

The Gradual Training, pt. 5: Five Hindrances, (pt 2)

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 08/26/2014.

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

With the last talk I gave we had reached the stage of training the mind and heart through meditation. In that talk I spoke about one of the primary obstacles to successfully meditating: getting caught in any of the states of mind and body known as The Five Hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*). The Hindrances are:

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

We mostly talk about the hindrances in relation to the practice of meditation, but developing skill in working with them really applies to all of our lives. When we are caught in the hindrances, they interfere with our ability to give clear, focused attention to whatever task is at hand in this moment. For example, Anālayo Bhikkhu has commented that each day before he sits down to do his scholarly research and writing he checks his mind to see whether there are any hindrances present. He does this because he has found that he is able to be much more productive when his mind is free of the hindrances.²

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*³, the Buddha offers a framework for working with the hindrances:

- First, recognize and understand when one of the hindrances is present;
- Second, recognize and understand when the mind is free of the hindrances;
- Third, understand what factors contribute to the arising of each of the hindrances;
- Fourth, understand what factors lead to the abandoning of each of the hindrances; and
- Fifth, understand what factors keep each of the hindrances from arising in the future.

The first two of these steps, recognizing the presence or absence of a hindrance, are primarily the work of mindfulness. Sometimes, mindfully recognizing the presence of a hindrance is enough to let go so that it can pass away. But when it isn't, it's important that we work with the remaining three steps of the framework.

In the last talk, I explored the third of the steps: factors that lead to the arising of each of the hindrances. As you may recall, the primary factor related to the arising of the hindrances is bringing careless attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*) to some quality or characteristic of sense contact in the moment, such as not clearly seeing that the pleasant or beautiful tone of a moment is subject to change and therefore an unreliable source of relief from life's difficulties. Tonight I want to explore the fourth and fifth steps, the factors that contribute to the abandoning of the hindrances and that keep them from arising in the future.

In the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Connected Discourses, #46.51, the Buddha uses the simile of not feeding or "de-nourishing" to speak about abandoning the hindrances and keeping them from arising. With regard to the hindrance of longing, lust, greed or sensual desire, he states:

"And what ... is the denourishment that prevents unarisen sensual desire from arising and arisen sensual desire from increasing and expanding? There is ... the sign of foulness: frequently giving careful attention to it is the denourishment..."⁴

Another way of translating this is rather than using the term "foulness," the phrase "absence of beauty" is used.

So, rather than carelessly giving attention to the beautiful, pleasant or appealing characteristics, we should counterbalance that tendency by giving careful attention to what is not beautiful. For example, if we see a man or woman who has physical features such as a body shape, smooth skin and a full head of lustrous hair that we find attractive, then we can counterbalance the tendency to get drawn into desiring more of that by reminding ourselves that the body is subject to change so that with age and illness the body will begin to sag, the skin will become wrinkled and spotted and the hair will turn gray or white and will thin or fall out. It can have the effect of taking the gas out of our desire for more of that sense pleasure.

With regard to the hindrance of hatred, aversion, ill will or fear, the Buddha said:

"And what...is the denourishment that prevents unarisen ill will from arising and arisen ill will from increasing and expanding? There is...the liberation of mind through lovingkindness: frequently giving careful attention to it is the denourishment..."⁵

The case of ill will is a particularly powerful example of the Buddha's statement that "whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will be come the inclination of the mind."⁶ The more one's thoughts abide in *mettā* or goodwill towards oneself and others, the weaker the inclination for ill will becomes. So our practice is to bring careful attention to the arising of an unpleasant feeling-tone in any moment of experience, noticing any reactivity to that unpleasantness, and responding with a quality of acceptance and goodwill instead which serves to counterbalance the tendency towards ill will.

Next the Buddha spoke of the hindrance of dullness and drowsiness, sloth and torpor, or sleepiness and sluggishness:

"And what...is the denourishment that prevents unarisen sloth and torpor from arising and arisen sloth and torpor from increasing and expanding? There are...the element of arousal, the element of endeavour, the element of exertion: frequently giving careful attention to them is the denourishment."⁷

Each of the qualities that the Buddha mentions —arousal, endeavor & exertion— is related to energy or effort. So our practice is to give careful attention to how much energy we have, to notice when it is lagging and to make an effort to increase it, in other words to counterbalance the sluggishness or sleepiness.

Then the Buddha spoke of the hindrance of restlessness and remorse, or mental and physical agitation:

"And what...is the denourishment that prevents unarisen restlessness and remorse from arising and arisen restlessness and remorse from increasing and expanding? There is... peacefulness of mind: frequently giving careful attention to it is the denourishment."⁸

So once again our practice is first to recognize the presence of this kind of agitation rather than being caught up in it. Just as with sleepiness and sluggishness, this can be helped by monitoring our energy level. Of course with agitation there is too much energy or effort. Then our effort needs to be to *tranquelize* or calm the body and mind. The two things that I've found most effective are: bringing a quality of acceptance, rather than resistance, to the agitation, opening to it or relaxing with it rather than trying to avoid it, and then returning to following the breath in a disciplined way. When there is agitation present, though, sometimes it can be more skillful initially to use a larger object, such as the rise and fall of the abdomen, or even larger the experience of breathing in the whole body. Then as one begins to experience more calmness, returning to a smaller or subtler meditation object, such as following the breath at the tip of the nose.

And, with regard to the hindrance of doubt the Buddha said:

"And what...is the denourishment that prevents unarisen doubt from arising and arisen doubt from increasing and expanding? There are...wholesome and unwholesome states, blameable and blameless states, inferior and superior states, dark and bright states with their counterparts: frequently giving careful attention to them is the denourishment."⁹

So understanding the importance of distinguishing between wholesome and unwholesome actions and states of mind can be a significant counterbalance. This includes a recognition that doubt itself is an unwholesome state when it is undermining one's practice.

In the Saṃyutta Nikāya (The Connected Discourses) we find the Buddha saying:

"These five hindrances are makers of blindness, causing lack of vision, causing lack of knowledge, detrimental to wisdom, tending to vexation, leading away from Nibbāna."¹⁰

Learning how to recognize the hindrances through careful attention and mindfulness, so that we know when they are present and when the mind and heart are free of them, along with knowing which factors contribute to their arising and ceasing are crucial skills that we have to develop.

But in order to become free of the hindrances, we often have to work with a facet that some would call psychological work. We have to begin to notice and begin to see clearly the ways that we're identified, the stories about our lives that we're caught in which lead to stress, dissatisfaction and suffering for ourselves and others. These are forms of the hindrances, even if we don't recognize them as hindrances. We also have to see through these stories, these identifications, and let them go.

This is all part of our work of opening to and coming to see more clearly what it is to be a human being on this earth. And the more skilled we become with this, the more we're able to settle our bodies, minds and hearts and become free from the things that cause our misery: greed, hatred and delusion.

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NOTES

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, pp. 241-250.
2. Anālayo Bhikkhu, public comment made during Mindfulness in Early Buddhist Meditation course, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Mar. 21-28, 2014.
3. MN 10.36, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha*, Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 287.
4. SN 46.51, Bhikkhu Bodhi, op cit., p. 1599.
5. SN 46.51, Bhikkhu Bodhi, op cit., pp. 1599-1600.
6. MN 19.6, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op cit., p. 208.
7. SN 46.51, Bhikkhu Bodhi, op cit., p. 1600.
8. SN 46.51, Bhikkhu Bodhi, op cit., p. 1600.
9. SN 46.51, Bhikkhu Bodhi, op cit., p. 1600.
10. SN 46.40, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 1594.