

Intro to Mindfulness (2 of 3) Hindrance of Torpor

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Sloth, hostile, aversion, greedy, desire, compulsive, compromising, mindfulness, middle way, effort, calm, fear, energy, engagement, *Vipassanā*, fantasies, attach, caffeine, dreamlike, complacent, sleepiness, tiredness, vitality, imbalance, rigidity, fear, shock, freezing, overwhelmed, Pandora's box, indulge, bliss, respect, wisdom, contraindicated

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Hello, and welcome to the third talk on the five hindrances. Today we'll do the third hindrance. The hindrances are that which compromise our capacity for a useful engagement in our activities, whatever we do, whether it's meditation or life itself.

I use the word "engagement" because being mindful is also an engagement. Something gets activated or comes alive when we're mindful. To only associate mindfulness with calmness might actually encourage a kind of dullness in the mindfulness. It's possible to get overly calm. However, associating mindfulness with making effort can mean that we're trying too much, we're straining, or we're agitated in some way. In the classic metaphor of the middle way in Buddhism, where is that middle?

In terms of the five hindrances, the first two – a greedy, compulsive, clinging kind of desire, and hostile aversion – are both energizing. Some people, even when they're really hostile, love to be hostile and angry because they feel truly alive. Otherwise, they don't feel much. Maybe they feel unworthy, or dull, or bored. Being angry makes them feel energized so that's what they're attached to, not necessarily the aversion. They love being energized.

It is the same way with desire. With fantasies of different types, maybe pleasant fantasies of desire, it is the sense of coming alive, and what they do in the body, and the feeling of purpose and meaning they bring that we attach to. Sometimes people spend a lot of time in fantasy because there's a pleasure in feeling alive. For some people, aversion and desire operate as a kind of caffeine of the soul. It's caffeinated because we're using something that's not really natural to keep us energized.

In meditation, when we find ourselves no longer caught in desires and aversion, some people don't know how to be alive, energized, and engaged without desire and aversion, so dullness can set in. There can be a kind of withdrawal like a caffeine withdrawal. There can be an awkward time of boredom and feeling dull and uncomfortable, maybe headache-y. It's very important to realize that just like withdrawal from caffeine, it takes a while to let the withdrawal work through the system – the withdrawal from a life of constant desires, constant aversion, or both. There's a period of awkwardness for a little while where we don't quite know which foot to stand on. We might feel dull, bored, shut down, or discouraged sometimes. We have to have the wisdom to know how to go through that.

The third hindrance is usually translated as "sloth and torpor" These are English words that I probably never used until I came to the *Vipassanā* tradition where teachers were using them for the third hindrance. This is not the same thing as tiredness. Physical and mental tiredness can come from overexertion and from not having slept enough. That can have a big effect on meditation as well. We have to be careful because it might be more important to take a nap than it is to meditate. If people are sleep-deprived, it's probably better to sleep than to meditate. Ideally, we get enough sleep and then we can meditate without that dullness and sleepiness that are there. However, when they're sleepy but can't sleep, some people find that meditation helps. It settles something so they can go to sleep.

So, sleepiness is not sloth and torpor. Sloth and torpor is a psychological condition that compromises our capacity to be mindful in a balanced, engaged way. There are a variety of things that can do that. One of them is the withdrawal symptoms of no longer being caught up in desires and aversions. Sometimes this happens because the meditation is going well and we're getting fairly concentrated and calm, but we're getting too calm, so the mind goes into a dreamlike state. If there are a lot of dreamlike images and things feel basically pleasant in meditation, then people can get complacent. They get lulled into a kind of dreamlike state. That's usually a sign that there's not enough engagement, not enough vitality in the mindfulness.

Then the art is to turn the dial a little bit, just enough to get that engagement and bring in more clarity and more active recognition, and see what's happening in a little more energized way. Sitting up straighter is sometimes enough for people. Maybe do walking meditation instead of sitting meditation. So the dullness is caused by an imbalance of energy and calm, sometimes called energy and concentration.

