

Hindrances and Assistances (5 of 5) Doubt Vs. Confidence

February 3, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

confident, not knowing, challenge, confusion, identity, hinder, restlessness, decisiveness, desires, aversion, sloth, torpor

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Hello everyone. We are coming to the fifth of these five talks. For those of you who looked for them this week, the talks are called “Hindrances and Assistances.” The things that hinder us. The things that assist us in this life. I’m looking at these categories of ways of being that can either go in a hindering way or an assisting way, a positive way.

Desires can hinder us, and desires can help free us and move us in good directions. Averting can take the form of hostility and aversion. But averting can also be turning away in a healthy way, an appropriate way, a stepping away. Freezing, sloth, torpor, and going numb are versions of being still but are hindering. There is also the stillness that is clarifying – creates clarity and presence. There is being animated (the energies of our life) that can lead to restlessness, preoccupation, thoughts, and regrets. There’s also the way of being animated that comes from a deeper place and suffuses us with a sense of wonderful vitality.

Today, the hindrance, the category, is “not knowing.” Not knowing can take the form of confusion, doubt, indecisiveness, and uncertainty. People get caught up in these and make all kinds of bad decisions because of their doubt. Or they make no decision at all because they’re caught in indecisiveness.

The positive side of not knowing is a certain confidence and decisiveness that doesn’t have to know anything. Sometimes we don’t know, and the not knowing leads to doubt. Or the not knowing can be held with confidence. Taking a posture of confidence, we can say, “I don’t know” – rather than collapsing, getting agitated, or feeling ashamed. If we’re standing, to stand with both feet firmly on the ground. Standing tall as if not knowing is completely fine. Announcing even to the whole world, “I don’t know,” almost as if people would be inspired that it’s possible to be alive, confident, and breathing, and not know.

This person has no doubts that they don’t know. They know they don’t know. They’re not confused about it. They’re not uncertain about it. There’s no lack of confidence in not knowing. There’s a confidence in not knowing definitively – “I don’t know.” There’s real value in that kind of clarity because then we don’t give up our confidence. We can stay in our place of strength. We stand tall, in a sense, and then we can look around from that place and see much better. We can start understanding, in small degrees, what is happening. But if we succumb to doubt, confusion, and indecisiveness, the cynicism and skepticism (of doubt) can keep us swirling in thoughts and from showing up in a confident way.

I’d like to suggest that confidence doesn’t require us to understand or to make a decision. We can stand confident and relaxed in whatever way we are in life. There’s no reason not to. This is a healthy not knowing. The not knowing that may open the possibilities, where we’re more available to the world to see clearly. There is also a not knowing that leads to doubt, uncertainty, confusion, and feeling we have to know that kind of spirals out.

Certainly, there are times we have to make decisions in life, so being caught in indecisiveness is not healthy. But to confidently assert, confidently recognize: “I don’t know what to do. Now I’m being indecisive. I’m not making a decision.” Standing tall and confident, making that statement, might give you access to some other way of knowing, some other way of deciding – rather than getting caught in the trap of hindering doubt. The doubt that we’re agitatedly feeling lost, confused, and uncertain about what to do. Even if the mind doesn’t know what to do, a confident body and heart can be a guide and support for finding someplace inside that wisely knows what to do.

Look for opportunities when you don't know, when you're not sure, and then study yourself. Does the not knowing somehow influence you in a way that is depleting, lowers your energy and confidence, is a bit of a downer? Or can you step into not knowing as if it's a room you're stepping into? To stand there confidently, "Yes, I'm in this room of not knowing."

This has a lot to do with where we identify ourselves. If we identify as the one who is confused, uncertain, or doesn't know, then we might not be able to easily find a way out. But if we are uncertain, we can think of it as just a room or a situation we're in. And if we're going to identify with anything, to identify as the one who can stand definitely and with confidence: "I am here. I am present, no doubt about it." Then the not knowing, maybe even the confusion of what to do, is not going to debilitate us the same way that identifying (seeing it as a personal fault or failure) would.

So, one of the great possibilities of meditation is to sit with some modicum of relaxed confidence in the midst of whatever storm is going on, and whatever confusion is going on. I offered as background for this week's talks that when we feel challenges in our life, it's very easy to be swept up in the drama, the concerns, trying to figure it out, and the difficulty of it. We can have unconscious, semiconscious, and even conscious coping strategies that are not helpful – and those are the five hindrances. Sometimes the five hindrances are used to try to escape so we don't have to face the challenge. Even restlessness, agitation, and doubt can be a running away. Sometimes it's safer to be caught in those than to feel like we're addressing directly what's going on.

To take the time to pause, step back, and ask: "What is my strategy with this challenge? How am I responding to it? What's my relationship to it? What am I trying to do in relationship to it? What desires are part of it? What motivations are coming up?" Simply asking those questions begins to create some space and independence, a little different ecology than if we're caught up in the challenge. And if we've learned something about being confident, in some simple way, then that stepping away – to ask: "What is going on here for me? What am I doing? How am I responding?" – can change the ecology that we're working with.

It's not easy to remember to be confident because the habit of succumbing, the habit of criticism or somehow identifying with the challenge is hard. But to switch this, where we get caught, by just simply pausing, stepping back, and asking "What's going on here?"

And then, if any hindrances are operating, remember you don't necessarily throw away the baby with the bathwater. Maybe the hindrances are connected or have a relationship to the other side – to a positive side. See if you can swing the pendulum to or evoke the positive side.

For example, if there's a lot of sensual desire for addictive behavior (e.g., becoming lost in comfort food), can you swing over and evoke your capacity for aspiration, your capacity for an inspired desire for the good? If you're caught up in hostility and aversion, can you swing to the other side and say: "This is a difficult situation. Is there some way that I could step away now, pause, either from the situation or from my aversion? Maybe that's what I should step away from. Avert myself so I can see more clearly."

This positive aspiration. Stepping away. Being still for the sake of clarity. Finding a place to be animated from within that has a pleasure to it; that feels pleasant, not harmful in the way that agitation or restlessness can be harmful. And to find a confident place of not knowing if that's what's going on. All these positive ways assist us. They work together. They support us.

Having these, almost as checklists that we go through, can support this ability to step away from being mired in the challenge. We can do this with the small challenges of life, so they become easier and easier, more familiar practices to do. Then, at some point, when we come to a big practice, a big challenge, we might have some healthy, beneficial capacity to go through it in a clearer way.

Thank you very much. I appreciate this time with you all this week.