



AWAKEN THE WORLD

Guided Meditations

#2 - THE HINDRANCES



#2 – The Hindrances

People often get frustrated when the hindrances arise and they feel that they're doing something wrong in their meditation. It's important to understand that the hindrances manifest because you are working correctly.

They are a necessary part of excavating to the deeper levels of mind. The practice is not to try and get rid of the hindrances, but to form the correct relationship to them. Any time you try to get rid of something in your meditation you'll just create more aversion, more activity in the mind, and more suffering.

The practice is always letting everything be AS IT IS. But often we don't realize what IS because it's unconscious. Sometimes a technique is a useful tool to penetrate into the deeper layers of the mind. The practice of staying single pointedly on the meditation object, the breath, always includes being equanimous with whatever arises.

But sometimes one or more of the hindrances will continue to distract you, to the point where there's a total inability to stay with the meditation object, or to be equanimous. A pain may be so persistent that it actually becomes your meditation object, whether you want it to or not. Or perhaps extreme sleepiness or haziness, or mind fog keeps you from being present. Maybe your thoughts are so persistent that you are lost in thoughts and daydreams most of the time.

If one of the hindrances has completely overtaken your ability to focus on the breath, that's okay, it happens. Acknowledge that it has happened, and acknowledge that it has become your new meditation object. Accept it and be equanimous with it. Pain, tiredness or thoughts can only overtake your meditation practice if there are aspects to them that are unconscious.

True meditation is never engaging in any type of doing. But rather it is penetrating into or witnessing what the mind is already doing, making the unconscious processes conscious. The practice is to remain present with what is, and to remain nonreactive. That is you remain equanimous, in a state of deep surrender or deep inner non-resistance, aware of sensations at the subtlest level, prior to thinking, prior to the formation of preference of 'this over that'.

The correct relationship to anything that arises in meditation is actually to see it not as a problem or hindrance at all, but as simply part of the phenomena of meditation, to see all phenomena as ultimately empty. ... to have no investment in anything one way or another.

The ego or self structure is made up of thoughts and feelings that we usually characterized as good or bad. The ego is a collection of preferences which are nothing but the result of incomplete experiences which are stored in the unconscious as memories. The ego is a collection of wiring in the mind and body. Whenever there is a preference there is an egoic self, and therefore suffering. Suffering is the nature of self because of the impermanent nature of all phenomena that the self clings to.

We are directing our attention and energy away from the perceptions and memories that form the self to focus on raw sensation. When we hold attention at the layer of raw sensation, new neurons fire and wire

together. This rewiring creates a different way of interfacing with the world. You begin to starve out the old wiring and create new wiring that's more subtle, prior to labeling. ... experiencing reality as a play of energy and aliveness, while at the same time one does not identify with the phenomena as part of oneself.

The energy or prana that has been moving in the old wiring becomes available for your experience of life in the now, and the old wiring starts to protest, starts to lose energy and die. The hindrances manifest as a sort of inner friction between the old wiring and the new wiring, and that friction is necessary for the inner alchemy to happen.

By being present and aware of the subtlest sensations possible in a state of non-resistance to all arising phenomena, the rewiring process happens automatically. It could be described as self-directed neuroplasticity- a process directed by the true self, the imminent or unconditioned self. The you that you are identified with does not control this process. This rewiring takes time. Just as someone who has only practiced piano for a short period of time can't expect to play like a virtuoso someone who has not practiced meditation and completed the necessary rewiring can't expect liberation all at once.

One might have an awakening experience, realizing one's true self, but mind and body must be purified to house the awakened consciousness permanently. Otherwise one will simply slip back into old habit patterns. One's patterns will shift in direct relation to the amount of meditation that you do, ... the amount of conditioning that you have become identified with, which could also be called your Karma, and the degree to which you have mastered being present in a state of continuous non- resistance to what is at all times.

This inner wiring may shift slowly. At times it may seem like a glacier pace, while at other times it may appear to progress quickly. Continue to practice with patience and persistence without making Samadhi a goal or interest for the mind. Simply be okay with what IS. Allow the pain, the feelings, the tiredness - even allow the pathological thinking. The more completely you allow, the faster it will arise and pass away.

