thinking about these thoughts, as the Buddha said, is like a dog chewing on a bone. There’s no meat there, it’s just the taste of its own saliva. You don’t gain anything from this. And if your happiness depends on sensual things being a certain way, then you have to fight and fight and fight to keep them that way. One of the images the Buddha gives is of a hawk flying off with a piece of meat in its claws. And other hawks and crows and other birds come and fight with it, trying to get that piece of meat. If it doesn’t let go, it can get pretty badly damaged. So you look at the drawbacks of the sensuality, you look at the drawbacks of the object you may have desire for, and you look at the drawbacks of the act of having that desire. And you say, “I don’t really want to go there. It doesn’t take me to a good place.” Then you come back to the breath. This is where breathing in a way that feels comfortable is a good great deal of help, because the mind, after all, is looking for pleasure. And oftentimes it wants its pleasure right now. So you can say, “Here, all I have to do is breathe in a way that feels good all the way down to the torso, all the way down to my hands and my feet.” When the mind gains a pleasure like that, it’s less interested in going after sensual thoughts. The second hindrance is ill will. Not just anger, ill will. You actually want to see somebody suffer. You think about the horrible things they’ve done and how you’d like to see them suffer. Here again, you have to remind yourself that this is a hindrance, because all too often when we think about the bad things other people have done, we think, “Well, they really deserve to suffer.” And you feel a lot of righteous anger and justification in thinking about their suffering. But you have to remember, what good does it do when people suffer? Do they really learn their lessons? It’s very rare that they do. So even if that person really has done horrible things, what do you gain by thinking about it? This is a kind of thinking where it’s easy to see the drawbacks. But you also have to look for why you like it. What is there to like about ill will? What’s the pleasure in ill will? Does it make you feel superior to other people, that you can see their drawbacks? Why do you need to feed on that? So when you can see that the hindrance of ill will doesn’t take you anywhere good, then it’s easier to let it go. And here again, it’s good to have a sense of fullness in the breathing, where every little cell in the body feels nourished by the breath coming in, going out. And when you have a sense of well-being like this, why would you want to destroy it by thinking thoughts of ill will? So when you’re able to pull yourself out of thoughts like that, even if it’s just briefly, it’s easier to stay with. The third hindrance is sleepiness, drowsiness. You sit here, and the breath gets comfortable, and you just fall for the comfort. Part of the mind thinks, “Oh, I really do need to rest.” But you don’t rest with alertness. You just fall asleep. Or you get into what John Lee calls delusion concentration, where things are very still, but you’re not really clear about where you are. There are various ways of dealing with it. One is breathe more heavily. Try to make the breath comfortable, but heavier. Another thing you can do is think of spreading your awareness to fill the whole body. So you’re fully aware of the whole body, each time you breathe in, all the way in, all the way out, everything from the head down to the feet. You keep your awareness broad. Don’t let it gather into a little point, because if it gathers into a little point, it just gets snuffed out. And you fall asleep. If you find that it helps, you might try moving the center of your attention every three breaths. Three breaths at the middle of the chest, three breaths at the base of the throat, three breaths in the middle of the head, down the back, out the legs, back of the neck, down the arms, starting at the front of the torso again, just going around and around and around like this. In other words, don’t stay in any one spot for more than three breaths. You might find that it helps wake you up. If you’re meditating alone, you can get up and walk. Stay with the breath, but walk around. See if that helps get rid of the drowsiness. But as the Buddha said, if you’re walking around and you’re still sleepy, it’s a sign that you really do need some rest. So you lie down, get some rest, but make up your mind that as soon as you wake up, you’re going to get up and meditate again. And you’re going to walk around and go for another 40 winks. The fourth hindrance is restlessness and anxiety. You start thinking about something that might happen in the future, and you’re worried about it. You get anxious and impatient. When are the results going to come? You have to realize, one, the results come not from being anxious and impatient. They come from just sticking with the breath. Each breath as it comes in, each breath as it goes out. As for anxiety about the future, there are all kinds of things you could worry about. In fact, we really don’t know what’s going to happen in the future. All kinds of things could happen. But what you do know is that you’re going to need more mindfulness, more alertness, more discernment in order to deal quickly and effectively with whatever comes up. Those are the qualities of mind that will be a lot more helpful than you’re