

Hindrances and Assistances (1 of 5) Helpful and Unhelpful Desires

January 30, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

challenges, Buddhism, healthy, strength, strategies, addiction, dysfunctional, diminish, dharmic, cope, letting go, sensual desire, acquisitiveness, love

Gil Fronsdal

Hello on this Monday morning. The topic I've been teaching from the beginning of this year is how to be with and practice with the challenges of life. These challenges can be from minor to the most major challenges of life. I have been laying down an important foundation that applies to all different areas, so that with time we can learn how to be with the really difficult things that happen to us and within us.

The topic this week has to do with strategies for working with challenges. There are two general categories of strategies for working with challenges. The first is dysfunctional, and the other one is functional. One kind is wholesome and helpful, and the other kind is unwholesome and unhelpful.

I want to use the teachings on the five hindrances, and present them as unhelpful strategies that people commonly use to cope with challenges that come up. But I also want to say that each of those hindrances has an opposite quality, which is a healthy way of responding to challenges. We have these two working together, and can know both. As you get to know and recognize how hindrances work in you, that can be a prompt to ask: “Oh, what’s the healthy form of the same thing? I’m being challenged right now by some difficulty, and my coping mechanism is a hindrance. Is there another strategy? What would be the opposite? And how do I tap into that opposite in me, so it’s integral – not an overlay or pretense added on top of everything?”

I think that in Buddhism the emphasis is often on letting go of the dysfunctional things that the mind does, and we are often just left there: “let go, let go.” This is partly because, in fact, as the practice gets deeper and matures, there is a profound letting go of everything. But the attitude that we are supposed to let go of everything right away is not really appropriate.

This would be like, when you are going swimming in a public pool, instead of going into a changing room to take off your clothes and put on a bathing suit, you decide to just take off everything and jump in the pool – why go into the changing room?

There is a time and place for letting go of certain things. If we try to do it all at once, we end up undermining ourselves, or diminishing the fullness, strength, and I would like to say “power,” of a human being that can come from the opposite of the hindrances. Our strength resides there. If we don’t find it there, our capacity for strength or energy can flow into the hindrances. Sometimes people put more energy into the hindrances than almost anything else.

For example, with the first one, sensual desire, people put more effort and energy into their addictions than almost anything else. When someone has a very strong addiction, boy, are they motivated sometimes. Get out of their way – they’ll do almost anything to satisfy their addiction. There is a lot of energy there.

Instead of that desperation, it is possible to have a sense of power and strength in the opposite of the hindrances – the healthy version. So, first, we have to understand them. The first hindrance is usually said to be sensual desire. The Buddha also offered a separate list of the five hindrances, where the only difference is that the first hindrance is covetousness: wanting something somebody else has. Sensual desire is the strong desire for everything in the world of sensual desire, not just sex or alcohol, but comfort and sensuality.

In the Buddhist analysis of human beings, sensual desire is one of the fundamental characteristics of human life. Acquisitiveness sometimes has very deep roots inside of us, in the desire to survive, to manage in this life of ours. These things can have deep roots in us. But there can be a lot of dysfunctionality in sensual desire and acquisitiveness. One thing it does is create a very strong separation, shutting down, or diminishment of our full connection to others and the world.

Our connection to the world and others is seen through the lens of fulfilling that desire. Some people will even confuse love with a strong desire to fulfill their sensual wishes. They think the other person can provide them with that wonderful, sensual possibility. That strong drive fills our being and our heart with a deep yearning and wanting that can be confused with love. Desire can be seen as a kind of love. But it probably has more to do with sensual desire than heartfelt love.

A foundational aspect of mindfulness practice is to become an expert, really attuned to and skillful in recognizing the hindrances and working with them. To recognize all the different flavors, colors, and shapes of sensual desires that arise all the time. This is not to reject sensual pleasure, which has a place in life, maybe an important place at times. But what makes desire a hindrance is the drive, the addiction, the way

that we get preoccupied and lose ourselves in the world of sensual desire.

Some people try to cope with strong challenges by getting something else – escaping into the world of sensual desire, or fantasizing about sensual desire, soothing themselves in a sensual way as compensation for the challenge. That could be useful at times. But as a hindrance, it is not useful when it's so strong.

On the other end of what's healthy and functional, there are profound healthy capacities for desire, for wanting. These arise out of heartfelt desires that open and connect us here to this moment, rather than narrowing and closing us down. If anything, they free us from addiction, rather than submerging us in addiction. We often don't get this message in Buddhism, because of the strong idea many people have that we're supposed to let go of all desire. Sometimes people even think that all desire is wrong. The Buddha did not say that.

Certain kinds of desire produce suffering, but there are also dharmic desires that connect us to the dharmic path, such as the desire to be free and the desire to be present. Compassion has desire in it, and care has desire in it – to care for someone. So when we're challenged by life, we can take the time to pause, having the faith that deep inside us there is a place of healthy desires, healthy wishes. These are for the well-

being of ourselves and others, for goodness, to be present, to be part of a transformational healing process for ourselves, and for the world to be a better place. When we have big challenges, especially when we're caught in the hindrances, we can take time to shift gears – taking a deep breath and trying to find this deeper place of healthy desires. Know there is a place of healthy desires – know this is part of you. Don't diminish yourself or pretend it's not supposed to be there.

Our desires are also the channel or support for our personal strength. They are a power of sorts, even if it's a very gentle power. There can be a wonderful strength in the gentleness of desire and wanting. Healthy desire can be the fuel or the catalyst for agency and engagement so we know what to do. This is not assertive, selfish, or aggressive, but is like water that flows around things and eventually wears all kinds of things down. We can give birth and expression to these healthy desires once we know what they are. We trust them and know their important place in our life.

In Buddhism, we allow ourselves to have dharmic desires until the dharmic desires no longer have a role. Then we can let go of them because they've done their job. So you might consider this today. Spend today reflecting, maybe talking with friends about what you know about the deepest desires you have – those that

do not feel dysfunctional or like hindrances, don't diminish you, or frustrate you, or add more problems to your life.

When we respond to challenges with hindrances, we tend to create more problems. When we respond to challenges by tapping into healthy desires, then we tend to be able to move toward health. Sometimes it takes time to reflect and think – by going for a walk or spending time meditating or talking to a friend – to drop down below the layers of reactivity and hindrances, until we tap into the deepest wellsprings of healthy desire within us.

So what are your healthy desires? Which desires are valuable for you to stay close to – especially when you have challenges? Which ones help you go through a challenge without collapsing, without being discouraged, and without succumbing to compensatory or escapist strategies like the hindrances? I trust that all of you have beautiful desires within you, maybe silent or hidden for now. Thank you.