

Overcoming Obstacles to Dharma Practice

When we engage in Buddhist practice, obstructions arise in the mind. Their cause seems to be the imprints of our past thoughts and actions driven by greed, hate and delusion. These karmic seeds are apparently made of “habit energy”. On-going difficulties in meditation and mindfulness need to be handled with patience and diligence, whenever these imprints resonate with conditions and yield effects. The karmic seeds keep sprouting.

One of the main difficulties in practice is a low level of motivation. Our intent may be to practice, then something comes up of a higher priority. It may be necessary to raise the priority of Dharma practice and study.

Another difficulty is forgetfulness. Say you make a determination to stop and be mindful of body, speech and mind, then return to some daily activity. The intention is, say, to do it 20 times in a day. After 3 or 4 stops the whole thing is entirely forgotten.

Then there is procrastination. “I will do it when conditions are just right”; “I’ll do it when I retire”; “I can meditate tomorrow”.

Four thoughts that turn the mind

Said to be a motivator for practice are the ‘4 thoughts that turn the mind to the Dharma’:

1. The Precious Human Life. A human life with leisure to practice is rare and precious. We need to recognize the great good fortune of being able to practice Dharma.

2. Death and Impermanence. Time is running out, everything is changing rapidly. If we want Liberation and Awakening, we need to get on with it. Our time of death is uncertain, our continuing to enjoy conducive conditions not guaranteed.

4. Defects of Samsara: Everybody suffers, everybody hurts. This samsara exempts no one. We get much that we don't want and then, because of impermanence, we can't hold on to what we do want. The limitations of our bodies and minds are one kind of subtle suffering, called "All Pervading Suffering". "Suffering of Suffering" is physical pain and psychological agony; "Suffering of Change" is our reaction to impermanence.

3. Karma and Cause & Effect: The web of cause & effect is intricate and only awakened Buddhas can fully understand its subtleties. The Law of Karma is like a resonating field: what goes around comes around; we reap what we have sown. This is cause & effect in the ethical dimension. Dharma practice trains us to stop sowing the seeds of our own misery.

To do this we need to work on our negative emotions and restrain our behavior of body, speech and mind. This

can be done by following the precepts and adopting scrupulous ethics along with increasing altruism.

Worldly Concerns: the 8 Winds of Karma

These 8 comprise 4 pair of opposites that can interfere with practice by destabilizing the mind and distracting it:

Happiness and unhappiness can both disturb one's focus. Likewise gain and loss can upset the equanimity. Praise & blame and fame and infamy are disturbers of our peace.

Decreasing the intensity of reaction to these 8 allows for deeper meditation and better practice.

The 5 Hinderances

These occur from the beginning of meditation and are overcome completely only on attainment of the First Dhyana. Each of the five attributes of the First Dhyana is impeded by one of the hinderances. Thus:

1. One Pointed Mind is hindered by Sense Desire
2. Priti, Physical Rapture is hindered by Malice
3. Vitarka 'Initial Application of Thought' is hindered by 'Sloth & Torpor'
4. Sukha, 'Mental Ease' is hindered by 'Restlessness and Worry'.

5. Vichara, Sustained Consideration', is hindered by Doubt

There are antidotes to specific afflictions and obstructions:

1. For Sense Desire (kamachanda), an antidote is to contemplate a rotting corpse.
2. For Malice (vyapada), an antidote is loving kindness meditation.
3. For Sloth & Torpor an antidote is the recollection of death.
4. Restlessness & Worry (auddhatya) are countered by quietude of mind.
5. Skeptical Doubt (vichikitsa) is countered by study of scripture.

The 5 Roots, when perfected, conquer the hinderances:

1. Faith overcomes Malice.
2. Vigor destroys Sloth and Torpor.
3. Mindfulness overcomes Sense Desire.
4. Concentration conquers Restlessness & Worry
5. Wisdom destroys Doubt.

When applying antidotes, there are 5 faults to avoid:

- Laziness, not making the effort.
- Forgetting the techniques and instructions.

Sinking and Scattering, losing the concentration
Not applying the antidote
Over-applying the antidote

The 10 Fetters that bind us to the wheel of samsara

The 5 Gross Fetters:

1. Satkaya.drishti mistaking the process of the 5 skandhas for a permanent self.
2. Doubt about the efficacy of the Path
3. Attachment to rules and rituals
4. Kama.raga-craving for sensuality
5. Vyapada-malice

The 5 Subtle Fetters:

Rupa.raga-craving for existence in the ‘form world’, the realm of subtle materiality.

Arupya.raga-craving for existence in the formless world.

Mana-pride

Auddhatya-the mental restlessness that impedes concentration.

Avidya-ignorance

These 10 are all dissolved at the stage of Arhat.

7 Anusayas

Anusayas are proclivities, subtle predispositions. They are seven root unwholesome mental states that lead eventually to suffering. They are like seeds of afflictions, of kleshas.

1. Kama.raga-sensual craving
2. Pratigha-hostility.
3. Mana-pride
4. Drishti-(wrong) views
5. Vicikitsa-doubt
6. Bhava.raga-craving for continued existence
7. Avidya-ignorance

These anusayas persist in the mindstream life after life. Strong yogas are required to uproot them.

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