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Understanding the Hindrances to Living a More Skillful Life

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It is hard for us to be mindful of those tendencies and characteristics that we have that keep us in a state of darkness or from achieving those states and conditions that we hope for and want in life

States can be thought of as being something mental, a tendency of mind or consciousness, while conditions can be thought of as being an environmental situation as regards our work, home and relationships.

We seem to be very outward directed in our actions, wanting, observing, criticizing, judging, while at the same time lacking mindfulness of states within, that many times form the conceptual and emotional basis for those outward perceptions and actions.

Societies and cultures do not teach us what these characteristics or mental tendencies are so it is up to our families and religious institutions to do so.

Our families may be so overwhelmed by their own conditioning that they do not have the knowledge or ability to teach us these things.

Religious institutions may have agendas of their own that direct the way they act and teach.

Neither our families or the religious institutions within our culture or society may address our needs or even understand where we are at.

At the same time, we may have cultivated states that make us rebellious or resentful of what they share with us and teach us.

If we do not have a degree of balance and openness in our being, it is difficult to learn anything.

If in what our family has said and done we find to have been neglectful or abusive to us, we may still learn something from observing this experience.

If the clergy of a particular religion has acted abusively, or the church or religious way as a whole has taken a stance or attitude that we find abusive, repugnant and in violation of the very morals and ethics that it teaches us to practice, we may still learn something from observing this experience.

There have been clergy and spiritual leaders in Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Catholicism and Yoga who have abused their authority and the trust placed in them by those seeking their guidance and assistance.

This is a human phenomenon, not something that is particular to one country, religion or spiritual path and practice.

If we understand those hindrances and obstacles that keep us from living a balanced life and the practice of mental cultivation, we are becoming more mindful of what keeps us down.

It is not an external element, but something within.

The hindrances to progress in life and a spiritual path according to Buddhism are:

1. Sensual Desire
2. Ill Will
3. Sloth and Torpor
4. Restlessness and Worry
5. Doubt

These mental hindrances can be thought of as being human characteristics, which if they are chronic or excessive, make it difficult to achieve stability or progress in life and living, whether one chooses to actively pursue a system of spiritual and mental training or not.

In the practice of Buddhism, with its emphasis on mental cultivation, we look at these human characteristics more closely, seeing their subtleties, seeing them as they arise and fade away, and understand how they impede our progress.

When ones heart and mind are overwhelmed by these characteristics and states of consciousness he will do what he should not do and neglect what he ought to do (Anguttara Nikaya 4:61)

As he weakens and overcomes them, he will know his own true good, (and) the good of others (Anguttara Nikaya 5:51)

As these characteristics apply to our individual lives, it is easy to see and understand that if one engages in any one of them excessively, his or her ability to pursue a job, profession or occupation successfully, and relationships with other people, and a personal relationship with a husband or wife and family will be compromised.

As they manifest themselves in our consciousness, they will be a source of stress and anxiety, or add to them.

1. **Sensual Desires** - If one is excessive in his or her sensual desires, there may be promiscuity in sexual relations, with all the attendant emotion and physical risks that that can bring. There may be self - abuse through the use of drugs or drink. There may be the living beyond ones mean through the purchase of things that one has no real need for. There may be the indulgence in habits that unbalance or weaken one,

such as smoking, or excessive television viewing, the viewing of pornography and chronic masturbation.

2. **Ill will** - If one harbors or manifests ill will, one will have a difficult time cultivating real friendships based on understanding, compassion and sharing. Colleagues, co workers and even family will want to avoid such a person. He or she will experience impatience frequently, and tend toward actions based on criticism, ridicule and judgment of others.

3. **Sloth and Torpor** - If one experience sloth and torpor (mental and physical laziness), one will not have the energy or see the need for engaging in certain actions that can bring fulfillment and growth. Once an initial effort has been made, there will be difficulty in sustaining and building on it. It will be more difficult to fulfill ones personal needs, such as cleaning the home and taking care of oneself, and doing work in the society in a harmonious and constructive manner.

4. **Restlessness and Worry** - Restlessness and worry will manifest itself in an overactive person, who has a difficult time sitting still and being calm. Such an individual will always be looking for something new and interesting to get involved in and have a difficult time being at peace with the ordinariness and mundane aspects of life.

They will have a more difficult time finding satisfaction with a partner, a place, and a job.

They will lack contentment.

Their mind will tend towards an agitated state, which is a breeding ground for worry.

They may engage in certain actions to calm themselves, that also unbalance or further disturb the consciousness.

In worry, we see what might happen, instead of what is happening.

In worry, our mental and physical action is redirected to something that drains us, from something that could enhance us.

5. **Doubt** - Doubt keeps us from making an attempt at something or believing in something and ourselves. Doubt may really be masking a fear of failure in some pursuit. It may also be an inability to see something greater and better than our own ego and perceptions.

With doubt, like with sloth and torpor, there is difficulty in pursuing a course of action, whether it is a personal relationship, a job, an educational program or a spiritual path and practice such as Yoga or Buddhism

Doubt, sloth and torpor and restlessness and worry seem to be closely related, where if we experience one, we are likely to experience the others.

In dealing with these hindrances to skillful living, we first become mindful of what these hindrances are. This is done through exposure and study. The short

bibliography below gives sources for those who want to examine them in more detail.

Then, we can see them as roots of the mental states that interfere with our meditation practice. It is a gradual evolvment, this ability to see them.

Then, we can notice them in all our actions and activities arising throughout the day, and make the effort to overcome them, cultivating states that are conducive to skillful and joyful living.

How do we deal with these states within?

There are a number of things that are within our grasp and daily life.

These include things such as moderation in eating and sleeping, and healthy friendships and verbal and physical interaction with others based on sharing, mutual respect and loving-kindness.

On a more specific level, there are support groups for those who suffer from various obsessive and habitual mental and physical actions, such as drinking, drug use, gambling, stealing, overeating, sexual promiscuity, and impulsive shopping.

Yoga and Buddhism deal with these mental states specifically through the path and practices that make them up.

In fact, it is the weakening and eradication of these states, in their overt and subtleness that form the intention behind the paths and practices of Yoga and Buddhism.

As these states are weakened, new states of consciousness are cultivated, being rooted in things such as joy, energy, concentration, mindfulness, tranquility, equanimity and investigation.

The starting point for progress in dealing with these states comes in our better understanding of them and that they are within us, for us to know, for us to work on.

Resources for further information on the five mental hindrances and how to overcome them:

1. *The Five Mental Hindrances and Their Conquest* Nyanaponika Thera, 1993, Buddhist Publication Society
2. *In This Very Life* Sayadaw U Pandita, 1991, Buddhist Publication Society
3. *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless*, Ajahn Sumedho, 1987, Amaravati Publications
4. *The Five Mental Hindrances* (tape cassette) Ajahn Sumedho, 1992(?), Dharma Seed Tape Libraray (?)

5. *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to The End of Suffering*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1994, Buddhist Publication Society

6. *The Wings to Awakening* Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1996, Dhamma Dana Publications

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