

Intro to Mindfulness Pt 2 (4) Hindrance of Restlessness and Remorse

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Hello. This is the fourth day on the topic of the hindrances. The hindrances are considered to be some of the primary obstacles to mindfulness and concentration. In some way they hinder our being present here. At the same time, they're almost universal in human experience. It is often emphasized that there is no need to take them personally, as personal failings. They're just part and parcel of what we're born with and come into our lives with.

Rather than taking them as enemies or personal faults, we take them as subjects for mindfulness, practice, and contemplation, with a certain degree of respect. They are part of the human condition, and respecting their presence is part of respecting ourselves. Then we learn how to overcome their hindering quality.

Desire can be a hindrance, but the same desire can be there and not be a hindrance. It is the same way with aversion and sloth and torpor – all of them. The difference is that when they're hindrances, we're involved with them in some way. We've succumbed to them. We've given ourselves over to them. We've somehow become them. The task of mindfulness is to step away enough so we're not involved with them and caught in their grip. We're not gripping onto them. Then they can be there without interfering.

So it's not all or nothing for these qualities. It's all or nothing in their hindering qualities, in the sense that we can either have them as hindrances, or we can see them clearly enough that they are no longer hindrances. They're just phenomena – one more thing that we're aware of.

In that way, we're beginning to take refuge in – put our faith and our life energy into – the process of being mindful. We are learning how to be present, aware, mindful, and clearly recognize what's happening without identifying with it, reacting to it, or being bothered by it. We are learning how to be free from what is happening.

Today the topic is restlessness and regret, or agitation and regret, or remorse. These are agitated energies in the heart and mind. They can be quite strong. We can feel like we want to bolt. We might feel like we can't sit still. I've sat in meditation with a lot of restlessness, but because I had such strong faith in mindfulness, I made the restlessness the object of my meditation. It was so much fun.

What I did was to feel the restless energy in my body as a ping-pong ball that was bouncing off the sides of the wall of my body – boom, boom, boom, boom. It was fun to just be with that energy and feel it, rather than identifying with it, being bothered by it, or reacting to it. Having aversion to something like restlessness means we are caught in its grip. Aversion is a way of being involved. The idea is to just see restlessness, be with it, and feel it physically.

However, it's also helpful to understand some of the dynamics that evoke restlessness. Remember the universal quality of the hindrances. The Buddha said that only someone who is fully enlightened – at the final and fourth stage of awakening – no longer has restlessness or agitation. So even if we're partially enlightened, we can expect that the mind will have some restlessness.

One reason for this is that with any kind of attachment, for example, attachment to desire, ill-will, or aversion, means that if that attachment, that desire to do, (desire is wanting something, and aversion is wanting

something to go away) is frustrated and if we can't act on it in a sane, ethical way, something inside of us is held in check. Even when there's no attachment involved – if there's healthy desire and healthy averting (or saying “No”) but social conditions don't allow us to speak up or do what we want to do, that healthy desire and aversion are bottled up and held in check.

Then we can either go to sleep, shut down, get dull, or use the opposite strategy, which is to get all worked up and agitated. Sometimes in extreme cases, this feels like water is boiling inside. This happens with agitation, with regret, when we've done something that we have remorse about. I like the word “remorse.” Maybe regret can be healthy, but the Latin roots of “remorse” mean we're chewing something over, “a morsel”– we're “re-morse-ing” it. We're chewing and chewing the same thing. Remorse is usually problematic when we're reviewing something over and over, beating ourselves up, being critical, not knowing what to do, and feeling we should do something about it.

Again, there's agitated energy and we're caught in the grip of it. This happens when our action is frustrated and held in check. This doesn't necessarily mean that we should act on our desires or aversions. Maybe we need to think about whether action is needed here, and what that action is.

With regrets, sometimes what's needed is an apology. Sometimes what's needed is to go talk to someone and make amends. What is needed is to do something in the world. It's not enough just to sit and try to be mindful and let go and find our peace by ourselves. Not taking care of what really needs to be taken care of in the world actually does us harm.

