

From Meditation Obstacles to Meditation Objects

Class 4 – The Hindrance of Sloth and Torpor

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Introduction

Sloth and torpor are forces in the mind that drain vitality and limit effort. Sloth manifests as a physical absence of vitality. The body may feel heavy, lethargic, weary, or weak. Torpor is a mental lack of energy. The mind may be dull, cloudy, or weary, easily drifting in thought. Being caught in sloth or torpor can resemble slogging through deep mud. When this hindrance is strong, there is not even enough mindfulness to know we've fallen in.

Mental and physical tiredness may be manifestations of sloth and torpor, but it also may be that we simply need more rest or sleep. We can differentiate normal tiredness from hindering sloth and torpor by paying attention to the impact resting has on our clarity of mind as well as by looking carefully at our underlying psychological attitude. The presence of sloth and torpor does not necessarily mean that energy is not available, it simply means that we are not accessing the energy. With a change in conditions, energy may reappear.

Discouragement, frustration, boredom, indifference, giving up, hopelessness, and resistance are some of the psychological causes of sloth and torpor. Mindfulness practice can help us understand how our evaluations and reactions lead to collapsing energy. We might notice the role resistance plays in the sinking of energy or the role striving plays in wearing us out. Shutting down energetically can be a strategy to prevent something from happening or from having to experience it. Occasionally, falling asleep in meditation can be a deep, almost unconscious form of resistance.

Sloth and torpor may arise from evaluating something as boring. But nothing is inherently boring; boredom is a judgment - an activity of the mind. It commonly arises from self-identity. People who feel highly energized when their self-image is being enhanced or diminished may deem an experience boring if it does nothing for their self-image. Other evaluations that drain energy are discouragement, self-pity, and ideas of futility. These can come with well-honed defeatist stories about how "I can't do it," "It's too hard," or "It's too dangerous." Learning to mindfully watch our thoughts instead of actively participating in them can effectively stop them from draining our energy.

A more subtle cause of sloth and torpor can be complacency. This can occur when we are lulled by comfort or misguided acceptance. Complacency may arise when meditation feels easy and comfortable. With the warm, fuzzy feeling that everything is okay, the mind can drift off.

Weariness can be closely entwined with sloth and torpor. Chronic excitement and tension, especially when expressed through the muscles, can leave a person deeply exhausted. Because

tension masks weariness, people may not realize how deeply fatigued they are until they sit down to meditate.

Practicing with Sloth and Torpor

When sloth and torpor appear in meditation, it is important to find ways to practice with the condition, not struggle against it. It is especially important not to abandon a meditation session because of sloth and torpor. If sloth and torpor is mild, it may be overcome by arousing more energy. Options include: sitting up with a more erect, energized posture; opening the eyes; standing meditation practice; brisk walking meditation; washing the face with cold water; avoiding being too warm while meditating; and increasing the frequency of mental noting. Our energy levels and effort naturally rise and fall, and this hindrance can be expected to appear sooner or later.

Another approach is investigation. It can be fascinating to feel the subjective experience of sloth and torpor. This includes exploring where and how the physical feelings of heaviness or dullness show themselves. Investigating this hindrance can also include understanding how particular thoughts, beliefs, and evaluations feed into sloth and torpor. Sometimes it is possible to change what the mind is contemplating so as to awaken more energy. A traditional Buddhist approach is to reflect on death and dying. Done the right way, this can arouse healthy energy, vitality and motivation, freeing the mind from preoccupations with insignificant things. Chronic sloth and torpor may represent a lack of meaning or purpose in life. In this case, the approach might involve taking time for deep inner reflection or thoughtful conversations with wise friends.

When sloth and torpor are present and energy is weak, we do the best we can. When they are absent, energy will naturally be stronger. Rather than berating yourself when you are tired or praising yourself when you are alert, just keep practicing. Certainly it will help reveal the precious beauty of your own mind.

Exercise

Spend some days experimenting with the amount of effort you apply in meditation. Deliberately, practice with lots of energy, less energy and then a moderate amount of energy and notice how the amount of energy you bring to your practice impacts your meditation.

Some things you can experiment with are: physically sitting up straighter, doing brisk walking meditation before sitting or intentionally slowing down your activity before sitting to support more ease and presence. It can be done mentally by putting more effort into being alert and mindful of what is happening during the meditation session. If applying more effort agitates you, try to match the increased effort with increased calm or inner stillness.