THE OUT-OF-BALANCE MIND

The five hindrances present the primary obstacles to Wisdom. Those hindrances are: *Sense Desire, Aversion/Ill-will, Sloth/Torpor, Restlessness/Worry* and *Skeptical Doubt*. In these notes, I want to consider these hindrances as an *imbalance of the functions of thinking and energy*. *Thinking* involves analysis of incoming sensory stimulation—relating the sense data to stored memories of similar stimulus profiles and developing strategies for relating to the events along the lines of “Friend or foe? Food or poison?” *Energy* relates to the levels of activation of two fundamental aspects of the human nervous and hormonal systems—the sympathetic (activating) and the parasympathetic (tranquilizing). These two subsystems operate in a dynamic balance, that is, when the systems are cooperating effectively, there is an optimal balance of the two. When the thinking and energy regulating systems are out of balance, the hindrances emerge and dominate subjective awareness.

*Sense desire* is the enchantment that occurs as the mind rehearses and amplifies the interaction between a pleasant feeling and an accompanying internal narrative. *Aversion/ill-will* occurs as the mind becomes enchanted, rehearsing and amplifying interactions between an unpleasant feeling and the accompanying internal narrative. *Sloth/torpor* is the quality of sluggishness and dullness that occurs when the parasympathetic system predominates, the result being an internal inertia that lacks a coherent internal narrative. *Restlessness/worry* combines an overactive “nervous” sympathetic system, reinforced by a recurring internal narrative preoccupied by remembered negative outcomes, projected as “certainties” regarding future outcomes. *Skeptical doubt* is a predominant internal narrative that is indecisive, and ambivalent, lacking conviction and confidence regarding the outcome of one’s choices and actions.

*When the thinking system becomes over-identified with an emerging selfing story, sense desire, aversion/ill-will, worry and doubt emerge*. A pleasant feeling develops into a self-reinforcing internal narrative justifies “hoarding” the feeling. With aversion/ill-will, an unpleasant feeling develops into a self-reinforcing internal narrative that rejects the feeling, perhaps with hostility and aggression. With worry, the mental processes become a repetitive self-reinforcing narrative about potential unpleasant outcomes as a result of either prior actions or anticipated future outcomes. With doubt, the ability to determine a particular course of action is disabled—the mind is indecisive and immobilized with hesitancy.

*When the energy regulating system is out of balance, two different outcomes can manifest*: too much sympathetic nervous and hormonal system activity regarding pleasant or unpleasant feelings results in the hindrances of sense desire, aversion/ill will, restlessness and doubt increase levels of turbulence in the selfing story. Alternatively, if there is too much parasympathetic nervous and hormonal system activity, the results involve sloth/torpor and the inertia of doubt.

*Overactive sympathetic system:* sense desire, aversion/ill-will, restlessness/worry, skeptical doubt

***Optimal balance point:***

*Too much confidence regarding a thought:* sense desire, aversion/ill-will, worry,

*Too little confidence in thinking:* skepticism

*Overactive parasympathetic system:* sloth/torpor, possibly skeptical doubt

The antidote for this imbalance involves cultivating a persistent willingness to quickly notice and disregard any movement of attention away from the primary focus on the sensation of breathing. This matures into the experience of samadhi/passadhi, stable attention and inner tranquility.