sitting here planning for something that eventually never happens. You probably know the story of the British during World War II in Singapore. They thought the Japanese were going to come by the sea, and so they pointed their cannons out by the sea, put them in concrete, aimed them out at the ocean. And then it turned out the Japanese came down the Malay Peninsula. The cannons were useless. So think about all the times in the past where you made preparations for something you were afraid of and it never happened. And what got you out of a difficult situation? The fact that you were alert. You were quick to read a situation and know what to do. Where do you get those qualities that come from developing them in the meditation? So that line of thinking should bring you right back to why you want to be here. Alert to what the mind is doing. Alert to what’s going on in the breath. Realizing that this is your best preparation for the future. As for the fifth hindrance, that’s uncertainty. You’re not really clear about the practice. You’re not clear about what your abilities are in the practice. You’re afraid the practice may not really be a genuine practice. And instead of actually giving the practice a try, which is the only way you can figure out whether it’s going to work or not, you just sit here wondering, wondering, wondering. As John Lee says, “You’re not true to the practice,”so of course the practice is not going to be true for you. “What you’ve got to do is be true in your intention.”You’ve got to stick with the breath.” And then true in carrying out your intention. It’s only when you’re true that you’re going to find out if the practice is true. And as for whether or not you can do it, what’s required for the practice? A breath and awareness. Get those. And the realization that a lot of the suffering that you’re feeling in life comes from your own actions. So you want to train the mind so that you can learn how to stop creating unnecessary suffering. Because after all, we all want happiness. This is the desire that lies under all of our actions. Yet all too often the things we do end up creating the opposite of happiness. The question is, why is that? Well, we’re not paying attention. We’re not really clear about what we’re doing, we’re not really clear about what the results of our actions are. We don’t connect the action with the result. That’s because we’re not alert, we’re not mindful. So this is our motivation for wanting to stay with the breath, because we develop mindfulness. In other words, the ability to keep something in mind. So no matter what else comes up in your awareness, you don’t follow it. You stay with the breath. You follow it through. And then begin to notice what you’re doing, and you notice the results of what you’re doing. Sometimes the results come immediately, sometimes they come over time. But if you’re consistently alert, you’ll be able to see them. You’ll be able to make the connection. That’s something every human being can do. It’s simply a matter of sitting down and actually doing it, carrying it through. So that’s the only way you overcome uncertainty, is actually trying to develop something skillful in the mind, and see if it does give the good results the Buddha said. So those are the five hindrances. One, sensual desire is based on greed. Another one, ill-will. Ill-will is based on anger. The other three are based on delusion, either delusion with too little energy or too much energy, or flat-out delusion about yourself. We want to know the truth, but all too often we want the truth handed to us on a platter. Well, whatever’s handed to us on a platter, we don’t know where it comes from. We don’t know whether it’s really good or not. But if it’s something we’ve done through our own actions, that’s when we know what’s really true, what’s really good. So this is how we overcome our uncertainty, by being true and sticking with the breath, really watching it, really watching the mind. And we’ll find that bit by bit by bit, things do become clearer, things do become more certain. The Buddha wasn’t the sort of person who simply asked you to believe just because he said something. He said, “Put it to the test.” But at the same time, you’ve got to put yourself to the test. In other words, you have to make yourself the sort of person who really is qualified to pass judgment. So you need to be alert, you need to be ardent, you need to be mindful. You need to develop your discernment and concentration to put your mind in a position where you can judge whether these things really are worthwhile or not. So we start with an intention to stay with the breath, and we try to really be true to that intention. And when other things come up, you ask yourself, “Well, what kind of hindrance is this?” Because whatever comes up that would pull you away from the meditation is going to fall into one of those five categories. And then once you know which category it falls into, then you have an idea of what to do. Whether the mind is leading too much toward the future or too much toward the past. Too much energy, too little energy. And then you can make adjustments accordingly. This ability to read the mind and make adjustments, that’s going to be the basis for developing wisdom and discernment in the meditation. At the same time that you’re developing concentration. These qualities all go together.

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