

Satipaṭṭhāna (46) Hindrances: Restlessness

March 17, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

restlessness, agitation, calmly recognize, regret, hindrances, worry, anxiety, restless, agency, agitated, hyper, excitement, second arrow

Gil Fronsda

We have come to the fourth of the five hindrances. These hindrances, when they are strong for us, are like tailgating the car in front of us on the freeway. We do not have to stop the hindrances, but we want to end their hindering quality. For example, restlessness – agitation – can hinder our ability to see, calmly recognize, and calmly consider what is going on. It hinders our ability to be wise and clear about what is happening. We do not have to stop being restless, but the idea is not to have restlessness interfere anymore. One way to do that is to practice mindfulness.

Today, I am referring to mindfulness as the practice of stopping in order to recognize what is happening. Perhaps, if we do not appreciate stopping, recognition is

done quickly, automatically, part and parcel of the usual ways the mind works. It is not really stepping out of the stream of restlessness – agitation – to take a look at it. Something inside stops enough to take a good look, clearly recognize: “Oh. This is what’s happening. I’m restless. I’m agitated.”

Let the recognition be calm. Learn how you can have agency in that particular area, the agency to take the time to recognize what is happening calmly. Take your time. It can be like this in your mind: “Restlessness. Restlessness is happening.” The mind might be going ninety miles an hour, but the recognition is like a person who is driving in the slow lane or standing on the side of the road. “Look at that. Speed. A car going by fast.”

The act of recognition is where we take some agency. In that recognition, we can pause to register, take in, the experience of restlessness in a deeper, fuller way. We can make space for it and really feel the restlessness in the space that has been created by the recognition. We could also take in the impact, the effect, that stopping and recognizing has. It might create more space, more calm. It might slow down the restlessness and agitation we have.

Restlessness and agitation are part of life. Even in deep meditation, you can feel it sometimes. There might be a

tremendous amount of calm, but the mind gets a little bit excited. Sometimes it gets excited about meditation: “Oh. Look. I’m so calm.” You can feel the mind getting a little bit agitated or excited. Recognize that, relax, and let it settle down again.

The two Pali words translated as “restlessness” and “worry” imply a hyper-arousal. Things are a bit more excited or activated. One of them (*uddhacca*) is often translated as “restlessness” or “agitation.” The other word (*kukkucca*) is sometimes translated as “worry,” sometimes as “regret.” It is hard to know exactly what the Pali words are supposed to mean, but the principle is that there is a hyper-aroused state. It can be worry. It can be panic. It can be fear. It can be regrets. Regrets can keep us churning away, with a lot of energy. It could be anxiety that keeps us activated.

Recognize what it is: anxiety, regrets, physical agitation restlessness, mental agitation restlessness. Calmly know it. Calmly recognize it. Get to know what it is like. With all these hindrances, the more we learn to be familiar with them, really knowing what they are physically, emotionally, mentally, and behaviorally, the more we can see them coming. We can recognize, “Oh, I’m beginning to go in that direction.” If we can catch something as it begins, there is often more ability to back off, pause, or let go of it.

To do that takes a lot of familiarity. With restlessness, anxiety, remorse, and agitation, look forward to the day when, in meditation, you can have a nice bout of it. Rather than viewing it as unfortunate and a drag. Rather than thinking that you have to figure out some way not to be agitated, and that this is proof you should never meditate, take it as an opportunity to study it and to get to know it.

I have had fascinating meditations when I was restless. It felt like ping-pong balls bouncing inside my body. I was amazed to watch this energy, “Where did this come from?” I just sat there quietly and felt the ping-pong balls bouncing off the sides of my body from the inside. Feeling the surging energy in the arms and legs, or the mind that does not seem to want to stop chattering.

To be amazed, “Wow,” as opposed to being horrified or upset. Take the time: “Okay. This is the time I have been looking for, a time for me to really take in the experience of restlessness, agitation. Let me just sit in the middle of it, like sitting in the middle of the fire. This is my chance to feel it, get to know it, become familiar with it. Let me see if I can understand and see something new about it. Something I’ve never known before. Is it in my little finger? Is it in my toes? No. Where is it? Do I feel any of

it along my back? Well, maybe and maybe not. Where do I feel it? Where is it? What's activated?"

What are our beliefs around it? What are our second arrows about restlessness, agitation, about having regrets, having anxiety? Maybe it is the second arrows, the reactivity we have with them, that is the fuel for the agitation, fear, anxiety, whatever it might be.

Assuming agency means we have some ability to meet a situation we are in. We cannot necessarily change it or control it, but we have some agency over our ability to show up for it. "Okay, I'm agitated. Okay, I'm going to stop for my agitation," as opposed to keep doing everything. "I'm going to stop for my agitation."

If you do that and stop, even close your eyes, maybe you find your shoulders relax a little bit. That is the beginning of a different way of being with it. There is the agency of calmly recognizing. If you want to recognize verbally in your mind, sometimes that is very helpful. Just calmly say to yourself, "Oh, this is restlessness." You are decoupling the mind that does the thinking from the restlessness itself.

The mind might be mostly restless, but it is as if you are talking to someone in the library. You might feel agitated, but because this is the library, you talk quietly. You talk

quietly in your mind, “Oh, this is restlessness.” You pause or take time – maybe luxurious time – to feel and know that experience. In this way, we are getting wise about restlessness, anxiety, remorse, regrets, agitation, the whole family of things that happen when we get hyper-aroused. We are finding a different way to be with it.

Once you are familiar with your agitation, take the time to become equally familiar with the times when you are not agitated – when you do feel calm, peaceful, or settled. Do the same thing there. Stop, recognize, pause, and really feel it. We can recognize calm states or peaceful states. We can also see them coming. We can see hints of them and allow them to blossom because we recognize them and make space for them. That space makes more room for them to appear, to be there. We can let that be a richer part of our life.

Restlessness, anxiety – I hope that you do not have much. I hope the practice supports you in not being caught in it. I also hope that you look for an opportunity to get to know it better, have a different relationship with it, and practice your agency of calm recognition. Today, I am sure that there will be some occasion for something in the family of agitation, restlessness, or excitement to occur. Take a good look at it. Thank you all.