

## **From Meditation Obstacles to Meditation Objects**

### **Class 3 – The Hindrance of Ill will**

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#### ***Introduction***

The first two of the five hindrances are sensual desire and ill will. They are paired in that they are opposite compulsive desires. The first wants something; the second does not want something. Both are mental forces that obstruct our ability to remain mindful and free.

These hindrances relate to an interesting topic: Where do we put our attention? Why does the mind sometimes fixate its attention on what we want or don't want? Rather than allowing this mental activity to continue unchecked, mindfulness examines this impulse to preoccupation. Through sufficient investigation, understanding, and non-reactivity, the hindrances can lose their power to hinder us or take control of our attention. With enough insight, we can become free of them.

Ill will is the desire to strike out at something. It is motivated by hostility. It manifests as wanting to hurt, attack, push away or turn away from something. It can operate in a range of intensity from the subtlest inclinations of mind to the grossest behaviors. It is common also to call this hindrance "aversion," which is reasonable translation for the subtler manifestation of ill will as it means a strong dislike. However, there are healthy forms of averting that are not motivated by hostility. It can be a kindness to turn away from something that is causing pain.

Being caught up in ill will is itself a painful experience. Ill will constricts the mind and heart. Ill will can predispose us to focus on whatever is undesirable or going wrong and then our perspective becomes narrow. Under the sway of ill will we become more reactive and impulsive. For some people, the discomfort that comes from having ill will keeps it going; aversion to aversion only perpetuates aversion.

In extreme forms, this hindrance can lead to a very alienated life. People can feel isolated, having difficulty connecting to others. Aversion can be self-fulfilling; when people feel our ill will toward them, they are more likely to act in ways that give us reasons to have aversion toward them.

#### ***Practicing with Ill Will***

One of the tasks in meditation is to become very familiar with the hindrances. Rather than rushing to get rid of them, it can be helpful to take the time to understand them well. In the case of ill will, this means being willing to shift our attention away from whatever we are hostile toward and instead turn our attention to investigating the experience of ill will. Without that willingness, mindfulness is unable to do its work.

Investigating ill will includes dropping into the body and feeling the ill will physically. How does it feel energetically? Is there physical discomfort associated with it? It can be very helpful to stop thinking about the object of ill will and instead allow the whole body to be a container that provides space for the many associated sensations and feelings.

Sometimes ill will is used as a cover for something deeper. What might ill will be covering? It might be frustrated desire, fear, embarrassment or physical discomfort. The “cover” of ill will is a way of protecting our selves. As long as we fixate on what we don’t like, we won’t feel how uncomfortable we are.

Another aspect of investigating ill will is to discover the underlying beliefs that support it. Why might we believe that aversion will benefit us? Why might we believe that ill will is justified? What beliefs do we have about ourselves that trigger anger? What assumptions do we carry about how things are “supposed” to be?

Besides investigation, another approach to mindfulness of aversion is to remain attentively and non-reactively present for it until it passes away. While this is not easy, doing so strengthens many of the qualities that support Buddhist spiritual life; e.g., mindfulness, resolve, patience and stability. Remaining present with the experience of ill will may require us to face difficult emotions, strong impulses and the seductive pull of discursive preoccupations, but doing so can build confidence in our ability to be with uncomfortableness.

If we’re caught in the boiling sensation of ill will, it can be helpful to turn our attention away from the strong emotion and instead create the conditions for a different, more spacious and gentle mental state to arise. When our mental state is very difficult it is appropriate to practice an antidote to ill will: loving-kindness. It may be best to start by practicing loving-kindness toward someone for whom it is easy for us to feel warmth and care. However, it is important to do so without trying to make ill will go away (more aversion to aversion) as well as to come back to really being with the experience of ill will when our mind state is more balanced.

As with the other hindrances, having ill will is not a personal failing. It is an ordinary part of life. There is no need to define or judge oneself by its presence. It is also not necessary to be under its sway.

### ***Exercise***

During this week, spend some time examining any aversions that might arise for you. These might be small movements of the mind or major outbursts. Notice how it affects the quality of your mind and thinking. Can you detect any hostility with the aversion? In situations where it is okay to do so, allow the aversion to be present without judging it, acting on it, or abandoning it and notice how this impacts you.