

FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 3: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Meditation

Week 3: Helps and Hindrances in Meditation

Introduction

In the first text of this part of the course the Buddha described the hindrances that may stop us from focussing on the object of meditation – these were described as ‘worldly’ desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, ‘worry and flurry’, and doubt. These five hindrances are not caused by meditation – they are mental habits we are prone to in everyday life, and when our enthusiasm and motivation to meditate is not strong they are likely to assert themselves when we meditate.

Probably all meditators experience all of the five hindrances at some time, and working with them can be a profitable way of getting to know our own mental processes and learning to manage our mind, our energy, and our emotions. But we shouldn’t get the impression that meditation is just about working with the hindrances. If we approach meditation in the right way and set up the right conditions we can often leave our old mental habits far behind for a while, opening the gateway to mental states we perhaps have never experienced in everyday life.

In the following passage Kamalashila describes how we can use the positive elements in our meditation experience to take us past the five hindrances, and also how we can work with the hindrances when they do arise. You will find more information about ways of working in meditation in the book from which this passage is adapted: *Meditation* by Kamalashila, which includes an appendix giving a detailed list of ways of counteracting specific hindrances.

How to Work in Meditation

(Text an edited extract from ‘Meditation’, by Kamalashila, pp 49-57)

Appreciating concentrated states of mind

Even if you have only tried the Mindfulness of Breathing once, you will probably have discovered something about the nature of concentration. Even if it was just for a split second, you probably experienced some clarity of mind. If so, you’ll have a sense of what it is like to be without all the distractions, images, and thoughts which usually clatter away in the mind. A concentrated mind is happy; it is clear, like a blue summer sky. The more concentrated you become in meditation practice, the more you will find these distracted thoughts dissolving away. In fact when one is very absorbed in meditation there may be almost no thought at all. We usually identify mental experience with thoughts. But the experience of meditation shows us that thinking is not necessarily the most important activity that happens

in our mind. We may discover that our mind can be at its clearest, richest, and most refined when there is virtually no thought at all.

A popular myth about meditation is that it involves ‘making your mind go blank’. But thought-free awareness is a very positive and natural thing. It is certainly not confined to meditation. We can get so happily absorbed, so ‘wrapped up’ in an activity, that thoughts simply do not arise.

The elements of meditation

Before we start looking at possible distractions and hindrances, it is useful to know roughly what we are aiming for. When we meditate, we should be looking for an absorbed, balanced, happy, concentrated state of mind. And it’s helpful to have some expectation that this happy state of concentration is ‘just round the corner’, or ‘just beneath the surface’. In fact there is always some degree of concentration present, even when we are distracted! If we have this attitude it is much more likely that deeper concentration will arise.

Meditation is like flying a glider, sailing with the wind, or surfing. We need to take the opportunities offered by the elements of meditation. We need to ride the warm air currents, use the power of the wind, launch ourselves skilfully in and out of the waves. And if we are to do so, we need to be aware of the positive potential of the states that arise in our mind. We need to be ready to ‘ride’ our mental states as they arise.

One example is pleasure and enjoyment. If we notice that we are experiencing a pleasant state of peacefulness – even if it is very slight – in the midst of an otherwise dull or distracted state of mind, this feeling is to be encouraged. We can allow this feeling to continue, and simply experience and enjoy it, as we concentrate on the object of our meditation. We should avoid getting distracted by the feeling, and simply use it as a support for our concentration. There is a bright energy in pleasure that we can learn to channel into our practice, rather than allowing it to divert our attention.

Similar to this is inspiration – deep joy and excitement – which can even be felt physically, in the form of ‘goose-pimples’ and ‘rushes’ of pleasure. Again, we can encourage this, include it as an aspect of our concentration. Another kind of recollection that can aid our concentration is the more sober, patient kind of determination – we feel deeply that we want to meditate, that we don’t want to be distracted, that we want to grow and develop. This kind of motivation can be profoundly moving. Another such aid can be the sense of concentration itself. As they grow, concentration and clarity of thought have their own distinct feeling-tones which we can learn to recognize and encourage.

We need to get to know these allies of meditation – to anticipate them, to utilize their aid, and to ride upon their positive influence. The more use we make of these allies, the less we shall have to be concerned with the hindrances to meditation.

Hindrances to meditation

Paying attention to just one thing, as we do in meditation, is not always easy. There is often a semi-conscious resistance from those parts of ourselves which want to stay in the ordinary sense-world and do other things. There are five recognizable kinds of hindrance to concentration, and everyone experiences all of them from time to time. If you know what they are, you can recognize them when they arise – perhaps before they take you over!

The five hindrances are:

1. Desire for sense experience
2. Ill will
3. Restlessness and anxiety
4. Sloth and torpor
5. Doubt and indecision

Desire for sense experience

Desire for sense experience is the most basic kind of distraction. We aren't particularly interested in the meditation, so our mind keeps getting drawn back to the sense-world. We haven't yet learned how to find pleasure in concentration, so we can't help looking for it in pleasurable sense experiences. If we hear a sound, it seems so interesting that we start listening to it. We may have many pleasant thoughts – about what we could be doing this evening, about what we could have to eat, or ideas we have recently read about. These impulses are perfectly natural in themselves – but they make concentration impossible.

