

# *Satipaṭṭhāna* (44) Hindrances: Ill Will

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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Today's topic is the hindrance of ill will. The opposite of ill will is love. Closely related to ill will, because it looks a bit like ill will, is our healthy capacity to say no: to avoid activities that are harm-producing or unhealthy for us. So, whereas love and ill will can be seen as quite distinct, healthy avoidance can be confused with the aversion that comes with ill will. So we have to be very careful here. Our capacity to say, "No thank you" to things can be part of our strength.

In the context of meditation, we are mostly talking about internal things we can avoid. Certain trains of thought arise, and we have been down those train tracks a lot. We see that they usually end up in train crashes, and so we say, "No, thank you." We turn away from involvement with those trains of thought. Turning away is not being aversive or having ill will towards them.

Rather, it means knowing that they are not good places to go. It is helpful to see those two mental activities (turning away versus aversion) as distinct, because in relation to ill will, there is a healthy way of saying no to it. We are not supposed to only accept the ill will and hold it in awareness. There are times to say: “No thank you. Enough. Not this.” We let go.

The hindrances are fascinating. For those who do insight meditation, they are one of our primary areas of study and investigation. They are the primary forces that are said to interfere with insight, with concentration, and with our ability to have clear attention to the moment. Understanding them well is one of the healthiest ways of working with the hindrances so they do not dominate us. Rather than being upset when one of the hindrances arises for you, take it as an opportunity to understand it more deeply. This is where we learn to turn around and look at a hindrance deeply.

One thing we can learn is that for some of us, the hindrances can be strategies to avoid things that are uncomfortable, painful, or difficult. Some people run off to desire – to food and pleasures. Some people get involved with aversion, anger and blame. Rather than stopping to really be with the discomfort, they push it away or direct their attention outward toward the object of ill will. Similarly with the other hindrances. They can be ways in which the mind is trying to avoid stopping

and looking carefully at what is really happening. In practice, we learn the skill of being present with what is uncomfortable rather than reacting to it.

In ordinary everyday mindfulness, when the mind is not settled and concentrated, there are some wonderful ways of practicing mindfulness with the hindrances. One is to appreciate that often they have an object – some concern of ours. This is especially true for desire and ill will. When we are caught in desire or ill will, we are often preoccupied with the object of the desire or the ill will. The attention is directed toward the object – it is an objectifying attention.

Then we learn to turn our attention around 180 degrees, and to feel what it is like to have desire and what it is like to have ill will. The best we can, we let go of our concern with the object in order to be more present for the experience of desire and ill will. That experience is what we are trying to discover, investigate and understand deeply. Doing this begins to break the trance – the allure – of desire and ill will. Rather than being committed to the object of the hindrance, we are committed to our well-being.

We start to see that ill will and desire are a kind of alienation. They are a way of not being connected to ourselves because we are so involved in the object. Even if the object is inside of us, there is a narrowing

and alienating effect in which we are only present for ourselves partially. Turning the attention around 180 degrees away from the object towards what the experience is like – how it feels within us – is an effective way of working with the hindrances.

As we do this, then we will also want to start feeling the different emotions that come into play. Sometimes anger, ill will, or hostility is actually people recoiling from their own sadness. Underneath ill will, there can be sadness. Sometimes there is hurt; sometimes there is loneliness. Sometimes inner pain is a catalyst for ill will and hostility. As we turn our attention around, we can see the underlying emotion that might be the fuel for ill will. Chances are, that is what needs our love. That is what needs our caring, careful attention, more so than the hindrance itself.

When working with a hindrance in daily life, it can be hard to pay careful attention to it, turn around, and look deeply at it. The hindrance is strong, and life is busy. We know we have a hindrance, but we are caught in the midst of all the activities of life and it is difficult to stop. Sometimes practicing radical restraint is the significant thing to do: “No, I am not going to do this. I am not going along with this. I am not going to speak from my ill will. I am not going to act on my ill will.” Just simply: “No.”

This is not pretty. It is not deep and insightful. But sometimes it is better than the alternative when we give in to it. A wonderful muscle is developed: the muscle of restraint. This will serve a meditator tremendously through a lifetime of meditation.

The premise for the fourth foundation of mindfulness is that when meditation is deeper and clearer, when we have followed the journey of practice, and gotten quieter, more still, and more present, then we have the opportunity to see the hindrances in a new way. We see them as an inconstant experience. We see that they come and go. We feel what it is like when they are not there, and get to know them when they are absent. Sometimes the quality of the absence of desire or aversion can be quite high. There can be a real sense of peace when we are finally free of the hindrances, which are maybe part and parcel of our ordinary life. We take time to feel that. We turn around and really feel the well-being, the peace, the quiet, and the stillness that can be there. We let it register deeply. Registering the peace sometimes allows it to grow and become fuller.

But we also see the inconstancy of the hindrances. Insight and *satipaṭṭhāna* practice come into maturity when we start seeing things arising and passing. In terms of the hindrances, the text seems to imply that we should use our agency to let go of them. If we can be

really present to see the ill will, aversion, or hostility arise – we are right there to see them come into being – this is an opportune time, perhaps an unparalleled time, to let go.

It is almost as if the body and mind have a memory of what it was like just before a hindrance arose, when the hindrance was not there. It can now be seen as a provisional state – as not having the absoluteness of really strong, fiery anger or hostility. It is just something appearing. The Buddha called it “a visitor” – a visitor that covers over or hides the luminosity of the mind.

It can be delightful and amusing to be quiet and still enough to watch a movement towards ill will arise, and say: “No. Let go. I am not going there.” Sometimes letting go is more like letting be, because we are not picking it up. We are just letting it be: letting it go by.

This is one of the deeper ways of practicing with the hindrances. It is deeper because now we are beginning to align our practice with the emphasis in the refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* on seeing the arising and passing of phenomena. The focus is on being right there at the place where we can see how inconstant and changeable our experiences and perceptions are.

The clarity we are trying to develop by not allowing the hindrances to obscure the mind becomes the clarity of

sitting quietly in the changing flow of experience in the present moment. We sit in the inconstant arising and passing, coming and going, appearing and disappearing of the flow of change that is the present moment. If we are in the present moment, things are always changing. This is a deep liberating place to sit and be. The hindrances are not liberating, but we are developing attention to the hindrances so that our attention can liberate us. The hindrances are just as good an object as anything else.

Today, see whether you have ill will, anger, or aversion that feels painful, and stop for it. Stop and take your time with it. Do the practice of turning your attention 180 degrees around to feel it and get to know it. If you do have ill will, when it is no longer there, feel what its absence is like. If you are tracking it through the day, perhaps you will catch the arising of ill will. Maybe while driving your car, someone cuts you off, and you might see it arise right there. What an opportunity. How is it different to have ill will when you see it arise, versus when it is already in place?

Practicing this way, I hope you can maybe enjoy and be amused by being mindful of ill will and seeing it clearly for what it is. May you find a very different relationship to ill will than people have when they are pushed around by it. Thank you.