

Unhindered: a Mindful Path Through the Five Hindrances

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Chapter 7, Restlessness and Worry

Selected Quotes

The fourth hindrance, restlessness and worry, makes it difficult to concentrate and see clearly. As is true with all the hindrances, the wisest way of overcoming restlessness and worry is to understand them well rather than getting rid of them quickly.... Investigating them carefully, instead of quickly letting them go, is a bit like learning to farm instead of accepting food. Investigation may take time, but what is learned will support us for a long time.

Restlessness... is a state of agitation and over-excitement.physical restlessness may appear as compulsive energy..., incessant impulses to fidget, move, or even to bolt. It can manifest as shakiness or agitated vulnerability, as if we have had too much caffeine.

When mental, restlessness can occur as scattered or persistent thinking. It is present whenever we are caught in distraction. There may be an inability to focus – the mind resists being directed anywhere or it jumps from one thing to the next, incapable of settling. In Buddhist teachings this is sometimes called monkey-mind. As a swinging monkey grasps one branch and immediately reaches for the next, so the restless mind focuses on one thing and immediately reaches out for the next, never still or satisfied with anything.

When ordinary restlessness disappears in deep meditation, a subtle restlessness may then appear.... Many meditators have been pulled out of stillness by thinking about the stillness. When the mind is quiet, restlessness can be as subtle as thinking, “I am not thinking anything.” It can also appear as anxiety if the stillness is so profound that breathing seems to stop. Even more subtly, restlessness is present whenever there is the slightest clinging or pride in such states of calm.

Classically worry is explained as the agitated feelings of regret for what one has done or not done. Nowadays it seems useful to expand the meaning to include the broader concept of worry. Anxiety over imagined futures can cause much agitation. Worry over threats to one’s self-image can also be as agitating as regrets.

Strong regret and worry hinder our ability to relax and focus during meditation. Occasionally these hindrances are powerful enough that meditation is counter-indicated....It might be necessary to make amends before doing meditation. Or when worry is overwhelming, psychotherapy may be more useful than meditation.

Simply being mindful is a big step in working through restlessness and worry during meditation. Having a hindrance is like wandering through a maze staring at the ground. Being mindful is like standing above the maze to get an overview....

..... it is useful to feel it physically. Imagine the body as a wide container where the energy is allowed to bounce around like a ricocheting ping pong ball. Accepting it like this can take away the extra agitation of struggling with the restlessness. Sitting still ... often allows it to settle down on its own. Because the settling can take a while, patience is needed. .. During meditation it is important not to give in to irrational compulsions.

..... it is useful to notice when it is not present. Physically, emotionally and mentally, what is the felt sense of being, at least temporarily, free of restlessness? The knowledge of what it is like to be still, calm, or peaceful is very nourishing. It can dissuade us from believing restless thoughts and it can give us an appreciation of healthy alternative to being caught in a hindrance.

.....we can learn how to prevent them from arising and how to settle them when they are occurring. It is important to have enough exercise, sleep, and good nutrition because their lack can encourage restlessness. It is also important to live one's life ethically, so that our behavior and speech do not give us cause to worry or to have regret.

It can be helpful to reflect, outside of a meditation session, whether there is a way we live our lives which encourages restlessness. Watching TV or frequently checking emails tend to make us restless. It can be useful to cultivate contentment. It is calming to give up incessantly wanting more.

Learning to breathe through restlessness is a great skill. Breathing conscious of the whole body, or focusing on the ongoing rhythm of breathing in and out, can calm us physically. Releasing tension or constriction in breathing can be relaxing. The more attention given to breathing, the less attention is available to fuel the restlessness or worry.

The classic Buddhist instruction for restlessness and worry includes noticing the causes and conditions that triggered it. When doing such reflection, rumination is not useful, remembering what happened is.

Dissatisfaction, frustrated desire, and pent-up aversion are common causes of agitation. Fear and resentment are others. If any of these causes are present, being mindful of them may be more helpful than being mindful of the restlessness itself. Ignoring the causes can keep us skimming the surface. When restlessness is a symptom of frustration, confusion, fear or anxiety, whatever emotion is behind the restlessness should be brought into the scope of mindfulness. This can include feeling the physical sensations of the underlying emotion.

When physical pain triggers restlessness, the pain should be addressed carefully. When appropriate and possible, try to alleviate the pain. When the pain cannot be alleviated, mindfulness can help us to separate the pain from our reaction. Seeing this difference is an important step in diminishing restlessness.

When thinking is a big part of restlessness, it can be useful to relax the "thinking muscle," softening any tension or pressure associated with thinking. There may be strain in the eyes or tightness in the forehead, jaws, shoulders, or stomach that can be slowly released on a series of successive out breaths.

One of the more profound skills for working through restlessness and worry is to let go of the beliefs that keep them going. Strong opinions about what is or is not supposed to be happening incite the mind; judgments of good and bad seldom lead to calm.