

Ready to Change (3 of 5)

Unpreoccupied

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

hindrance, blanket, greenhouse, delight, beneficial, gladness, softness, *nīvaraṇā*, harmful, receptive, malleable, workable, resistance, asserting, vacuum cleaner, ruminating, agitated, frozenness, stiffness, seeds, ill will, hostility, greed, sloth, torpor, resentment, regret, doubt, avariciousness, generous, planning, appreciate, openness, judge, settle, absence, available, Unhindered

Gil Fronsdal

We are continuing with this week's theme, which is to be ready for change – able and willing to change in a good way through how we live. Dharma practice is about walking on the path of being changed for the better – from ways that are harmful to ourselves and others, to a way of living that is beneficial for ourselves and others.

Five different skills prepare and help the mind and heart be available for change and beneficial growth. One is

readiness or receptivity – to be ready and available for something new. The second is to have a mind that is malleable or workable, where we are not holding on to ideas, opinions, and identities in such a way that the mind is stuck or hard. We are not taking a stance, being stubborn, resisting, or asserting, but instead, there is softness, some malleability, and workability. We are a work of art that we can work on ourselves.

Today the topic is being free of hindrances. The hindrances are major preoccupations that we get caught in. They are like vacuum cleaners, so that when we get close, we get sucked in and swirl around inside until somehow we find our way out. The hindrances are very powerful forces that keep us preoccupied, churning, ruminating, caught up in wanting and not wanting, clamped down, shut down, frozen, agitated, spinning, and so on.

There are five of them, but the shorthand is that they are preoccupations of the mind. The Pali word *nīvaraṇā*, translated as “hindrances,” also means “coverings.” Sometimes I think of the hindrances as blankets covering a wonderful greenhouse during a freezing night. But the farmer forgot to take the blankets off, so the greenhouse stays that way for months, and the plants inside can’t grow. The warmth of the sun can’t get inside. The plants shrivel and dry, and get thin and etiolated, until they all fall over.

The idea is that we have coverings that cover something precious that we do not see when we are preoccupied. We can let go of these preoccupations, just like pulling a blanket off, so that something can reach deeper within the seed beds and the seeds can grow. Something beautiful can begin to happen. We have beauty within us – beautiful capacities, beautiful potential, beautiful attitudes, motivations, thoughts, and feelings. To be available and unpreoccupied allows something deeper to happen that can't happen when we are preoccupied.

One of the important skills for doing vipassana practice is to become an expert on the five hindrances: sensual desire, avariciousness, wanting, and greed; ill will, hostility, and resentment; resistance, frozenness, stiffness (usually called sloth and torpor); agitation, resentments, regrets; and doubt. These are strategies of not being present that shut us down. There are Dharma talks and essays about the five hindrances. I have a little book about the hindrances called *Unhindered*.

It is important for people who do this practice to not be discouraged or turn away from the hindrances when they occur for us. But rather, we take them on as a worthy area to study and understand how they work, until we can see how their magic works, and are no

longer tricked by the magic into thinking that something there is real. We start seeing through the sleight of hand of the hindrances – why we get caught in them, and why we think they are so important and valuable. We see they are just a trick of the mind to get us preoccupied and caught.

To find ourselves without the hindrances is one of the great delights. Having an unpreoccupied mind is a pleasure. One way to be prepared to change and grow is to begin appreciating, valuing, enjoying, and being inspired by the degree to which we are unpreoccupied. This is a hard thing to do because the preoccupation seems so important. Being unpreoccupied can seem like nothing: “That’s not any good. What matters is doing things and thinking about things.”

We can appreciate the unpreoccupied mind that is available and present for the fullness of life, the fullness of our hearts and our minds. Just here, present, and unpreoccupied. Take the time to appreciate it and value it when it’s there. Rather than all or nothing – either preoccupied or unpreoccupied – it is a matter of degree. Hopefully, we are tipping the balance towards being more unpreoccupied than preoccupied.

Begin to appreciate the degree to which you are unpreoccupied, available, and present. This also allows you to have the same attitude of availability, receptivity,

and softness around the ways that you are preoccupied. We are not setting up a battle between them. The more we have this availability of attention, the more we can hold all the ways that we are caught, attached, and involved. We can hold them generously and non-assertively, not trying to blow them away or fix them. We can be available to fully know our preoccupations.

In meditation, everything difficult within us can be a door to a deeper understanding of life and ourselves. If you want to change in a beneficial way, begin appreciating the unpreoccupied mind. Make time for it. Learn to recognize when you are preoccupied and spinning out, when you're being carried away by trains of thought. See it: "There it is. There it is again." Then step off the train and take off the blanket. Let the thought bubbles drift away. Let the tension, the pressure, the needs to solve, fix, judge, remember, and plan settle for a while, so you can be here in a deeper and fuller way. So that you're available and receptive. You can start to become softer in a place where creativity can occur, where deeper wisdom and deeper understanding can arise.

It is not as if you lose your ability to take care of your life when you are no longer preoccupied with your concerns. You gain a new vantage point from which to take care of your life. The important issues of your life can come into your mind and be thought about without

becoming a preoccupation. They are just something to think about in a light, open, peaceful way. Have tea with your thoughts and think about what needs to be thought about.

Today the topic is to appreciate non-preoccupation. Appreciate when you're not caught up in your thoughts and understand the alternative. Appreciate what it's like to not be preoccupied and caught. Appreciate the openness, the settledness, the availability, and the receptivity. Appreciate the delight and joy of not having lost yourself in your thoughts. There is a way that we lose ourselves when we get too preoccupied. We gain ourselves when the clouds part – the preoccupations part – and we are back: here we are.

For the Buddha, the absence of hindrances and preoccupation is a source of gladness, delight, and happiness. Today I'd like to suggest that you notice the times that you are not preoccupied, where you're available rather than asserting yourself. See if you can taste and find the hints, the small or big ways you feel some gladness and happiness in the ability to be here in an available way. Think of these as micro-moments or as degrees, but see if you can find the well-being, delight, gladness, and appreciation of not being caught up. "Wow, I'm not caught up. I'm just here for this second. Wow."

May you have lots of wows today – lots of appreciation and joy. “Oh, here it is. Here it is. I’m back. I’m back. Life is back.” May this be a day that is sprinkled with joy. Thank you.