OVERCOMING RESTLESSNESS AND WORRY

Another of the Five Hindrances referred to in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness is Restlessness and Worry. The Pali word for restlessness is *uddhacca* and for worry is *kukkucca*. In the Visuddhimagga, a very important Buddhist commentary, Restlessness is described in this way: “..*It has mental excitement as characteristic like wind-tossed water; wavering as function, like a flag waving in the wind; whirling as manifestation like scattered ashes struck by a stone; unsystematic thought owing to mental excitement as proximate cause; and it should be regarded as mental distraction over an object of excitement.*” Regarding kukkucca, another important commentary, the Atthasalini, describes Worry in this manner: “..*It has repentance as characteristic, sorrow at deeds of commission and omission as function, regret as manifestation, deeds of commission and omission as proximate cause, and it should be regarded as a state of bondage*.”

Regarding Worry, a more contemporary view involves rumination, which is the recurrence of a particular stream of thought regarding something that was in error, or the anticipation of something going wrong in the future. The classic rendition of Worry primarily involves an ethical flaw such as dishonesty or intoxication. The more contemporary understanding doesn’t necessarily involve an ethical flaw—instead, one might worry about whether a monthly bill was paid on time, or whether the door was locked after leaving home. This hindrance may be so prevalent and potent that its function can be diagnosed psychologically as an anxiety disorder. In this discussion the focus is on more normal patterns of dysfunction that everyone is vulnerable to. Even with an anxiety disorder, the practice of mindfulness of breathing has great benefit for alleviating the symptoms.

Like the hindrance of Sloth and Torpor, Restlessness and Worry are so embedded in the ways the mind normally operates that it may be difficult to perceive the process clearly. The brain is wired to be alert for novelty and to analyze incoming stimuli to determine potential threat or benefit: “friend or foe, food or poison?” This vigilance operates through the actions of the sympathetic system, a combination of nerve network activation and hormonal arousal. The hormone most commonly identified in this function is adrenaline. When adrenaline is injected into the bloodstream, multiple metabolic processes are activated to increase heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, etc. Additionally, in the brain norepinephrine (the form of adrenaline in the brain’s activating system) increases the general level of mental excitement. Naturally, this activity seeks a meaningful understanding that would justify the excitement and will identify a particular plausible internal narrative to that end—this is where the Worry aspect of the hindrance operates.

We live in a culture that stimulates justifiable excitement. We are bombarded with enticement to consume “new and improved” versions of a broad variety of items from toothpaste to new automobiles with more computerizes electronic “bells and whistles”. Alternatively, we are stimulated to worry about any number of events, political, economic and health oriented through the media. Most often, those topical stimuli have little relevance to our immediate circumstance, but a mind that lacks the critical analytic skills that mindfulness fosters will become preoccupied with the plight of places and groups of people far removed from the likelihood of being directly affected.

Modern neuroscientific research reveals that a quickly reinforcing pattern manifests as Restlessness and Worry. As the incoming stimulus is processed, an initial impulsive emotional alert with align with a memory trace that is somehow relatable to the heightened reactivity of the emotional arousal. This memory trace seems to validate the incompletely investigated impulse and this, in turn, justifies the emotional arousal. A useful comparison would be what happens when a microphone is placed in front of a speaker wired into the same amplifier—an unpleasant squawking sound emerges in a fraction of a second.

An initial goal in this process is to cultivate enough samadhi/passadhi (stable attention/inner tranquility) to be able to “disconnect” the alliance between the underlying restlessness and any narrative that amplifies the restlessness. There will still be restlessness, but it will be subtler and less demanding of action. The next step is to focus on the low levels of restlessness that we are all subject to and systematically reduce them so that the mind becomes very quiet and the body very relaxed, while maintaining a level of internal diligent awareness. What does the practice recommended in the Satipatthana Sutta offer in this regard? In the Fourth Foundation of the Sutta, the phrases relevant to addressing Restlessness and Worry are stated in this manner:

“If restlessness and worry are present in him, he knows ‘restlessness and worry is present in me’; if restlessness and worry is not present in him, he knows ‘restlessness and worry is not present in me’; and he knows how unarisen restlessness and worry can arise, how arisen restlessness and worry can be removed, and how a future arising of restlessness and worry can be prevented.”

The practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation provides the necessary skills for intervening in this hindrance:

* The sensation of breathing is a neutral stimulus—it doesn’t provide excitement to the hormonal or neural networks. When this operation is sustained over time, the levels of adrenaline and norepinephrine are metabolized out of the system.
* Because metabolic and neural excitation is minimized, the stimulation of internal narratives is reduced. In effect, this is like removing the microphone from proximity to the speaker.
* The increasingly sensitized internal awareness that careful and persistent investigation of breath sensations makes it possible to notice “how unarisen restlessness and worry can arise, how arisen restlessness and worry can be removed, and how a future arising of restlessness and worry can be prevented.”
* When Restlessness and Worry are significantly reduced, and the body-mind system is stable and calm (samadhi and passadhi are primarily functioning), the process of “selfing” can be investigated without craving and clinging, and this leads to the experience of Nirvana, the unconditioned process of being.

Achaan Chah was a revered mindfulness master who made good use of similes. Here is one that is applicable to the benefits of overcoming restlessness in the mind. Here is a quote from “The Teachings of Ajahn Chah” on page 89:

“Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become quieter and quieter in any

surrounding. It will become still like a clear forest pool. Then all kinds of wonderful and rare animals will come to drink at the pool. You will see clearly the nature of all things in the world. You will see many wonderful and strange things come and go. But you will be still. Problems will arise and you will see through them immediately. This is the happiness of the Buddha.”

The “wonderful and rare animals” are the sequence of self-state organizations that arise and pass away, unhindered by Restlessness and Worry (and the other hindrances).

Other strategies for overcoming Restlessness and Worry include:

* Cultivating a quiet, relatively unstimulated environment. This would involve minimal exposure to media and an increased exposure to mindfulness meditation.
* Avoiding stimulating foods such as caffeine.
* Cultivating sufficient physical activity to reduce general restlessness. One of the recommended antidotes for and anxiety disorder is regular exercise, particularly those activities that increase aerobic fitness such as jogging, swimming, or walking.
* Associate socially with folks that are not likely to provide overactivation of the body/mind processes.

It is hoped that these suggestions will be beneficial in fostering the process of Awakening.