

The Gradual Training, pt. 4: Five Hindrances

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 08/05/2014

Tonight I'd like to continue with a series of talks about the Gradual Training. My primary source for this talk is "The Shorter Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint", the *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta*, MN 27.¹

The steps in this Gradual Training that have been covered so far are:

- Having the extraordinary good fortune to hear the Buddha's teachings, and then having enough faith or confidence to begin to test them in one's own life.
- Then using that faith to train in living a more ethical life, which leads to inner and outer harmony, safety and ease.
- Ethical Training is extended by training oneself in being more content with what one has and being patient with the way things are.
- Then the next step in the training is exercising restraint at the sense doors. This involves bringing enough mindfulness to the senses to notice when one is getting caught in greed, hatred or delusion in relation to a sense experience and letting go of the greed, hatred or delusion. So this is both an inner practice of monitoring and restraining at the sense doors, but also a continuation of restraining our tendency to act in unwholesome or unskillful ways.
- Guarding the sense doors is followed by Clear Understanding. This is, in many ways, a continuation of the refinement of our ethics externally and internally.
 - We train in having sufficient mindfulness to clearly see what bodily experiences, feelings, thoughts and intentions are arising into awareness in each moment.
 - And we train in having a clear understanding of the purpose of any internal actions or any external behavioral actions we might take, and whether that purpose is wholesome or unwholesome. If the action is wholesome, we train in having a clear understanding of whether we have the suitable means for expressing it, and whether this is the suitable time and place for acting on it.
 - We train in having a clear understanding that the domain or field (*gocara*) for our action is maintaining a continuity of mindfulness, whether the object is our primary meditation object, such as the breath, or any and all phenomena.
 - And we train in clearly understanding non-delusion. In other words, we train in clearly seeing through our misperceptions, and seeing the impermanent or ever-changing nature of what we're encountering, the ultimately unsatisfying nature of it, and that what we encounter arises because of causes and conditions and not because it has an enduring nature or "self."

Each of the steps I've described help us to develop skills that we will need in order to meditate effectively which is the next step in the Gradual Training. The description continues with the Buddha saying:

"...he [one] resorts to a secluded resting place: the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw.

...he [one] sits down, folding his [one's] legs crosswise, setting his [one's] body erect, and establishing mindfulness before him [oneself]."²

In other words, we find a quiet, somewhat secluded place to practice. Then we settle into our meditation posture, and begin establishing mindfulness of our moment-to-moment experience.

Then the Buddha describes a crucial aspect of this training:

"Abandoning longing for the world, he [one] dwells with a mind free from longing; he [one] purifies his [one's] mind from longing. Abandoning ill will and hatred, he [one] dwells with a mind free from ill will, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings; he [one] purifies his [one's] mind from ill will and hatred. Abandoning dullness and drowsiness, he [one] dwells free from dullness and drowsiness, percipient of light, mindful and clearly comprehending; he [one] purifies his [one's] mind from dullness and drowsiness. Abandoning restlessness and remorse, he [one] dwells free from agitation with a mind inwardly peaceful; he [one] purifies his [one's] mind of restlessness and remorse. Abandoning doubt, he [one] dwells having gone beyond doubt, unperplexed about wholesome states; he [one] purifies his [one's] mind from doubt."³

The Buddha is talking about training ourselves in becoming free of what are called the Five Hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*):

1. longing for the world of sense experiences, or greed or sense-desire (*kāmacchanda*);
2. ill-will, hatred, aversion or fear (*byāpāda* or *vyāpāda*);
3. dullness and drowsiness, sloth and torpor or sleepiness and sluggishness (*thīnamiddha*);
4. restlessness and remorse, or mental and physical agitation (*uddhacca-kukkucca*);
5. and doubt (*vicikicchā*), primarily doubt about the practice.

Doubts such as "Is this wholesome or unwholesome?" "Is this the right practice?" "Am I doing this practice correctly?" "Would I be better off working with another teacher?" "Is this teaching true and reliable?" All of these are legitimate questions to ask oneself periodically.

But when your immediate purpose is meditating, getting caught up in these questions undermines your ability to settle the mind and to see things as they are. So in this situation, these questions are hindrances or obstructions to practice.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, we find the Buddha offering a little more framework for practicing with the Five Hindrances

"when there is sensual desire in ~~him~~ [one], ~~a monk~~ [one] understands: 'There is sensual desire in me'; or when there is no sensual desire in ~~him~~ [one], ~~he~~ [one] understands 'There is no sensual desire in me'; and ~~he~~ [one] also understands how unarisen sensual desire arises, and how arisen sensual desire is abandoned, and how abandoned sensual desire does not arise again in the future."⁴

This same framework is also applied to each of the other hindrances.