Ill will

Ill will is a variant of the previous hindrance: this time our interest is stuck in some painful experience. We are irritated – by something or someone – and we can't let it go. We can't stop thinking about the way we have been mistreated and about what we'd like to say, or do, to even the score. Or maybe there is some external sound, or smell, which irritates us so much that we cannot stop thinking about it. Perhaps some idea or opinion has struck a wrong note, and we feel we must analyse all its faults in detail. So long as this is going on, it is impossible to concentrate on anything else.

Restlessness and anxiety

Restlessness and anxiety gives us no peace – we cannot settle down and concentrate our mind. We need to slow down. We are 'speedy', going too fast. Either the body is restless and fidgeting, or the mind is anxious – or both are happening at the same time! A restless body and mind might be the result of insufficient preparation. Maybe we sat down to meditate too soon after some

stimulating activity; or maybe there is a lot on our mind at present; perhaps there is something weighing on our conscience. If we can work patiently with this situation, meditation practice itself will eventually harmonize such conflicts.

Sloth and torpor

With sloth and torpor the hindrance to our concentration is dullness of mind. We feel tired, and our body feels heavy. There is vacuity in the mind (that's the torpor) and heaviness in the body (sloth). Sometimes physical sloth can be so overwhelming that our head nods or we start snoring! The causes for this hindrance may lie simply in physical or mental tiredness, or our digestion may be coping with the onslaught of a recent meal. But it sometimes seems that psychological factors may be involved – perhaps the resistance has arisen due to some unacknowledged emotion. Again, it could also be a reflex of the previous hindrance, restless mental activity leading to exhaustion! We may sometimes alternate between restlessness and dullness, both in and out of meditation. If so, this demonstrates a need to find some new kind of balance.

Doubt and indecision

Can I, with all my problems, hope to get anywhere with meditation – especially with this meditation? Is this kind of meditation practice really any good? Can it actually do anything for me? Is this teacher any use? – Does he really know what he's talking about? And how would I know, anyway?

All this is doubt – and it is also indecision, since in this state of mind we cannot make up our mind and get on with the concentration. We end up prevaricating, 'sitting on the fence' – we lose our motivation. Doubt, in this sense, is a very serious hindrance to meditation.

There is nothing wrong with the sincere doubts that we are sure to have about meditation and its effects. There is bound to be a degree of uncertainty in our mind; some things can only be found out from experience. To a certain extent we have to take what we are told on trust and discover the truth through our own experimentation. But we can do that only by giving ourselves wholeheartedly to our experimenting. The doubting, over-sceptical frame of mind might often stem from self-doubt, or a rationalisation of self-doubt. We can hardly expect to concentrate without some confidence that we will be able to do it.

Learning from the hindrances

These five hindrances are a useful check-list for assessing how a session of meditation is going. The most important thing is to recognize the hindrance as a hindrance. Very often the act of recognition will itself weaken the hindrance. However, there may be some tendency to avoid the recognition. Most people's hindrances have their own style of 'protection' built into them. Sloth and torpor, for example, may succeed in completely walling itself off from our recognition. It's like when we don't want to get up in the morning: our mind firstly doesn't

want to know and, secondly, can keep finding good ‘reasons’ for lying in, just for another five minutes. When we’re taken over by ill will, we probably won’t want to stop picking on faults and running our minds over all the painful, unpleasant things that have happened to us. And our doubts can immediately fulfil their own prophecies.

We need to recognize clearly that we are entertaining a hindrance to concentration – the first principle is acknowledgement that the hindrance is actually there. It’s no good carrying on meditating regardless, trying to ignore it and wishing that it would go away. That approach just leads to headaches and sloth and torpor! You need to take responsibility for the hindrance. You should accept that for the time being this is your hindrance and that you need to do something about it. In meditation, you need to acknowledge each new mental state as it arises. Guilt can be a problem for some of us. Many people don’t like to think that they could experience emotions like hatred, or animal-like cravings for food and sex. Yet when their meditation experience forces them to acknowledge that in fact they do, they may feel unduly bad about it. Such an attitude is extreme and unrealistic, and blocks the possibility of progress. In meditation we need to cultivate a positive view of ourselves, to have faith in our spiritual potential.

Creative use of antidotes

There are a number of ways we can work against the hindrances. The first is to consider the consequences of allowing the hindrance to increase unchecked. What if we simply did nothing about our tendency to distraction, to hatred, or to doubt? Clearly, it would increase – our character would become progressively dominated by that trait. If we reflect on this, the importance of what we are doing may become clear.

The second is to cultivate the opposite quality. If there is doubt, cultivate confidence. If there is sloth, cultivate energy. If there is restlessness, cultivate contentment and peace. If the mind is too tight, relax it; if it is too loose, sharpen it. In other words, whenever a negative mental state gets in the way of our concentration, we try to cultivate some positive quality that overcomes or neutralizes it.

