Setting Aside Restlessness and Worry

These characteristics of unstable attention represent the fourth of the Five Hindrances, uddhacca-kukkucca (ooh-dah-chah-koo-koo-chah). *Uddhacca* is typically translated as *mental restlessness and agitation*, a characteristic instability of attention, which is the absence of the benefits provided by *samadhi* (sah-mah-dee) the *unification of wholesome mind conditioning factors*, which are termed *kusala cetasikas* (koo-sah-lah cheh-tah-see-kahs), *kusala* translated as *wholesome* and *cetasikas* as *mind conditioners* in Pali. *Kukkucca* is translated as *worry* or *remorse*. In its classic rendition, it is *the state of mind that is the consequence of a regrettable action*, typically an *ethical error*. In the context of contemporary culture, it can also be associated with *what one regrets as a result of a mistake in judgment or action*, perhaps worrying about whether you left home without locking the door or about whether it might rain during a planned event. The effect of restlessness and worry was compared by the Buddha to be like trying to investigate the depths of an otherwise clear pond when the surface is disturbed by the wind or, alternatively, being held captive.

The nature of the undisciplined mind is unstable, mostly because our ancestors’ survival depended on being alert to novelty to survive in a challenging environment. The complexity of the enormously interactive neural pathways of the brain creates a fragility of attention, which becomes quite obvious when meditating. It is also true that the brain is capable of great discipline, developing highly focused attention for completing complex tasks through the training provided by mindfulness of breathing meditation.

Meditation practice cultivates the ability to stabilize attention to the highest degree with jhana practice, producing highly exclusive stability of attention that is impervious to any intrusive external disruption. The Buddha, before his awakening, mastered this discipline, but discovered that this attainment didn’t alleviate dukkha, the distress and confusion that the complexity of the world’s stimuli produces in the untrained mind. What he did realize is that the mind can be trained to create stability that, although not exclusive like jhana, provides a balanced coordination between mental stability, *samadhi,* and detached, investigative awareness, *vipassana* (vee-pah-sah-nah), the ability to understand at a fundamental how the mind interprets the novelty of a complex world of stimuli, liberating the mind from dukkha.

The other issue to be contended with regarding this hindrance is *kukkucca*, *worry* or *regret*, the tendency of the mind to become preoccupied with an internally fabricated narrative that provides a conflicted and uncomfortable meaning in the context of the basic instability described above as restlessness. Having a clear conscience regarding ethical conduct is certainly valuable to internal emotional stability, and this is why Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood have a dominant function in the Noble Eightfold Path. However, as mentioned above, an additional consideration is valuable: The tendency we experience in the complexity of contemporary lifestyles to worry about what might happen in the future and regret what happened in the past. To quote the Dalai Lama: “If something happens and you can do something about it, why worry? If something happens and you can’t do anything about it, why worry?”.

As mentioned in the Dharma talk entitled “Setting Aside Sloth and Torpor”, there are two interactive systems in the body, the sympathetic and parasympathetic. The hindrance of Sloth and Torpor represents an overactive parasympathetic system, which sedates the body and mind. The hindrance of Restlessness and Worry is the effect of an overactive sympathetic nervous system, in which case there is an introduction of adrenaline into the blood stream, activating the heart, tensing the muscles, and so on; in the mind the same hormone is called epinephrine, and this creates restlessness in the mind.

The highest level of this hindrance clinically is the mentally disabling condition called *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder*, which involves, in part, becoming highly dysfunctional emotionally and behaviorally, focusing intensely on possible personal contamination or having to repeat certain rituals in order to be able to function, such as repeatedly checking doors to be sure they are locked. There are contemporary psychotherapeutic interventions that utilize mindfulness to interrupt the repetitive nature of the narratives through noting “This is not me, it’s my OCD” and learning to reduce the accompanying anxiety through mindfulness of the body practices.

What is of concern for most of us is not the high levels of agitation manifested by OCD, but what is clinically diagnosed as Generalized Anxiety Disorder, which has the same characteristics as the classical hindrance, but is more pronounced and disruptive. The antidote for GAD, which is the clinical abbreviation for the disorder, can include what is called Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, which involves the ability to use mindfulness of breathing meditation to reduce an overactive Sympathetic Nervous System (thereby reducing uddhacca), combined with the ability to investigate the accompanying irrational beliefs that accompany the agitation and modify them to reduce the mutually reinforcing interactions between the agitation and beliefs (thereby modifying kukkucca).

Even when the disorders of Anxiety are subdued, the mind is still afflicted by restlessness, enhanced and reinforced by beliefs that seem to justify the restlessness, and this is the primary characteristic of this hindrance. It is beneficial to be able to generally set aside adrenaline/epinephrine based agitation as a primary function of samadhi. Furthermore, it is beneficial to cultivate *viraga* (vee-rah-gah), translated as *dispassion*. Dispassion is like *upekkha* (ooh-peh-kah), *equipoise,* but with more emphasis on the absence of excitement or urgency as a mood. With viraga there is simply less and less appeal regarding experience that previously manifested as restlessness. This is a subtle but important characteristic for overcoming restlessness, which is necessary to realize the ultimate of liberation from dukkha, nirvana. How can mindfulness of breathing promote this awareness?

* Cultivate an ethical life, which provides the serenity of a clear conscience.
* Regular mindfulness of breathing meditation. Every agitating thought introduces more adrenaline/epinephrine into the body/brain process—when focusing on breath awareness, the introduction of these hormones ceases, and prolonged awareness of the neutral feeling associated with breath awareness allows the hormones to metabolize out from the body/brain processes, increasing calmness.
* Be alert for when the mind is drawn away from breath awareness to some internal narrative. During the early stages of setting aside Restlessness and Worry, routinely denying the opportunity for restlessness-inducing thoughts to establish dominance by going back to the breath repeatedly provides the stability of attention necessary to foster vipassana, the function of which is to be dispassionately aware of the transient and impersonal nature of internal narratives.