

Unhindered: a Mindful Path Through the Five Hindrances by Gil Fronsdal

Chapter 8, Doubt

Selected Quotes

Sooner or later all meditators need to address the hindrances. Because of how frequently the hindrances occur, for most meditators, this will be sooner *and* later. These obstructing mind states should not be seen as unfortunate occurrences. Rather, they are opportunities for strengthening mindfulness, concentration, understanding, and non-clinging. The path of practice can go through the hindrances.

Without a dedication to working with the hindrances, they can derail a person from practice. This is especially so for doubt, the fifth and final hindrance. Whereas the other four hindrances can arise from concerns about anything, doubt, as a hindrance to meditation and mindfulness, is directly related to the practice itself. In fact.....doubt can lead one to give up on the practice.

“Hindering doubt” is not the same as “questioning doubt”. Doubt as a hindrance is a mental preoccupation involving indecision, uncertainty, and lack of confidence. It causes a person to hesitate, vacillate, and not settle into meditation practice. Doubt can be a simple lack of clarity about meditation or practice instructions.[it] can involve ...inner conflicts and fears stirred up by the practice. Doubt can keep the mind agitated, perhaps simmering in discursive thought and feelings of inadequacy. It can deflate the mind, robbing it of interest and energy.

Doubt as a hindrance leads to inaction..... Questioning doubt inspires action and the impulse to understand. It can be helpful for mindfulness to have a questioning attitude that encourages deeper investigation. It is a healthy doubt that can both overcome complacency and loosen preconceived ideas.

Hindering doubt takes many forms. Doubt in the practice, the teachings, one’s teachers, and, most dangerously, in oneself.....Doubt is often accompanied by discursive thinking..... Doubt can be self-fulfilling: the very act of thinking doubt-filled thoughts that one’s meditation is not working is what makes the meditation not work.

The most insidious doubts are those about oneself, especially when they involve a lack of confidence in one’s ability or worthiness. Sometimes such doubt arises when one is intimidated by a distant goal on the path of practice. It is easy to forget that a mountain is climbed one step at a time..... Doubt can also arise from insecurity. Worry about the consequences of spiritual practice can provoke a proliferation of doubt-filled thoughts. Fear of unusual mind states, either pleasant or difficult, can trigger mistrust and indecision.

It can be difficult to recognize doubt when caught in it. The challenge is to have enough distance or objectivity to see it for what it is. Indecisiveness or holding back in the practice are clues that doubt is occurring. Physical tension or pressure may be evidence we are under the sway of doubt.

To counter doubt, practicing mindfulness of the body helps. Staying present for our bodily experience keeps us in the present rather than the future thinking of the doubts. Relaxation and attention to the body improves our chances of recognizing doubt as it occurs. Once we recognize it, it can be helpful to use a mental note to label the doubt as 'doubt'. When clearly identified, doubt tends to have less power over us.

A primary approach to [working with doubt] is to continue being mindful in a non-reactive way. This means letting the doubt be while cultivating a mindful awareness which is stronger than the pull of the doubt.

Mindfulness can be strengthened by recognizing how doubt distances us from the present moment and from seeing clearly. When we are caught up in doubt, we are often preoccupied in thoughts, concepts and beliefs. To counteract this, we can devote our self to being present, relaxing the spinning mind and making effort to disentangle from all the ideas and thoughts....[also be] interested in what doubt feels like physically, not what we have doubt about.

When doubt involves a hesitation to commit to the practice, it can sometimes be overcome by applying more discipline and resolve to the practice.

In the case of major or persistent doubts, discipline may not be helpful, especially if it entails unhealthy suppression. Major doubts may need to be dealt with directly such as by questioning deeply held beliefs, attending to unresolved feeling or challenging ingrained convictions about self-identity.

When doubt involves uncertainty about the practice or the teachings, it helps to study, learn and reflect on the dhamma itself. Discussing it with a teacher or having a talk with a dharma friend may also help in this regard. Having a clear understanding of the Buddha's teachings on what is skillful and what is unskillful can go a long way toward overcoming doubt.

Confidence in one's capacity is very important. For people plagued by doubt in their own ability, it can be useful to develop self-confidence. Taking time to consider and feel happy about what one can do – even the smallest of things – can strengthen confidence. Approaching one's practice in small increments may slowly develop confidence. For instance, resolving to be aware of each breath throughout a meditation session is unlikely to build confidence, whereas resolving to stay with two breaths at a time may be more effective. Once one has confidence in two breaths, one can move on to three breaths, then four, etc. Surprisingly, spending less time thinking about oneself can help with confidence. This is because self-preoccupation tends to undermine healthy self-regard.

Finally, it can be helpful to remember something that inspires you in the practice, such as a teaching, a person, or some experience you have had. It may gladden the heart enough to clear away the clouds of doubt. It may even encourage you to rededicate your efforts to transform everything into your path to freedom, including the hindrances.