



Delusion and Wisdom:

The Relationship Between the Hindrances and Seven Factors of Awakening

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This year, Tuere and I are exploring the Five Hindrances and the Seven Factors of Awakening during our weekly talks. At first, this may seem like an odd combination. The hindrances describe our common struggles as meditators (craving, aversion, restless/worry, sloth/torpor, and doubt.) While the factors describe contemplative and uplifting aspects of our practice (mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, calmness, concentration, and equanimity). Why are these paired and how do they relate to each other? They represent delusion and the path to wisdom.

We struggle with the hindrances. They seem to prevent us from a fruitful meditation and therefore need to be overcome. If this hindrance just abated, then the real meditation could continue. The frustration grows the longer the hindrance remains. We may not even recognize a hindrance is present, but we certainly recognize the struggle and difficulty in our meditation practice. We project the cause of that struggle outward on the sound, or person, or technique. Or we may project inwardly, that “I am failing yet again” because of a core deficiency. Often considered a “beginning” topic, we try to overcome them through skillful means, or, if that fails, dogged endurance.

We discount the hindrances as an annoying obstruction of our meditation practice. The hindrances actually deserve more respect. If we bring careful attention to the underlying currents and forces of the hindrances, we discover something startling. They are expressions of delusion, the root cause of suffering. This understanding shifts the hindrances from a beginning teaching to a profound teaching. By delusion, we mean the fundamental process of being blind to the nature of reality. One way to describe this is denying the three characteristics of dukkha (suffering), annica (impermanence), and annata (non-self). The denial of these three characteristics is the basis for our suffering.

The mind states of the Five Hindrances are manifestations of delusion and its two offspring, greed and hatred. The hindrances have their obvious expressions, which are full of fire and reactivity. To see the workings of delusion, it can help to sense the subtle movement of the hindrances. For example, a slight friction with this moment’s experience reveals a subtle craving or aversion. The more fundamental greed and hatred can be sensed underneath. Delusion, as the basis of this, operates as if the three characteristics didn’t apply.

Learning to practice this way means the very struggle of our lives becomes our practice. Mental and emotional suffering catches our attention. The hindrances are present within that suffering, forming it into a particular shape. Recognizing that our suffering is an expression of delusion opens a gateway to the dharma. In this way, the hindrances become a gift in our journey toward awakening. The friction and difficulty of the hindrances helps ground our practice into the very rub of our lives. The seven factors help us open that gift.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness invites the essential shift from being lost in a state of mind to observing the state of mind with clarity, balance, and compassion. Mindfulness in the face of delusion and the hindrances is very significant. The hindrances, at their essence, are expressions of delusion. The loss of clarity, imbalance, and hardness of heart are all trademarks of delusion. The deepest aspects of delusion are beyond our current conscious seeing. Observing this with clarity is the necessary first step in moving toward awakening.

A key question around mindfulness is, “Can this state of mind, filled with the struggle of a hindrance, be seen free of identification?” This means seeing without having to add anything to what is being seen. This includes judgment, preference, and even a name. When we are not able to do this, we are caught in identification. We create and believe in a sense of “I, me or mine.” This sense of self is needed for struggle to exist. This creates the essential sense of separation from what is being seen. We are caught in a hindrance and its underlying delusion.

Of course, life is full of experiences we are programmed to identify around and therefore resist or chase. Denying that resistance creates a secondary knot of delusion. Judging that resistance as unspiritual adds a glob of glue to those already tightening knots. Learning to step back, even a hair’s width, creates the space to observe. We may not be able to observe our anger and reactivity initially, but can we observe our resistance and judgment toward that reactivity? Or, if our judgment seems intractable, can we observe our judgment of our judgment? In this way, mindfulness gains a foothold and delusion begins to weaken. We begin to observe with clarity, balance, and compassion.

Investigation

From some level of clear seeing, our mindfulness becomes a gateway for investigation to arise. Sometimes we as students stall out in mindfulness alone. The relief of not being caught and lost is very alluring, and we feel we have arrived at a final stage.

However, mindfulness alone may not be strong enough to penetrate the veils of delusion, as the fundamental seeds of our suffering persist even as we practice mindfulness. This is where investigation comes in.

We take the essence of clarity, balance, and compassion in observation, and then direct it to the deeper, unseen aspects of this moment's seeing with the underlying purpose of seeing through delusion.

The Hindrances are a gift in this way, as they catch our attention like a dandelion flower stands out on a green lawn. Instead of yanking out that blossom, we observe the initial sense of it with clarity, balance, and compassion. Then investigation begins a gentle, delicate exploration of what is not seen. We begin to see the stem, and the deeper roots without destroying or altering, allowing the dandelion to have its own existence. We see how the plant exists, how it gathers water and nutrients, down to the core tap root.

If we are able to maintain true mindfulness, and not slip into critique or agenda, we see the hindrance free of distortion, without separation. We find the very essence of struggle becomes a source of wisdom. And if we take it even deeper, we see the illusion of self. Then the source of delusion fades.

Energy

We use a large amount of energy to maintain our argument with the three characteristics, maintaining our delusion. Again, looking at the seven factors as a sequential process, that energy releases as we begin to see through delusion with mindfulness and investigation.

This release of energy then becomes reinvested in the willingness and perseverance to see more clearly and deeply. This leads to more release of energy.

Joy

Usually our experience of joy is tied to events, situations, circumstances, and relationships. Everything that is subject to impermanence and conditions brings this normal experience of happiness. When those change, our joy fades.

In the seven factors, a different source of joy arises, one not based on conditions or circumstances. As our suffering begins to ease and lift, we experience joy. The Buddha described the release from the hindrances as freedom from crushing debt (craving), a return to health after an illness (aversion), liberation from slavery (restless and worry), release from prison (sloth and torpor), and finding one's way safely through a dangerous desert (doubt).

Another aspect of this joy is the unbinding of the heart. This includes a deep sense of ease and intimacy with life. Joy then enlivens our mind, allowing even deeper seeing.

Tranquility

As joy springs from the unbinding of the heart, a deep sense of ease arises. Even in the

midst of the many tasks of life, there is a deeper realization of each moment's perfection. From this place, nothing needs to be added or subtracted. Nothing needs to be done in this moment, and stillness reveals its presence.

Concentration

This tranquility invites a deeper seeing of mindfulness and investigation. Our attention takes on a steady, unwavering quality. This concentrated mind sees more deeply and fully, like a spotlight shining into the depths of the ocean. The more subtle roots of the hindrances are then revealed.

Equanimity

The last factor of equanimity is often misunderstood as aloofness, distance, and disengagement. We can mistakenly believe equanimity means being emotionally or mentally unaffected by life. This often results in repression and numbness. This is not waking up. Equanimity actually is "being equally near all things."

True equanimity arises naturally as the core roots of delusion are seen through. The willingness and intention to meet the hindrances with the Seven Factors of Awakening can reveal the underlying roots of greed, hatred, and delusion. This allows us to clearly see the three characteristics as the essential expression of who and what we are. Then equanimity becomes the natural state of being equally near all things.

Conclusion

Pairing the five hindrances and the seven factors of awakening brings two essential elements of dharma practice together. The hindrances show us the shape of our suffering. The seven factors offer a framework for taking that very suffering as a path to awakening. Ultimately, this becomes a journey from delusion to wisdom.