Don't make it a goal to dissolve the hindrance. You must truly allow it to be as it is without any expectation of it changing. You are training the mind to be equanimous, ... nonreactive, ... to perceive reality at the deepest sensory level- the field of change, ... the field of prana or inner energy. We are going to examine three of the most common hindrances: pain, sleepiness and excessive thinking. A similar approach can be taken with any hindrance or phenomena that arises.

With each example we can begin to understand how we can penetrate the phenomena with our consciousness by observing its various hidden qualities and components. Let's start with the example of pain. Normally the pain might be a temporary distraction, and the practice is to return to the breath. In the extreme case, if pain becomes your meditation object through no choice of your own, then accept that it becomes your meditation object. This is an opportunity to penetrate deeply into its changing characteristics with your consciousness.

At first it may just seem like a wall of pain, but if you sharpen your mind you will find the pain is actually a collection of different characteristics that were unconscious. Sometimes people will start to shift their body, to move or do little stretches to try and escape from their pain. This quickly creates a pattern of aversion in the mind and only makes the pain worse. It's important to distinguish between productive pain and non-productive pain.

Most pain that arises in meditation is pain related to the habit patterns of the mind. This is the pain that you want to go into and learn to remain equanimous with. This type of pain usually disappears quickly when you get up from the cushion. Unproductive pain is more serious pain, maybe related to an injury or some sort of extreme pain, which might damage the nervous system if you try to push through it. Meditation is about the middle way- you want to move beyond your comfort zone pushing your limits but not damaging yourself or damaging the nervous system.

There's a time to be still, a time for strong determination not to move, and there's a time to be gentle with yourself. Try to discern the middle way. First we are going to drop the word pain, which has a negative connotation. Instead we will refer to it as sensation. Let go of all labels which convey a preference or judgment. This judging language keeps us locked within a limited framework of craving and aversion.

Observe the sensation in your body. Find out... is the sensation sharp or dull? Does the sharpness, or dullness change through time? Does the sensation change in intensity? Is it pulsating or throbbing? Is it static or continuous? These observations are neutral, ...not loaded with any bias or judgment. Observe, ... scientifically. You are just witnessing. Find out, is there a heat, a burning sensation? Or is there coldness? Identify the exact location of the sensation in the body and any areas within the body that may be connected to the sensation.

Are these locations moving or static? Are the areas of the sensations spreading? Are they spreading slowly or jumping around quickly? Does it appear to be solidified in one area... unmoving? In the gross sensation is there any tingling or subtle energy inside of it? Is there a contraction in the breath when sensation arises? Is there a subtle or not so subtle saying no, a pushing away in some deep part of your being? Is there a contraction of muscles? Are you holding on to something, ... protecting something?

Stay with the field of change. Observe the changing qualities and characteristics of your direct sensory experience. Permeate the gross solidified sensation, suffuse it with your consciousness. Do not be attached to what the body feels Do not be attached to particular sensations, but stay with the whole field of changing phenomena. Observe change itself, understanding that all particular phenomena is impermanent, arising and passing away.

The same approach can be used with sleepiness or mental dullness that has overtaken your meditation. Observe the characteristics of the sleepiness. Sharpen your consciousness to take in the subtleties. Let go of the word sleepiness and just observe sensation. Maybe there is a pressure or heaviness around the eyes. Maybe there's a drooping in your posture. The body may feel heavy. Maybe there is a dreaminess or foggiess in the mind. Penetrate into that fog. Permeate it. Illuminate it. Suffuse it with your awareness. Don't push it away. See it clearly for what it is.

Do these sensations grow in intensity at some points and then lessen at other points? Is there a change in the breath when these sensations come on? Continue to observe the field of changing phenomena with clear vivid awareness, and deep surrender to what is. Your meditation will be vivid if you are present. Experience this remarkable law of nature: when you don't react when you don't label anything, observing reality at the subtlest level, this inner alchemy unfolds.

