

Chapter 6 Selected Quotes
SLOTH AND TORPOR
UNHINDERED
Gil Fronsdal

Sloth and torpor, treated together as one hindrance, follow sensual desire and ill will in the list of the five hindrances. This is not surprising as weariness often follows from bouts of excessive desire and ill will. Sometimes this is simply because prolonged states of each is exhausting.

Sloth and torpor can also follow from the absence of desire and aversion. For people who depend on the stimulation of constant desire and aversion, their ceasing can be deflating, even depressing.

sloth and torpor are the forces in the mind that drain vitality and limit effort. Sloth manifests as physical absence of vitality. The body may feel heavy, lethargic, weary or weak. Torpor is a lack of mental energy. The mind may be dull, cloudy, or weary, easily drifting in thought. Being caught in sloth or torpor can resemble slogging through deep mud. When this hindrance is strong, there is not even enough mindfulness to know we've fallen into it.

Sloth and torpor are not the same as mental and physical tiredness even though they may be experienced in similar ways. Tiredness refers to a natural physiological condition of sleepiness or fatigue. Sloth and torpor refers to low energy states related to an attitude we have. Discouragement, frustration, boredom, indifference, giving up, hopelessness and resistance are some of the psychological causes of sloth and torpor.

The presence of sloth and torpor does not mean energy is not available. It simply means we are not accessing it.

Mindfulness practice can help us understand how our evaluations and reactions lead to lethargy. We can see how the stories we tell ourselves drain our vitality. These can be well-honed defeatist stories about how "I can't do it," "It's too hard," or "It's too dangerous." As these thoughts lead to discouragement, self-pits and ideas of futility, our vitality continues to disappear. Learning to mindfully watch our thoughts instead of actively participating in them can effectively stop them from draining our energy.

Sloth and torpor may arise from evaluating something as boring. But nothing is inherently boring; boredom is a judgment, an activity of the mind. It can arise when desires and expectations are not satisfied. It can also occur when a situation is thought to have no personal benefit.

...complacency can be a subtle cause for sloth and torpor. This can occur when we are lulled by comfort of misguided acceptance. Complacency may arise when meditation feels easy and pleasurable.

Defensiveness and resistance can be played out through a draining of energy that prevent us from responding or moving forward. In meditation, when deep unresolved issues bubble up or when emotions are too uncomfortable, a way to avoid these is to fall asleep.

Weariness can be closely entwined with sloth and torpor. Chronic excitement and tension, especially when expressed through muscular tension, can leave a person deeply exhausted. Incessant anxiety expends tremendous amount of energy leaving people drained.

There is also a type of sloth and torpor that arises in meditation due to an imbalance between effort and relaxation. Many people associate meditation with getting calm and therefore over emphasize the calming side of meditation. This then leads to what is called "sinking mind," a state of mental dullness often reinforced by comfortable complacency. To counter this it is important to know that meditation is not only about becoming calm and relaxed, but about becoming calm with alertness, healthy engagement and clarity.

PRACTICING WITH SLOTH AND TORPOR

When sloth and torpor appear in meditation the first task is to become mindful of them...It is especially important not to abandon a meditation session because of sloth and torpor.

If sloth and torpor are mild, it may be overcome by arousing more energy. Options include walking meditation; sitting up...opening the eyes; washing the face with cold water and avoiding being too warm while meditating.

Being too comfortable can lead to becoming sleepy.

Another approach is investigation.

If a state of sloth and torpor has continued..it can be useful to ask yourself some questions: "If I weren't feeling so sleepy or dull, what would I be experiencing?" or you can ask yourself: "What do I really want right now. Or you can look into your relationship....what is your attitude to their presence? Aversion to sloth and torpor can reinforce them.