Once a friend of mine was in India, and he knew about an issue that came up at home. He went to his teacher, and his teacher said, “Go home. Go home to America and address this issue, and then come back.” So my friend did. Some things need to be addressed, otherwise, the agitation and restlessness will stay.

Sometimes the human heart and our psyche need to know that we will act, we will do something. (I was going to say, “take control,” but in our *vipassanā* circles, being controlling or trying to control our experience is kind of a taboo topic.) Our system needs to know that we're not just going to sit there and passively let things happen.

When it's a hindrance, like desires that are just fantasies or unhealthy, aversions that have to do with attachment or hatred, we don't want to act on them. But our heart-mind needs to know that we can act. We're not holding ourselves in check. We need to know we can engage in the process of mindfulness and be mindful of avariciousness, greed, or aversion, and have faith and confidence that this is the practice, and this is a valuable thing to do. We have no doubt that being mindful of these – being clearly present for them rather than giving in to them – is a better action than allowing them to boil over.

Something in our system appreciates that we're doing – we're engaged. The art is to engage in such a way that the engagement of mindfulness itself is not agitating. We engage in such a way that the engagement is settling and makes us more peaceful. The reference point I want to give for that is that of an athlete, a runner. It takes a lot of physical energy to do a long run, but some people get into a flow state. They get absorbed in it. Everything comes into harmony, gets unified, and there is a sense of flow and quiet. Maybe something in the mind gets very still, and they're really present. There's a way of expending energy that is completely harmonious and promotes calm and peace.

So if meditation is only about trying to find peace or relax and settle, and not do, we might be doing a disservice to that part of our inner life that needs to feel that we *can* do something, we *can* act, we *can* move forward, and we're not always held in check.

There can be a combination of these two. Something like anger sometimes needs to be given its freedom, but not the freedom to act on it. But if it is not given its freedom to be in process, then there's agitation.

The marvel about this comes in meditation and some other situations in life where it's safe to let the anger flow through us, but we know how to do it without participating in the anger, getting involved in it, or being reactive to it. When we sit in meditation we learn how to have a good upright posture. It doesn't have to be upright, but it's an intentional posture where we're not going to collapse into something or get involved in it. Then we stay mindful the best we can and give freedom to the movements of the hindrances, even desire, so we can see them clearly, and make space for them. Then something can begin to shift in the freedom of letting it flow. We

don't want to feed the hindrances, but we don't want to repress them. Allowing that flow also begins to overcome the restlessness of things held in check.

I think what I'm saying today is not necessarily easy to understand in practice, because the lesson that sometimes we have to act and engage can lend itself to more agitation and tension. But I'm trying to point to another possibility. One way to understand it is that one of the most valuable actions that we can give ourselves to (and it is an activity, it's a kind of action) is the action of being aware and mindful in a way that's relaxed, at ease, and unbothered by what we know. We trust knowing fully. We immerse ourselves in being really here in such a way that there's no tension in the knowing.

In the end, we discover that we can know while being free of what is being known. That knowing becomes nourishing for that part of our heart or inner life that needs to know that we're here and engaged in doing something very important. As the meditation goes deeper and deeper, the act of simple, clear, lucid knowing is more and more valuable, sweeter, and clearer. It feels like a flow state, like one of the best things to put our life energy into. It's so satisfying and gratifying – yes, there's purpose here, there's value here, there's meaning here, there's agency here, and there is faith here.

When you find yourself in the grip of the fourth hindrance, agitation and remorse, maybe it's a sign that there's a really deep need for action. Some kind of frustrated desire to act is causing the agitation. Something in the realm of activity needs to be done to meet that desire to act, without giving in to it and doing what it wants, but some other activity that's healthy and important. I can't tell you exactly what that activity is, but practicing mindfulness with it is one of the most meaningful things we can do. When we can really immerse ourselves with faith and whole-heartedness, this does something really good for our hearts. So may this practice bring you peace. Thank you.