Another reason for sloth and torpor is that it can be a variation of aversion where we don't like what's happening. There's aversion for sure, but it manifests as shutting down, getting really tired, and dragging our feet. You can see this in spades sometimes in young children. I remember very well how I did that with my mother. She pulled me through department stores when I was young and I really disliked it. Even the smell of them would set me off because I had negative associations. I would drag my feet and tell my mother how tired I was and how hard it was. It must have been miserable for my mother to be with me, the way I was so tired. Then all she had to do was say, "Let's go get some ice cream." And boy, the tiredness just vanished and it was worthwhile being alive. The tiredness was a kind of resistance, a strategy of aversion.

Sometimes what's called "sloth and torpor" can be a shutting down out of fear or shock. It turns out that if you look in the Pali-English dictionaries, one of the meanings that they give for "sloth" is "rigidity". I think this works really well for some of the ways we get compromised in meditation. Fear can operate in such a strong way that we shut down, we freeze, we don't know what to do, and we might even give up. That's what is compromising awareness – a kind of rigidity, freezing up, or dullness that is a response to feeling overwhelmed.

Overwhelm can also happen in meditation because sometimes meditation is kind of like taking the lid off the Pandora's box of our emotional life. There are a lot of unresolved emotions that exist within us. As we quiet down in meditation, the activity of keeping them repressed or avoiding them can slow down and get quiet. Then the deeper wellsprings of the anger, grief, or despair that we might have show themselves. That can be overwhelming, so then people will shut down.

Some people will shut down so thoroughly that they are not really even aware of what's going on. They might believe that they're meditating well because nothing really happens until the end of the sitting. They hardly knew where they were during the sitting, so they think, "Oh, boy, that was fast." Or, "Boy, that must have been a deep meditation." But they're shutting down or freezing.

One more reason for sloth and torpor is actually bliss. Some people get such joy, well-being, and happiness in meditation that they bask in it. They kind of give up their energy. They lean back and indulge in it in such a way that mindfulness goes out the window. Then there's no desire to even be mindful anymore. But things are really dull because the mind is just basking in the sun of the bliss that might be there.

All these things need respect. All these things need care and love. Anything that fits in the category of sloth and torpor, rigidity, freezing up is not an enemy. There's no need to be afraid of them, but we need to become wise about them and to understand exactly why sloth and torpor have come up.

Simply increasing the level of energy or engagement might not be appropriate for some of the causes of sloth and torpor. If we're really afraid, and if that's why we're freezing up, we might want to stop our meditation. We might do walking meditation instead, and just go gently around the block. There are different contexts for sensing what's going on so that we don't feel trapped by meditation. Some people can feel trapped in meditation. But if they're walking around, they might be willing to be present for what's happening in a more easeful way. If we're up against a really deep challenge, maybe meditation is contraindicated. We have to carefully consider what's the best way to appropriately address the reason behind the freezing up that might be going on.

But in the bigger picture, what we're aiming toward over time is to dial up the effort, the energy, and the vitality just enough so that we feel engaged in the mindfulness, but not tired. We want to be engaged in awareness enough to not be caught in desires or aversion. We are engaged in just that middle way that's sustainable.

For example, maybe you feel tired and you don't have much energy. But you turn the corner and there, lo and behold, in some big parking lot nearby, there's a never-before-seen event – a circus has come to town. You've never seen such a thing. Now, you're just amazed in a relaxed way. You're not tired at all anymore; you're just, "Wow!" You're present to notice the colors of the tents.

I don't know if my examples are the right ones for you to show the middle way of dialing up the energy when there's sloth and torpor. But that's the goal. Sometimes we can do it directly, and sometimes we take the time to address what's going on in an appropriate way.

Today, I'd suggest that the ebbs and flows of how engaged, how present, and how clear our mindfulness is have a lot to do with whether we're caught in desires, aversions, or sloth and torpor. Watch the ebbs and flows and see what is compromising your mindfulness. Is it desire? Is it aversion? Or is it a kind of shutting down or giving up or complacency? All of the above can operate. But watch the ebbs and flows.

That's the assignment for the next 24 hours if you want it. Thank you. We'll continue with the hindrances tomorrow.