

Satipaṭṭhāna (45) Hindrances: Rigidity and Sluggishness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Today's topic is the third of the five hindrances. In English, it is often called sloth and torpor. I suspect that a good percentage of you do not use those words. They are not in your active vocabulary, especially the word "sloth." But you may have picked them up, especially if you have been around the insight meditation scene for a while.

It is not so clear that these are the best translations of the Pāli words – the original Buddhist idea. I do not know where sloth and torpor came from as translations of these terms. But these translations have been around for a long time. It might be that eighteenth-century English translators chose words that had a particular meaning for them.

The Pāli word translated as “sloth” literally means “rigid” or “stiff.” This describes a mind that is stiff or rigid, not soft and pliable. The word translated as “torpor” may work, but I like the word “sluggish” better.

The tradition says that “sluggish” has more to do with the physical – the body – and “rigid,” more with the mind. The mind can become rigid or stiff, or there can be sluggishness in the body.

But exactly where this stiffness and sluggishness is, whether it is in the mind, the body, or both, does not really matter. In practice, we are just paying attention to how it is. These words describe a movement of the mind when its energy is not alive and engaged in a healthy, flowing way. They are often associated with a sinking mind, a sinking of energy and vitality in the mind.

The next hindrance, the fourth, is arousal, the over-arousing of the mind. What we are noticing here is the energy level, activity, and engagement level of the mind. Either it can sink or it can be over-aroused. There are many reasons for that in life.

If we are successful in not being caught in desire or aversion – the first two hindrances – not caught in the grip of greed, hatred, and ill will, our minds do not have

their usual entertainment. They do not have the usual fire that keeps them going. Sometimes we are exhausted from too much wanting, anxiety, or aversion. We might be angry all the time.

When we finally stop feeling greed, fear, anxiety, or anger, we can sometimes crash. At times the energy level drops down. Some of that has to do simply with finally being at rest. But some of it might have to do with confusion, depression, or with not knowing where to put the mind and what to do when it is a little lost. There is no good reason to be engaged, no cause to want, to have, or to want to make go away.

Perhaps we have never discovered the natural vitality of awareness – attention – because the vitality of attention is always being fueled by greed, aversion, or fear. A huge adjustment can happen when those “caffeines of the soul,” as I call them, are not operating and we go through withdrawal a little.

Sometimes a sinking mind – the mind getting rigid, closed, tight, or sluggish – is a response or a reaction to circumstances. We might feel overwhelmed. We might have too many stimuli, too many emotional difficulties. It is difficult for our heart or mind to manage, and we believe we cannot manage. We think it should be different. We feel discouraged. Perhaps we feel a lot of

self-pity or a lot of self-doubt, thinking: “I should have done better. I made a mistake.”

All of these different attitudes come into play around the difficulties in our lives. Sometimes our lives are extremely difficult. I do not want to diminish that or pretend that things are not difficult sometimes. But one of the ways the mind can respond to that is to get rigid, numb, and closed down. Another way is to get sluggish. Sometimes sluggishness is resistance to doing what we do not want to do. Sometimes it is just a sense of being deeply, deeply weary and tired. We then give up a little bit.

These are some of the ways that the mind responds to difficulties and challenges. They can be dramatic and very big, or they can be very subtle. As meditation gets clearer and clearer, as it gets stronger, we can become sensitive to more subtle shifts in the direction of stiffness, or in the direction of rigidity of mind and sluggishness.

These shifts can be very subtle. There can be a feeling that it is too much to stay with a full in-breath, a feeling of, “I did that before.” And the mind does not want to do it anymore. There is a bit of resistance, and something shuts down. Or we begin to feel as if meditation has become a duty. We have done it for a long time and it

has become a duty: “Oh. One more time. I have to do it.” Something inside gets rigid, tight, or closed.

We may have had three days of difficult meditations. Something inside feels discouraged and the level of energy decreases. There is sluggishness and the mind is unwilling to operate.

The hindrances can all be considered normal human mental activities. We are born with the hindrances. They come with a human life. It is not a personal failing to have them. But it *is* a personal field of mindfulness, a personal place to discover what is happening with us and to become wise about it.

One of the tasks of mindfulness is to become sensitive to movements of energy. For the third hindrance, become wise about how energy sinks – the sinking mind. Become wise about how energy gets frozen or tight, wise about how the mind and the heart get rigid. Become wise with it, and practice with it wisely.

One of the ways to be wise about it is to take a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn toward feeling and sensing it more. Really care for yourself by truly feeling what this is, rather than being discouraged by our discouragement, overwhelmed by our overwhelm, or by how we are shutting down or not practicing “just right.”

We take care of ourselves by turning our attention to, “Oh, this is how it is now.” Feel it and be with it. It is invaluable to feel and be with an experience. This is partly because one of the things we are trying to develop in this practice is the ability to have clarity of seeing, clear knowing, and clear feeling of what actually is. We are developing it with things that are difficult.

We might also discover that some of the attitudes underlying the third hindrance are attitudes of “should’s,” or “it’s too much,” or “it’s been too long,” or “I can’t manage,” or “I’m supposed to be better.” These are some of the attitudes that can be draining for us to live by.

We can see those attitudes, and to see them as attitudes can be quite powerful. When the time comes, when meditation is very clear, peaceful, and settled, the movements of the third hindrance might be very subtle. But we can see it arise, see it be born.

Because we are familiar with it from practicing with it for a long time, we can see it arise – the first inklings or hints of it. Then it might be possible to let go of it – abandon it. And this is a really good thing to do when abandoning it moves us to greater health, greater clarity, and to a good way of being.

In this practice of the hindrances, we want to be able to see clearly. Then, if it is easy enough, we want to let go. We can appreciate the absence of a rigid mind or any sluggishness that may have arisen.

So, the hindrances. Tomorrow, we will discuss restlessness, the over-energized hindrance and, on Friday, doubt. Thank you all very much.