The sensations that are arising on the body don't have to create suffering. This is a revelation. This is a radical shift of reality. But be patient. Work diligently. One of the biggest challenges in meditation is the monkey mind, the busy mind. Normally the practice is such that the mind will wander and you will bring it back to the breath. Even if the mind is very busy, whenever possible use the breath as your meditation object. But once again in extreme cases this is not possible and it will seem like the mind has taken over completely. If the mind is unrelenting in its production of thoughts to the point that you're unable to observe the breath at all then accept that the thoughts have become your meditation object.

There are many ways to bring our unconscious thoughts into consciousness. Here is one such practice: Simply wait for the next thought to arise Be like a cat watching a mouse hole for the mouse to appear. When the thought appears notice whether it is made of a visual image or whether it is an auditory thought or a combination of both. All thoughts are either visual auditory or both. This applies to both waking and dreaming. If no thought is arising then simply be aware that there is no thought arising.

A visual thought is an image or picture that appears in your mind. It may be a person place or a thing. An auditory thought is like self-talk an internal dialogue in the head. Sometimes a thought will be murky, indistinct, unformed, or not quite conscious. It may be hard to grasp what it is exactly. Just Do your best to be aware of whether it is visual, auditory, or both.

Or, whether there is no thought arising in that moment It's important to understand precisely what we mean by thoughts. Here we use the words thoughts, perceptions and sensations in a very precise, particular way, that's unique to meditation practice. In the teachings of the Buddha the five Skandhas, the five aggregates, describe the aspects of the mind that we are referring to.

The first Skandha is called "rupa", which is simply the physical form or the body. Sensation arises on rupa, on the body. For example as you are meditating you may be aware of a burning sensation- the raw sensation arises on the body. It is the bare phenomena, your inner aliveness or inner energy, arising and passing away

on the body prior to the formation of thought, prior to any label or definition. This is called "vedana", the second Skandha the root level of sensory awareness. This is where we want to keep our attention.

The third and fourth skandhas are where the most persistent layers of Maya and illusion arise. The next stage, the stage of perception, is where we perceive "things". We might at this stage say that there is a burning sensation in the knee. There is a thing called knee pain. This is "sanna" the third Skandha which is cognition or identification of a particular separate thing.

Finally there is the triggering of "sankaras" -- the fourth skandha, the conditioned habitual response pattern of the mind which is based on one's held definitions and beliefs This is where we hold craving and aversion. In the case of pain we have aversion to the pain. Craving and aversion is always related to experienced memories, the opinions and definitions one holds.

The mind may be holding on to a memory of a time when you were running and had a knee injury or maybe you had an operation there may be a story connected to the knee. Your mind might say: "Not this again". It might say "This pain is ruining my meditation." The thoughts about the knee are always in the form of words and ideas or they may be visual images or both. This is what we are referring to as thoughts, which are distinct from the raw sensations and perceptions of the knee as a distinct thing.

Another example: as you are meditating there may be a smell which is a sensation At the level of vedana, the second skandha, it is neither good nor bad. It is not a particular smell, it is raw sensation. When you smell your mind may then label it as the scent of a flower. This is the third skandha sanna. Then finally the smell may trigger a thought based on one's preference, which is a habit pattern of the mind, the sankara.

Maybe your mind generates the image of a flower or maybe you have a positive memory of your grandmother's garden. Or it may trigger a negative dialogue about how the meditation space is supposed to be a scent free environment. Whether the smell is perceived as good or bad depends on the preconceptions and the ideas held in the mind. The smell itself at the level of vedana is neutral. So in summary the sensation of smell is one thing, the mental labeling is another, and the craving and aversion, the preference based on your held beliefs, is another.

Start to observe these processes so that you can distinguish your thoughts clearly from perceptions and sensations. Make your thoughts clear and conscious. The consciousness of the first four skandhas is called vinnana, which is the fifth Skandha. With practice you may begin to experience not only the changing field of phenomena, but you may realize yourself as the consciousness that is observing. Recognize the two realms of duality the changing realm of phenomena and the unchanging stillness or consciousness, the awareness itself.

As you observe the field of change realize that consciousness which is beyond feeling beyond thinking beyond what the body is doing. Another technique, which can help you to make unconscious thought patterns conscious is to notice the characteristics of the thoughts in terms of their content. Here we are consciously performing the task of labeling and identifying which is normally done automatically by the unconscious mind.

