

From Meditation Obstacles to Meditation Objects

Class 1 – Introduction to the Five Hindrances

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Introduction

Anyone practicing mindfulness knows there are forces in the mind that can make it difficult to stay attentive to one's pre-sent moment experience. Ranging from weak to very powerful, these forces hamper our ability to remain mindful, develop concentration and have clear insight. They pull our attention away from our efforts to meditate. Even with the best of intentions to stay focused, these forces can propel us into the world of preoccupation and distracted thought.

Rather than reacting to these difficulties as being "bad," "distractions," or personal failings, it is important to be mindful of them. In that they are happening in the present, they can be a basis for cultivating greater awareness and wisdom. They can become part of the path of practice, rather than a detour.

It is helpful to investigate the forces of distraction and agitation carefully to understand their nature and how they work. It is easier to find freedom from something when we know it thoroughly.

The Five Hindrances

Of the many forces of distraction, five are traditionally identified as particularly important for people practicing Buddhist mindfulness and meditation. Known as the "Five Hindrances," they are workings of the mind that can hinder both our ability to see clearly and our capacity to develop a stable, concentrated mind. The hindrances are:

1. Sensual desire
2. Ill will
3. Sloth and torpor
4. Restlessness and worry
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 physical and mental factors.

The first two hindrances are related by being opposite qualities. Desire and ill will are both forms of wanting, albeit in opposing ways. Desire wants to have something, whereas ill will wants to push something away. The third and fourth hindrances are similarly seen as opposing tendencies. They both involve levels of energy or vitality. Sloth and torpor are

low energy states while restlessness and worry are high energy states. The fifth hindrance, doubt, is not specifically connected with any of the other hindrances or distinguished into physical and mental aspects. This is because doubt is often entwined with any combination of the other hindrances.

Practicing with the Hindrances

Addressing the hindrances with mindfulness practice can be divided into five different aspects. These fit into the acronym **BELLA**.

Be When a hindrance appears it is useful to first let it be. This does not mean giving in to it or intentionally participating with the thinking it may involve. Rather, it means not acting on it or reacting to it. It involves the useful training in staying present for our experience without being in conflict with it.

Examine: Just as spiritual freedom requires wisdom, so overcoming the hindrances requires us understanding them well. Examining the hindrance involves recognizing its components; e.g., its physical, energetic, emotional, cognitive and motivational aspects.

Lessen: Relaxing both the body and mind are often good ways to lessen the intensity of strong bouts with a hindrance. If a hindrance is overwhelming, lessening its power may require removing ourselves from situations that reinforce it. Or it may be useful to direct one's attention to something that has a calming effect.

Let Go: Once a hindrance is understood well enough it can be appropriate to let go of it. This may involve letting go of unhelpful beliefs that perpetuate the hindrance, it might require letting go of attachments to any self-identity fueling the hindrance, or perhaps simply balancing out our efforts. In addition, there are times that we may need to make changes to our daily life habits such as exercising more or improving the quality of our sleep. Finally, when a hindrance is very strong it may be best for us to do walking meditation or practice friendliness, generosity or loving kindness.

Appreciate: The path of freedom is nurtured by appreciating the times we become free. When a hindrance is no longer present it is useful to take time to experience its absence.

Exercises for the First Week

- Notice what opportunities you have in your daily life to bring mindfulness to the hindrances. In what ways do the hindrances limit you? How do they diminish your ability to be mindful and wise?
- During the week, notice what supports your ability to practice with the hindrances and what makes it difficult to practice with the hindrances.