

Intro to Mindfulness pt 2 (1): Hindrance of Desire

February 26, 2024

SUMMARY KEYWORDS obstacle, practice, challenge, *vipassanā*, entangled, thinking, aversion, sloth, torpor, rigidity, fear, restlessness, regrets, doubts, freedom, self-determination, grounded, centered, present, stability, awareness, attachment, compulsive, acquisitiveness, greed, clinging, grasping, supermarket, car, planning

Gil Fronsdal

Welcome to this Monday's *Dharma* talk as we begin Part 2 of the Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation. This week I would like to talk about the five hindrances.

For people who do mindfulness meditation, one of the standard things to do is to become very familiar with how the hindrances work in us. We want to understand what hinders our ability to be aware and mindful. It is a wonderful principle that the very thing that is the obstacle becomes the practice. So rather than letting them remain obstacles that hinder awareness because we get pulled into the thought trains of the hindrances, we turn around and make the hindrances the object of mindfulness. What's brilliant is that this doesn't require the hindrances to go away in order to reestablish mindfulness. We establish mindfulness on the very challenge we have.

This is one of the important principles of *vipassanā* practice in general. It is not an avoidant practice, but rather, a practice where we turn toward, stand near, and stand next to what's happening. The practice is to be able to accompany what's happening, see and know it without becoming it or being entangled with it. Rather than being upset when we can't be mindful, we see it as an indication that we need to turn our attention to something different than what we have been paying attention to. We give attention to the very thing that's making mindfulness difficult.

For example, when a lot of thinking takes us away, then we want to practice mindfulness of thinking. But sometimes, even that is not enough. Sometimes what's propelling that thinking and entanglement is some form of desire, some form of hindrance.

Five hindrances are recognized in *vipassanā* practice. Desire is the first. Technically, it means sensual desire. The second is aversion – that is, not wanting something or wanting something to go away. The third is usually translated as “sloth and torpor.” However, because it fits the hindrance of fear quite a bit, it might be more appropriate to translate it as “sloth and rigidity,” or “rigidity and torpor.” The fourth hindrance is restlessness and regrets. The fifth is doubt. (The five are actually seven because two of them are pairs.)

Today we will consider desire. Desires are an important part of life, and they're also the very dynamic that trips us up. Desires free us from trouble and also put us in trouble. They are multifaceted. Beginning to recognize desires is phenomenally helpful. If you can recognize desires as desires, then you have a chance to feel, sense, and experience what it is like to have the desire.

Some desires lead us to feel like our freedom is compromised, we are caught in something, or we're being compelled and pushed. It's almost like we lose our self-determination because the desire overwhelms us, compelling us to act in a certain way. Other forms of desire do not limit our freedom or capacity to stay grounded and centered here. They actually support us to be present. Those desires can even feel nourishing. They can feel right. They can feel like they're part and parcel of a centered, grounded way of being alive and present.

The desire – the desire to be present – is connected to mindfulness, as we are trying to establish awareness here. The foundation of mindfulness and awareness is stability. We want to be here in a clear way so that we are abiding in awareness, rather than abiding in our desires or thoughts.

When thinking and desires get merged, we can be in trouble because the mind gets swept away in thoughts propelled by the desire. If there's a lot of attachment together with the desire, then the thinking can become compulsive. When the thinking is compulsive, sometimes the behavior becomes compulsive too. The pressure is so strong.

One of the things that happens with the compulsive desires that compel thinking is that we get caught in the hindrance of desire. It is often translated as "the hindrance of sensual desire." Sometimes in the ancient texts, it is also described as "the hindrance of acquisitiveness" – wanting to have something, to acquire something for ourselves. Of course it's okay to acquire things that are healthy for us when we acquire them in healthy ways. But greed, clinging, grasping, compulsion, and pushing become a hindrance that makes it difficult to be present. It becomes difficult to be centered and stay aware as opposed to being pulled away into the trains of thought over and over again.

So we want to be able to recognize when desires are there. Desires are there often, so it shouldn't be too difficult to begin recognizing them. In the course of your daily life, you might stop a few times, maybe every hour, and have some kind of alarm that goes off. Then you can ask yourself, "What desire am I involved in right now?"

When you find yourself in a supermarket, there is some desire that got you there. You're looking for something to buy. Maybe in every aisle you're on, you're looking for what you want. You're searching. There's nothing wrong with that, but what's the quality and nature of that desire? When you really check in about how you're desiring, does it feel relaxed and easy? Does it feel nice and comfortable? Or is it tight and stressful to have it?

When you're driving your car, what is the nature of desire there? If you're driving fast, does that tell you something about how you're living in your desires? If you're driving with a lot of impatience, does that tell you something about the nature of your desires? If you are doing anything at all – talking on the phone or answering an email – what desires are operating there? Does it feel good to have that desire? Or, when you really pay attention to it, is it stressful and strained?

There are desires all the time, so you can get tied up in knots if you look at every desire carefully. It is skillful to become cognizant of desires so that you can center yourself on desires that are healthy. You'll learn to recognize when they're not good for you or for other people. Then when you learn to be familiar with them and how they feel, slowly you learn how to be free of desires.

Ideally, we are free of both good desires and bad desires, healthy and unhealthy ones. It is possible to have clinging and grasping toward healthy desires, but we want to hold them lightly and act on them appropriately.

Sitting in meditation, then, one of the things to become aware of is the functioning of desire. One of the functions of becoming calm, centered, and stable – maybe over the course of a meditation session – is that it gives us a vantage point from which to feel, sense, or experience desires when they arise. We can see them there – "Oh, now there is wanting. There are thoughts – not just thinking – but thoughts driven by desire." For example, fantasies are usually thoughts driven by desire. You might want to keep it very simple. Just recognize, "Oh there's a desire," as opposed to deciding exactly what the desire is. Maybe that can be looked at later. But see what kind of freedom comes from clearly recognizing: "This is a desire."

I'm not proposing this to make your meditation busy with a lot of searching, looking, and analyzing. But the idea is once you've arrived and are centered and stable, you might want to be on the lookout for desire. Or it might be most useful to see desire before you become centered. The very thing that's keeping you from getting into the present moment when you first sit down is the spinning of your thoughts driven by some strong desire. It might be useful to sit down and see, "Oh look at that. No wonder it's hard to be settled right now. There's a desire that's very compelling and compulsive that I'm still carrying with me." This could be a desire to think something, figure something out, or plan something. Planning usually involves a desire.

I'll repeat this very important principle: the very thing that makes it difficult to be mindful is the thing to be mindful of. One of those things can be desire. That is a key place in meditation where you want to check in and see, "Where's the desire here?" When you're not able to be present easily, when the mind is drifting off a lot, then check in, "What is the desire that's operating here?" It is possible to clearly recognize and know the desire, and

feel it in your body, so that it begins to lose its grip on you. Maybe then it becomes easier to continue with your meditation.

Thank you very much. We will continue with the hindrances this week.