Setting Aside Dullness In The Mind

The third of the five hindrances to be contemplated in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness Discourse is *thina-middha* (tee-nah-me-dah), translated as *sloth-torpor*, which is characterized by *heaviness, dullness and lack of responsiveness in the mind*. During this experience, the quality of attention is impaired by sluggishness, lack of engaged interest in what is flowing through attention, often with a daydreaming quality and inability to maintain a clear awareness in an ongoing way.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the contemplation of thina-middha is described in this manner, as per Analayo’s book “Satipatthana Meditation: A Practice Guide”, on page 161:

If sloth-and-torpor is present within, one knows: “sloth-and-torpor is present within me”; *or if sloth-and-torpor is not present within, one knows: “sloth-and-torpor is not present within me”; and one knows how unarisen sloth-and-torpor arises, one knows how arisen sloth-and-torpor is removed, and one knows how removed sloth-and-torpor does not arise in the future.*

Thina-middha is often considered boredom or simply being tired, and this is a misperception, likely due to the way this hindrance degrades one’s ability to actively investigate what is emerging into consciousness. I believe it was Fritz Perls, the developer of what is called gestalt therapy, who said that “Boredom is the inability to pay attention”. One of the characteristics of contemporary culture is overstimulation—we are bombarded with images and narratives that are explicitly designed to excite attention and this overstimulation becomes a “normal” way the nervous system operates; when the overstimulation isn’t present, the mind can fall into a state of soothing reverie—sloth-and-torpor. It is not uncommon for meditators to misperceive subtle dullness in the mind as samadhi (sah-mah-dee), which is a beneficial and tranquil unification of wholesome mind conditioners; when samadhi is present, there is also a quality of alertness and clarity of attention.

What is happening in the brain when thina-middha is predominant? There are two systems in the brain that regulate one’s mood—the sympathetic and parasympathetic. Here is a quote from Wikipedia regarding the two systems:

The autonomic nervous system functions to regulate the body's unconscious actions. The sympathetic nervous system's primary process is to stimulate the body's [fight or flight response](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fight_or_flight_response). It is, however, constantly active at a basic level to maintain [homeostasis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeostasis). The sympathetic nervous system is described as being antagonistic to the parasympathetic nervous system which stimulates the body to "feed and breed" and to (then) "rest-and-digest".

When the brain is in a stimulation mode, the sympathetic system is activated, releasing epinephrine in the brain, which is mental excitement; another, more familiar name for this hormone is adrenaline, which operates in the body to increase heart rate, muscle tension, etc.—this will be reviewed more thoroughly in the next talk, which focuses on the fourth hindrance, Restlessness and Worry.

The parasympathetic system is associated with satiation, which is that quality of internal quietude and calmness. When the mind is conditioned by wholesomeness, there is a dynamic balance between the two systems, and this is called equanimity, and the characteristics of that state include a high degree of mental alertness and buoyant non-reactivity. With the hindrance of thina-middha, that system is out of balance, with the parasympathetic overactivated and dominant, producing the sluggishness, reverie and non-responsiveness characteristic of the experience. The Buddha described this state of mind to be like a pond filled with algae, sluggish and immobilized. Another metaphor involves regarding that quality of consciousness as being imprisoned.

Different levels of sloth and torpor can be noted—gross levels, during which the head nods, daydreaming is a dominant theme, and the mind is sluggish and non-responsive. Subtle levels of sloth and torpor are quite common—there is a soothing tranquility in the mind that is hard to notice until the mind is more disciplined and aware—this typically is first realized during the middle phase of a one-week residential retreat, when the levels of alertness and responsiveness in the mind are remarkably more evident.

How can this hindrance be set aside? There is a Buddhist refrain that is repeated throughout the Satipatthana Sutta: *atapi, sati sampajanna* (ah-tah-pee, sah-tee sahm-pah-jahn-yah), which is translated as *diligent, mindful clear comprehension*. This is the primary antidote for any of the hindrances but is especially useful for overcoming thina-middha. Diligence counters the low levels of psychic energy, mindfulness interrupts the daydreaming characteristic of sloth and torpor, while clear comprehension clarifies what is happening in the mind on a moment-by-moment basis.

SKILLFUL MEANS FOR SETTING ASIDE SLOTH AND TORPOR

* Cultivate a balanced lifestyle that includes a degree of physical fitness and good nutrition. Avoid overstimulating media environments. Reduce exposure to stressful circumstances when possible.
* Diligently cultivate immediate and clear awareness of the beginning of the in-breath and the out-breath; this supports being able to note distinctly the onset of dullness in the mind. The sooner dullness can be noted and interrupted, the less likely sloth and torpor will become dominant.
* It is helpful to practice “body sweep” meditation, as the effort to notice sensations in the body supports more alertness and investigation, antidotes for thina-middha.
* If drowsiness is predominant, open the eyes—look at a somewhat bright light, which activates the pineal gland in the brain and creates more alertness of attention.
* If that doesn’t work, practice mindfulness of breathing while standing with eyes open.
* If that doesn’t work, practice walking meditation, either at a normal, but mindful pace or a formal slow, mindful formal meditation.
* If that doesn’t work, splash cool water on the face, being mindful of the sensations associated with that action.
* If that doesn’t work, go to your room, lie down on the bed and determine to mindfully go to sleep.