

HINDRANCES TO CLEAR SEEING

By Gil Fronsdal, March 26, 2005

Anyone who practices mindfulness knows that there are forces in the mind that can make it difficult to be mindful. Rather than reacting to these difficulties as somehow being “bad” or as “distractions,” it is important to investigate them. It is easier to find freedom from something when we know it thoroughly. Ancient Buddhist stories tell of Mara, the Buddhist personification of temptation and distraction, approaching the Buddha. Each time the Buddha simply says, “Mara, I see you,” and Mara flees. Because the Buddha knew Mara thoroughly, his act of clear seeing was effective in bringing freedom.

Of the many forces of distraction, five are traditionally identified as particularly important for meditators to be familiar with. Known as the five hindrances, they are forces in the mind that hinder our ability to see clearly or to become concentrated. The hindrances are: 1) sensual desire, 2) ill will, 3) sloth and torpor, 4) anxiousness and worry, and 5) doubt.

As you can see, the list is actually made up of seven factors, but four are always paired. One explanation for the paired items is that they represent closely related but distinguishable physical and mental factors. Another explanation is that this makes it easier to show a one-to-one relationship between the five hindrances and another traditional list, the five mental qualities needed for the mind to become concentrated. Each of these qualities is said to be an antidote to one of the hindrances: one-pointedness overcomes desire, joy overcomes ill-will, arousing and engaging one’s attention overcomes sloth and torpor, happiness overcomes anxiousness and worry, and sustaining attention overcomes doubt.

The hindrances can be like “black holes” in the mind. A black hole is a collapsed star where the gravitational force is so powerful that even light is sucked in and trapped. When the hindrances are strong, the light of awareness is pulled into their gravitational field and we lose our ability to see what is happening. We may get lost in thought or fantasy fueled by a hindrance.

When they aren't so strong as to act like black holes, the hindrances can still cloud our ability to see clearly, particularly to know what is harmful and what is beneficial to do, say, or think.

An ancient metaphor for how the hindrances obscure clarity of mind is that of a pond. When the pond is clean and the surface still, the water reflects our image. The effect of sensual desire is like looking into a pond that has been dyed. We are predisposed to see unrealistically-i.e., "seeing with rose colored glasses." When the heat of ill will is present, it is as if the pond water is boiling; no reflection is possible. Sloth and torpor are like having thick algae growing across the pond; again, no reflection is possible except by the difficult work of pulling out the algae. Anxiousness is like the wind churning up the pond's surface. And doubt is like the water filled with mud. Because we tend not to see clearly when the hindrances are present, Buddhist teachings strongly encourage people not to make decisions while under their influence. If possible, wait to make a decision when the mind is more settled or clean.

The hindrances operate in everyone; their presence is not a personal failing. Rather, it is useful to see their occurrence as an important opportunity to investigate them. Sometimes it is wise to not attempt to quickly get rid of a hindrance but to use it as a chance to learn something. The stronger the hindrance, the more important it is to investigate it.

The Buddha taught five areas that are useful to explore when investigating a hindrance: the hindrance itself, its absence, how it arose, how it is removed, and how to prevent it from arising again.

Exploring the hindrance in and of itself involves recognizing the components of a hindrance, e.g. its physical energetic, emotional, cognitive and motivational aspects. For example, strong desire may be experienced physically as a leaning forward, a tightening of the solar plexus, or a sense of lightness. Energetically, it may be a rushing or lifting. Emotionally it may involve pleasant emotions like delight, excitement, eagerness, or an effort to fix unpleasant emotions such as emptiness, loneliness, or fear. Cognitively it may involve beliefs and

stories that we tell ourselves. And motivationally it may come as a strong impulse to act or to cling.

Noticing a hindrance's absence is also important. The contrast between when it is absent and when it is present can help us to perceive the different aspects of the hindrance more clearly. Noticing its absence can also help reinforce a state of being free of hindrances.

Appreciating the passing of a hindrance can be a source of joy that can feed the spiritual life. I believe the Buddha was pointing to the joy when he offered the following similes: being freed from sensual desire is like being freed from debt; being released from the grip of ill will is like recovering from an illness; being free from sloth and torpor is like being freed from prison; freedom from anxiety and worry is like freedom from slavery; and passing beyond doubt is like completing a perilous desert crossing.

Noticing how hindrances arise, how they are removed and how they can be prevented from arising is the same as knowing how you got into trouble, how to get out of trouble, and how to avoid getting into trouble in the future. It requires attention and discernment to overcome the hindering effect of the hindrances. With enough experience with them, we learn not to be tricked into giving up our presence of mind no matter what hindrance may appear.

To be present without being hijacked by the hindrances is a joy. Unhindered attention is a treasure. It is what allows mindfulness to begin doing its most penetrating work of liberation.