In the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Connected Discourses, 46.2, we find a teaching on what causes the different hindrances to arise.

"And what...is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen sensual desire and for the increase and expansion of arisen sensual desire? There is...the sign of the beautiful: frequently giving careless attention to it is the nutriment..."⁵

So, in plain English, we get caught in sense-desire when we give careless attention to the pleasant feeling-tone associated with a sense experience. We mistake the pleasantness, the beauty, of the sense experience, for something that will truly be satisfying, and so we try to grasp it and hold onto it. Because of our careless attention, we fail to see that it is actually impermanent, and in time will inevitably be replaced by something that is not so pleasant or beautiful. And, the more we act on sense-desire, the more we reinforce the tendency for more sense-desire to arise. This is another example of that saying:

"whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon will become the inclination of the mind."⁶

The sutta continues:

"And what ... is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen ill will and for the increase and expansion of arisen ill will? There is ... a sign of the repulsive: frequently giving careless attention to it is the nutriment..."⁷

We get caught in ill-will, in aversion, in fear when we give careless attention to the unpleasant feeling-tone associated with a sense experience. We mistake the unpleasantness, the repulsiveness, of the sense experience, as something permanent, something that will torment us for the foreseeable future and so we try to destroy it, push it away or avoid it. Because of our careless attention, we fail to see that it is actually impermanent, and if we

patiently endure it, with mindfulness, it will pass away and be replaced by another experience.

Next we find

"And what ... is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen sloth and torpor and for the increase and expansion of arisen sloth and torpor? There are ... discontent, lethargy, lazy stretching, drowsiness after meals, sluggishness of the mind: frequently giving careless attention to them is the nutriment..."⁸

So when we don't clearly see that our mind-state is one of dullness, that our body is a bit sluggish, when we fail to clearly see the impulse to fall asleep as it arises, then the mind falls into or grasps this inclination to fall asleep or to be mentally dull and physically sluggish. Another aspect is that if we recognize a general state of sleepiness, but we fail to give careful attention to the pleasant feeling-tone that often accompanies it, then we are also likely to fall asleep.

The sutta continues:

"And what ... is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen restlessness and remorse and for the increase and expansion of arisen restlessness and remorse? There is ... unsettledness of mind: frequently giving careless attention to it is the nutriment..."⁹

When we don't clearly see that mental or physical agitation is what is occurring right now and we fail to recognize it as a hindrance, then we stay caught up in it. And, even if we see it, if we continue to bring careless attention to the feeling-tone of the agitation, we are likely to get caught in aversion towards the unpleasantness of it, which will contribute to the agitation continuing. Another factor that can contribute to the arising of restlessness and remorse is excessive striving after a goal, sometimes called "gaining mind." It is unbalanced effort. And a fourth factor that can contribute to remorse and worry is actions that are unethical or just not very clear or timely.

And then the sutta addresses the last of the hindrances:

"And what ... is the nutriment for the arising of unarisen doubt and for the increase and expansion of arisen doubt? There are ... things that are the basis for doubt: frequently giving careless attention to them is the nutriment ..." ¹⁰

Doubt arises when we aren't clear about the teachings, when we aren't clear about what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, either generally or in this moment. Doubt can also be influenced by being caught in other hindrances that we aren't relating to with careful attention.

In his book *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Anālayo Bhikkhu commented:

"Clearly recognizing the conditions for the arising of a particular hindrance not only forms the basis for its removal, but also leads to an appreciation of the general pattern for its arising. Such appreciation lays bare the levels of conditioning and misperceptions that cause the arising of a hindrance, and thereby contributes to preventing its recurrence."¹¹

I'm going to stop here this evening and next time explore the factors that contribute to the abandoning of the hindrances. In the meantime, you might want to give some attention to the hindrances and what contributes to them arising in your own body and mind.

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NOTES

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, pp. 241-250.
2. MN 27.17-18, Bhikkhu Bodhi, op cit., p. 247, gender changed for neutrality.
3. MN 27.18, Bhikkhu Bodhi, op cit., p. 247, gender changed for neutrality.
4. MN 10.36, Bhikkhu Bodhi, op cit., p. 287.
5. SN 46.2, Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 1568. Also see <http://suttacentral.net/en/sn46.2> .
6. MN 19.6, Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha*, Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 208. Also see <http://suttacentral.net/en/mn19> .
7. SN 46.2, op. cit., p. 1568.
8. *ibid.*, p. 1568.
9. *ibid.*, p. 1568.
10. *ibid.*, p. 1568.
11. Anālayo Bhikkhu, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham, UK: Windhorse Publications, 2003, p. 193.