The third antidote is to cultivate a sky-like attitude. Sometimes the more we resist a particular mental state, the stronger it seems to get. If the previous two methods don’t work, try the ‘sky-like attitude’: the mind is like the clear blue sky, the hindrances are like clouds. With this way of working, we accept the fact that the hindrance has ‘got in’, and simply observe it. We watch it play itself out in our mind – we watch the fantasies, the worries, the images – we watch whatever arises. We watch, but we try not to get involved. Getting involved only feeds the hindrance. If we observe patiently, without getting involved with the hindrance, it will eventually lose its power and disperse.

Fourthly, there is suppression. This is something of a last resort: we just say ‘no’ to the hindrance, and push it aside. This is most effective when the hindrance is

weak, and when we are quite convinced of the pointlessness of playing host to it. If the hindrance is very strong – or if there is an element of emotional conflict – we may find that using this method creates unhelpful side-effects. Tension, lack of feeling, and mental dullness commonly result from an over-forceful approach. The best rule of thumb is therefore to use suppression only with weak hindrances. If we are in a positive, clear state of mind, it can be quite easy to turn such a hindrance aside.

Finally, there is Going for Refuge. Sometimes, we completely fail to deal with the hindrances; we spend the whole of a meditation session, or part of it, in a distracted state of mind. When this happens, it is important not to lose heart. We need to see that session of practice in the perspective of our overall development. Unconscious tendencies are strong in all of us, and sometimes there is bound to be struggle. Some good effects are certain to result from that effort, even though we didn't experience its fruits in that meditation! Going for Refuge is not so much a way of working against the hindrances as an attitude with which we try to connect after a meditation session. We need to reaffirm our commitment to our practice – in traditional terms, we need to Go for Refuge – to our development of higher human qualities in the direction of Enlightenment (symbolized by the Buddha), to his teaching (the Dharma), and to all those who practise it (the Sangha).

Balanced effort

You should make all these efforts in a balanced way – you need to tread a middle path between too much and too little effort. If you are too easy-going and lazy – if you don't make any particular effort to become concentrated, don't encourage positive qualities, don't bother to avoid the hindrances – you will tend to drift in a hazy, unfocused state of mind. That is one extreme. On the other hand, if you force yourself too hard you will tend to become rigid and inflexible. There will probably be some kind of reaction: force can lead to dullness or headaches. You can find a middle way between these two extremes by ensuring that there is just enough tension, and just enough relaxation. We need to relax when our mind feels too tight, sharpen when it feels too loose.

When we get beyond these hindrances and achieve a steady stream of balanced concentration, we will become especially relaxed and especially energized, both at the same time. When these two states – the bright, joyful energy, and the deep calm – arise together, we enter a state of absorption. This is a state of consciousness known traditionally as dhyāna in Sanskrit, (jhāna in Pāli).

Some auspicious signs

If we practise regularly we will soon notice the benefits our meditation is having. We will probably see some signs of progress during our meditation itself – perhaps feeling unaccountably happy and peaceful. Ecstatic sensations of bliss may sometimes arise. We will also find outside meditation that we are happier, that our life seems smoother, more under our control. We will probably find that our thoughts and ideas are clearer, and that our outlook is more expansive and

creative. We may even find that our dreams have become unusually vivid and colourful. These are all typical results of meditation.

Our progress may also show itself in less definite ways. We may simply notice that there seems to have been some kind of indefinable change. It may even be the response of other people that brings it to our attention – we may find people are more attracted towards us than before. Perhaps they can sense that we are more inwardly free and content.

These inner changes may also present us with some challenges. Meditation can stir up a wealth of rich new feelings and emotions, and we may be unsure of what to do with them. We may start seeing our life very differently and may feel like making some fundamental changes. Such experiences are to be welcomed; they show us that we are breaking through some of our basic psychological limitations. It is important, though, that we understand what is happening. Meditation really can change people's lives, and we need to participate willingly and actively in the process of change – if that's what we want. If we don't actually want to change – perhaps we just wanted something to help us relax after work – no harm is being done, but we should be aware that the meditation we are practising is essentially about spiritual transformation, and that its effects will go deep.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What positive experiences – perhaps pleasure, inspiration, or the 'taste' of concentration – have you had so far in your meditation practice? How could you use these to motivate yourself and give impetus to your meditation?
2. Which of the five hindrances do you experience most in your everyday life? Are there changes you could make outside meditation that would reduce the habit-energy you give to the hindrance, or help you develop its opposite?
3. Which of the five hindrances do you experience most strongly or most often in meditation? If this is not the hindrance you chose in Q2, could there be something about your approach to meditation that encourages this hindrance?
4. Which of the 'creative antidotes' to the hindrances do you find most useful? Are there any you haven't used so far that you think you might find useful?
5. Do you need to make more effort or to be less wilful in meditation – is your tendency to be too lazy, or too rigid? (Or perhaps you get it just right?)
6. Has your meditation practice so far had any positive effects on your everyday life?