

INTRODUCTION

The 5 Mental Hindrances

WHAT IS A HINDRANCE. A mental hindrance, in meditation terms, is what veils or clouds our mind up so that it is weakened and we are unable to see our own self. We then have wrong views of our mind, of ourself, of others, and of things around us. Hence, our meditation does not progress.

Here is a brief overview of the 5 mental hindrances as a quick guide of what is to come in this volume. These are a practical summary of various difficulties we may already be experiencing even before we start to meditate. At this early stage we need to know our enemies, as it were. Actually these are friends we have not yet known. Wisdom and skill convert these hindrances into free and flowing energies channelled into our meditation.

SENSUAL DESIRE. The world out there exists, but we only make sense of them through our 5 physical sense. We see forms of light and shapes. We hear sounds of vibrations and communication. We smell molecules of fragrance or otherwise. We taste a range of what are pleasurable or displeasurable. We touch things that we can feel with our body.

Yet all these events occur on the stage of our own mind. Our mind makes sense of sights, sounds, smells, taste, touches and thoughts. When we mistake these outside things as real and see them as pleasurable, we crave for them. When we think we have them, we cling to them. So we are stuck with that idea. This is the hindrance of sensual desire.

ILL WILL. Whenever we experience something as pleasant and desirable, we will also be aware of their opposite: what are unpleasant and undesirable. The one define and deepen the other. When we notice that something is preventing us from getting these desirable pleasures or lessening them or threatening them, we are troubled by this. We want to get rid of this frustration or impending loss of pleasure.

Or, we might notice that others are enjoying what we see as desirable, but we are unable to do so, or we are having it less than they. We feel a sense of loss or envy. We might even feel like depriving others of those pleasures, so that no one enjoys any of them. This is the hindrance of ill will.

SLOTH AND TORPOR. Sensual desire has a pulling effect upon us: when we are unmindful, we tend to pull something we perceive as desirable towards us: we want to consume it. Ill will has a pushing effect away from us: what we think is undesirable we wish to extinguish, or at least keep away from our being. This ding-dong struggle drains our energies so that we are physically and mentally tired.

Our body begins to feel discomfort and our minds feel really tired because we are caught up with something we cannot let go of, and which does not really satisfy us in anyway. We seem to have lost all power of will so that we seem to melt into the darkness of inaction and sleep. This is the hindrance of sloth and torpor.

RESTLESSNESS AND REMORSE. When we are roused from our uneasy inaction or sleep, we feel even more tired and uneasy. We simply want to get out of the situation. We start thinking about what we have missed: we run after the past. Some past memories about things done or undone, commission and omission, make us remorseful and guilty. We simply cannot focus on the present.

Or, we start thinking about what to do next, just to get out of our uncomfortable situation. We imagine as if the future is here, and almost act on it. We become restless. But the future never comes. So we keep on hoping and planning. Our mind is no more in the present moment. These are called restlessness and remorse.

DOUBT. After being tossed and tested by these four mental hindrances—indeed, by any one of them—it is enough for us to begin doubting our ability to meditate. Doubt is simply an imaginative way of looking in the wrong direction, away from where the real action should be. Instead of directing our attention and effort in what we *can* do in meditation, we are caught up with imagining what we cannot do.

Often past conditions and experiences may also hold us down with various wrong views about meditation itself, so that we even doubt if it will ever work. And, if we have been influenced by religious teachings about the vanity of self-effort, that we need some external agency to help us, we might further disempower ourselves into giving up our struggle to meditate. This is the mental hindrance of doubt.

THE UNHINDERED MIND. If we see meditation as a “struggle,” then we might just fulfill that prophecy. To think we must struggle is simply a thought: a mental hindrance. All these hindrances are mental stumbling blocks that we have been conditioned with. The real struggle (if we want to use the word) is to rise above such preconceptions.

To overcome these hindrances, we must simply start by accepting ourselves just as we are. This is the best and only place to begin. If we do not accept ourselves, then we open ourselves up to the need for an external agency to rescue us. It’s like waiting for a lifeguard to swim to us to rescue us. Isn’t it better if we all learn to swim in the first place?

We must first accept our body just as it is, showing it every lovingkindness. We set it down as comfortably as possible in a place and time suitable for meditation. Then we sit as long or as short as we can, focusing our mind on the meditation-object we have learned from an experienced and compassionate teacher. We simply need to smile in our hearts when we are meditating, we only stop smiling, or more correctly, we do not need to make any effort to smile, when we are fully tasting the peaceful joy within.

KEEPING IT UP. When we are not meditating, or before we begin, if we are new to it, this is a good place to start. Go through the teachings of this volume carefully, skimming over those parts we find heavy, and noting those parts we can connect with. If we look deeply enough, we will find something helpful here for our meditation.

After our meditation, note our difficulties, and then look through this volume again, and we might now find that the sutta or passage even clearer. So there are two ways of reading these manuals: before meditating and after meditating, and also reading it again after many years of meditation. When our mind is open and our heart clear, we will find happy surprises in the suttas.

Of course, these volumes should never replace a wise and compassionate meditation teacher. A volume like this is useful when we are unable to find such a teacher, or in his absence. This book is also a preparation for us to have fruitful interviews with such teachers when we have the chance. It will help us understand better what he is talking about.

Experienced meditation teachers and meditators speak of the same peace and clarity, maybe in different words. If we listen with our ear and heart, we will experience the same Dharma teaching as what this book is trying to give us. Even then, we still need to return to our meditation seat again and again because it is a fun thing to do.

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