Wait for the next thought to arise Maybe the thought is a recollection of something in the past such as an event or perhaps it is a recapitulation of events from your day, a replaying of a past conversation. Just make a note to yourself saying "remembering" or "recollecting" or simply "past". Label it as "past" without going into the story. Like a scientist, you are just labeling, just observing what is. Don't indulge the mind or get hooked into the dialogue of the mind.

Perhaps the thought that arises is something to do with the future such as planning or envisioning, worrying or wishing. Just make a note saying to yourself "planning" or "future" Perhaps the thought is more like daydreaming, fantasizing or the mind creating a story. In this case label it "fantasizing" or "daydreaming". Maybe the mind is analyzing, figuring something out. Then note that your mind is "analyzing". Maybe the thought is fuzzy or not fully formed . In which case label it as a "fuzzy thought" or "indistinct". Continue to observe the thoughts in this way.

Here we are using the mind to observe the mind. Like using a thorn to remove a thorn, so that we can dig deeper into the unconscious habit patterns of the mind and bring what is hidden into greater awareness. This

approach is very useful when the hindrances become extreme. Use it until the hindrance or gross solidified phenomena has dissolved enough that you can return to the breath as your meditation object.

There are a few other common hindrances that are likely to arise in your practice. Blissful feelings or pleasant sensations can be as much of a hindrance as pain. When you begin to let go surrendering deeply the energy that was going into old patterns will be felt as present and it can be quite pleasurable. You may experience peace, tranquility or even ecstasy. When the self starts to merge with the meditation object one can experience a free flow of sensation or inner energy, inner aliveness.

You could call it an inner light or "prana". Whatever name you give it, the mind will likely generate a craving for these sensations and experiences, and as soon as it grasps at the pleasant sensation you will usually lose it because the pleasure has come from resting in a place of non grasping. Notice whether the mind is playing this game.

The mind is clever- ... it will surrender to a point so that it can feel the release, feel the pleasurable sensation, but the root of the Sankara is never released, because of the grasping and the mind's effort to control and possess. So you enjoy a bit of pleasurable sensation and then the pain returns, and you keep playing the game in an endless cycle. If you are doing this, it is not meditation it is only a game that your mind has learned to play.

True meditation is having no preference to any sensation, observing at the root level of awareness without labeling anything as good or bad. Do not cling to any sensation, any experience or any state of consciousness. Do not begin to crave Samadhi, because Samadhi is the realization of the self that is beyond craving and aversion, beyond the mind. Notice whether your mind is playing some game. Notice if your mind is manipulating your meditation in any way.

Emotions can come up in meditation. Emotions are a sort of combination of thoughts and feelings. They are tied to bodily sensations, but also to memories and experiences. Treat them the same way you do any phenomena. Penetrate the characteristics of the emotion, observe the characteristics of any thoughts that arise with them making the unconscious aspects conscious, observing the field of change at the root level.

Go into them with piercing awareness and surrender deeply, allowing them to arise and pass away fully on the body. Finally the mind can manipulate the meditation practice by expecting something to happen. Sometimes people hear about the experiences of other meditators read about the Yogi's and sages of the past, read or hear about Samadhi , and expect or want something dramatic to happen.

The mind might try to manufacture some experience expecting the heavens to open, expecting to have some vision or some energy come. Let go of all expectations all are just ideas in the mind. Always sit with beginner's mind as if you know nothing about meditation at all. Sit with the mind that is open like the sky and watch as thoughts come and go like clouds.

Sit not only as if you know nothing about meditation, but as if you know nothing at all. Let all layers of the mind be transparent as if you don't even know what sensations are. As if you have appeared in a human body for the first time in this moment. This practice can show you the truth- that there is no substance to the thoughts and sensations that make up the self. The self structure is ultimately ephemeral, empty impermanent, and constantly changing.

The next 25 minutes will be in silence, and the beginning and end of the meditation will be indicated by a bell. Continue to focus on the breath as your meditation object as described in guided meditation part 1. As the hindrances arise you now have techniques to penetrate deeper into the unconscious characteristics if necessary, always, ultimately returning to the breath as your meditation object.