

Intro to Mindfulness Pt 2 (5) Hindrance of Doubt

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Today the topic is the fifth hindrance, which is usually referred to as doubt. The meaning of the ancient word is “to think in faulty or unskillful ways.” It is a way of thinking that “does not know the distinction between what is skillful and not skillful, what serves us and what doesn't serve us,” or what should be served and what should not be served with our life energy.

It is very useful to understand the fifth hindrance as doubt because it is an obstacle that many people are struggling with. This is especially true for practitioners in the West who come to Buddhism to meditate because it's all a little strange. We're doing something that is maybe different than what we grew up with, even the values or religion we grew up with. It may also be very different from the values of our society, for example, what we've been taught about what's important, who we are, and what we should be about, and how to view our desires, aversions, wishes, and ourselves.

When we start settling into practice, it's natural to have doubt or uncertainty, to not know how to go forward, and where to commit ourselves, what activity to give ourselves to. “Should I be doing this or that? I can't let go of the anger or resentment I've carried all my life. But here I'm practicing, and they're telling me to let go, or be mindful of it, or settle more deeply. I don't know who I am and what I should do.” There can be doubt about the practice, the teachings, or about oneself and one's ability to practice. This kind of doubt can derail us from doing the practice.

The important thing I want to emphasize about doing the practice is that the ancient Buddhists understood the fifth hindrance as faulty thinking that sets us off in the wrong direction. It's thinking that is not very profound, and that does not arise out of our wisdom, or out of the *yoniso manasikāra*, the profound way of thinking from our depths.

When I began meditating on my own in college, I started doing it twice a day. I had good reasons to do it. I was suffering, and I wanted to somehow deal with my suffering. After I practiced for many months, an unusual thing happened. The suffering that I was trying to contend with just wasn't there anymore. It wasn't that I had solved it or figured it out, and it didn't actually go away in my daily life, but in meditation, it was no longer there. Since I like to have reasons for things, I wondered why I was still meditating. I felt compelled to meditate. It felt like the right thing to do, and I had no doubts that I should do it, but I didn't have a reason. I thought that was really strange. I lived with this question for a while.

One day I felt what was happening was that when I sat down to meditate, it was the most profound expression of myself available to me. It was no different from the way an artist expresses herself with painting, dancing, or playing a musical instrument. It's an expression that is fulfilled in the moment. It isn't for a purpose beyond itself. It just felt like a beautiful expression of my depth or wholeness. I used the word “integrity” at the time.

Then my task became, “How do I bring the sense of wholeness and integrity that wants to be expressed from my depths into my whole life outside of meditation?” Then my questions were, “How do I speak? How do I present myself to other people? What do I do with my life? What are the actions I do?” My next question was, “When I sit down to meditate, what is it that connects me to this? What comes out of this feeling of depth that feels wholesome and healthy?” I felt that coming from the feeling of connectedness and presence that came from the depth was a meaningful way to live. This experience of integrity gave me a direction in my life. It gave me clarity about what I was doing in meditation.

I thought, “I'm here to sit and wake up and be present, to relax and open to this depth that's within, this place of freedom from contraction. I'm here to no longer live with tension, craving, desire, and conceit. I could feel that all these things were diminishing me, making me less than I actually was. So it became very clear that when my mind started drifting off in thoughts that didn't serve me, I knew it. They were kind of an “ouch.” They were a diminishment of the wholeness and fullness of who I am.

So of course I wanted to return here, to this moment. I found it was so profound just to say the word, “here.” “Here I am. This is how it is now. I'm sitting in the here-ness of the moment.” There was something very profound in this, even if the here-ness of the moment was my suffering or thoughts that were unskillful. In saying “here” and being alive and present,

feeling the totality of it, I was no longer participating in it. I was also not condemning or fighting it. I was just here with it, not giving in to it. I had clarity.

As I talk about the hindrances this week, I see they have a lot to do with action. The Buddha was said to be a teacher of action. How do we act? How do we engage? What do we do with our life energy?

Meditation can often be seen as passive, as if we're not supposed to do anything. That view is not right. Buddhist meditation is an action, an activity that we engage in. We engage in a peaceful and calm way that stills and quiets the overactive mind. The mind itself can become quiet and peaceful. Our action is very peaceful, calm, settled, and soft, but it is still showing up in an activity, being here.

At some point, this inner expression of life coming through us – being alive and present – is not something we do self-consciously. It's just here flowing through us. But it's still an activity to show up here and be here in this full way.

This last hindrance, often called doubt, is sometimes more interestingly considered to be indecisiveness or not knowing what to do. But in the original teachings, it was more than that. It was faulty thinking – the kind of thinking that doesn't understand what is for the best for us and for the world, and how to show up for ourselves in any moment in a healthy and skillful way. The ancient texts say that the way we know what is best is not from the surface mind, not from the mind that jumps around in shallow ways, or the mind that thinks from anxiety, worry, greed, or hatred. We know what is best from the mind that has a deep source within and is settled and peaceful.

That mind is not easy to have, but that's part of the function of meditation – to wake up, relax, get settled, and create a sense of unity, harmony, or wholeness with being here. We're not divided against ourselves. We are not fragmented by our desires and aversions, our fears and shutting down, our restlessness and regrets. We do the opposite. We show up for all of it, warts and all, but from this profound place of wholeness, integrity, and willingness to open and feel. Having *vicikicchati*? (doubt, in Pali) – this harmful and faulty way of thinking – gets in the way of doing the practice because it takes us in the wrong direction.

To have no doubt about what the teachings are, we are called upon not to read Buddhist texts, but to develop the inner sensitivity to be able to understand from our own experience that this is healthy. Not only is it healthy, but it enables us to serve something profound – this health and wholeness. It is the same health and wholeness that will support us to serve and care for the suffering of the world. The world needs us. It needs us to do this healthy work so that in small and big ways we can make a difference in this world, making it a better place for everyone.

I hope this week of exploring hindrances was useful for you. Next week I'll continue Part 2 of Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation.

Thank you.