

Hindrances and Assistances (3 of 5) Freezing and Stilling

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Welcome to this third talk on strategies for working with the challenges we have.

One way for developing the skills for being with life's challenges is to train on the small challenges. From time to time, life can give us huge challenges. Some of them are so big that their legacy continues to live in us in many difficult ways, such as fear, anger, or grief. Sometimes the challenges are too much to sit with, be with, or open to without having trained or prepared the ground first.

Personal inner challenges that are a legacy of other things in our lives are better managed with wisdom. We might even put them aside until we can spend time

preparing ourselves for addressing them in a useful way, such as by training with small challenges.

The training for this week is to start by asking ourselves the questions: “What strategy am I using concerning this challenge I am feeling? What am I trying to do with it?” Simply asking those questions and stopping to investigate is a powerful thing to do. By asking these questions, we become less entangled or lost in the challenge. We are stepping back and trying to get an overview of what is happening. “Given what is happening, how am I responding? What is my mind-heart trying to do here?”

There are two general things to notice. Is the direction you are going making it harder to be aware? Are you more likely to shut down awareness, get wrapped up or entangled in what is going on, or be trapped and hindered by it? Or does this strategy have the effect of helping you to open up and see more clearly? Does it help your wisdom to come forth – the wisdom that can only come forth if you are not entangled, lost, or caught up in the situation?

We have to be able to step back, pause, and make room for wisdom, clarity, and compassion to show itself in a way that it can't when we are entangled or caught in what is happening. This is why it is so powerful to ask: “What is happening here? What am I trying to do?”

This week, we are referring to the Five Hindrances as dysfunctional ways of being with challenges. Today, we are considering the third hindrance, which is usually translated into English as “sloth and torpor.” I don’t think that this is the best translation of the Pali. The first word, *thīna*, which is usually translated as sloth, more literally means “to become stiff or rigid.” It may be akin to the modern psychological idea of freeze. Some people will freeze in the face of a challenge. It is a shutting down. Something shuts down, closes down, freezes, or we may go numb.

This can often be a product of fear. Fear gets the upper hand and shuts us down. What is happening is too much. Other strong emotions can also have this effect on us. One byproduct can be turning away from what is happening. Part of the reason to shut down, freeze, or become rigid is so that we don’t have to deal with something. It can be like an ostrich that puts its head in the sand to not see the danger. Freezing can be a type of shutting down.

When I was quite young, I remember something that made me feel extremely afraid. It wasn’t an imminently dangerous situation, but my reaction was a clear feeling that I disappeared. I was no longer there. I couldn’t understand why people were looking in my direction because I had disappeared. Later, I found myself

walking down the street, and I had no idea how I got there. Something inside of me had turned off, and I guess I had left the place. I don't know how I left or what I said. Something shut down – we can feel that. We can feel that kind of shutting down, closing down, closing up, or resisting: “I am not going to deal with this.” Something gets rigid, tight, closed, or locked. We can feel it physically.

Sometimes we can feel it over the heart. I remember when I was 15 or 16, a friend said something to me, and I literally felt the doors of my heart close. They locked up. I remember the thought, “I am never going to open that again.” It wasn't until I started meditating some four or five years later that what had closed that day began opening. So this shutting down or closing up is the dysfunctional way of responding,

The more functional, healthy, wise way of responding also involves stopping or stilling. Both the wise and unwise response involves stopping, but the functional response is to stop in order to pay attention. Stop and be present for what is going on. Take a step back, either metaphorically in the mind or sometimes physically, to get an overview of what is happening.

If there is an argument and you are caught in the heat of the argument, it can be a healthy thing to stop and pause or ask for a pause. Maybe even step away a few

feet and get a little physical distance. Explain: “I need to spend some time thinking. I need to get a feel for what is going on.” Then you can catch your breath and find your bearings. You can better understand what is happening.

The degree to which there can be a stopping in the form of an inner stilling – not a numbing – allows us to make room for what is there. There is a feeling of stilling, not closing down or locking up. There is a stilling that has a feeling of opening up or becoming full. It is like a sacred pause: “What is happening here? What am I feeling? What am I thinking? What am I trying to do? What is happening with the person that I am with or the situation I am in? Can I take a second look? What is happening?”

I find a day of pausing and looking or pausing and reflecting invaluable. Even to this day, my mind will produce interpretations and biases or jump to conclusions about a situation. When I am moving along kind of fast, I don’t see that my mind has done this. There is something in my mind that predisposes me to have confidence in my ideas. I may have an erroneous idea, but the confidence I have convinces me that it is right.

I know myself well enough that if I can stop, pause, and become still, then I can see: “Oh, that is an

interpretation. I am overlaying a guess onto the situation.” I have learned to put a question mark after the assumptions, guesses, or conclusions that I make. Even if I am confident that I am right, I have learned to put a question mark asking: “What is this? Is this so?”

The more consequential my view, decision, or ideas are about what is out there, the more important I feel it is to stop, pause, and live for a while with my conclusion. Reflect on it. See if it comes up again. If it comes up two or three more times, then it feels like it may be right. I will give it a little more credence. I will give it more attention and explore what is going on with this idea or view.

We stop so we can see, stop so we can question, stop so we can catch our breath and look at things in a fresh way. There are two forms of stopping just like there are two movements of the mind – one is the hindrance, and the other is the opening to wisdom.

When considering the first hindrance of desire, there is sensual desire. Some desires can cause problems. There is also the desire to open up, see, and be free. These are healthy desires. When we are with challenges, can we see the difference? Which desire is operating?

In working with challenges, there is averting. There is healthy averting – turning away or saying no. Can we see the difference between healthy averting and unhealthy averting?

Today there is the unhealthy hindrance of sloth and torpor – freezing, getting still, going numb, shutting down, and going to sleep. There is also stopping or pausing that opens us up. It allows more clarity and room for wisdom.

So these are my words for today. I would like to suggest that you take a look at this movement of shutting down, turning off, getting bored, going numb, and losing interest – symptoms of the third hindrance. Pay attention to waking up, being interested, and clearly investigating a situation that at first might seem boring. Certainly, there is something about this situation that you can study and look at. What is the interesting thing here? What is going on? Do the work of stopping and pausing not to be lazy, but stopping and pausing so you can figure out what is the mind's work here. What needs to be done that is beneficial, healthy, and creates a better connection and empathy for the person or the situation you are in?

Look today for opportunities around this. What goes on in your mind, your awareness? Is it shutting down in

some way, or is it opening up to the situation you are in? If you see the difference, choose opening up.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to being together tomorrow.