

From Meditation Obstacles to Meditation Objects
Class 5 – The Hindrance of Restlessness and Worry
by Gil Fronsdal

Introduction

Restlessness is a state of agitation and over-excitement. When primarily in the body, restlessness may be experienced as compulsive energy bouncing throughout the body. We just can't get comfortable. There may be incessant impulses to fidget or even to bolt. It can be experienced as shakiness or agitated vulnerability, as when we have had too much caffeine.

When primarily in the mind, restlessness can manifest as scattered or persistent thinking. There may be an inability to focus – the mind recoils from being directed anywhere, or it jumps from one thing to the next, incapable of settling. During deep meditation, restlessness can manifest as excitement about states of peace. When the mind is quiet, restlessness can be as subtle as thinking, "I am not thinking anything." Even more subtly, restlessness is present whenever there is the slightest clinging or pride in such states of calm.

Constant activity and over scheduling can be expressions of the restlessness which occurs at the expense of neither confronting it nor settling it. Because restlessness is uncomfortable, it can be difficult to pay attention to it. Paradoxically, restlessness is itself sometimes a symptom of not being able to be present for discomfort. Patience, discipline, and courage are needed to sit still and face the restlessness or worry.

Worry is the other half of the fourth hindrance. Classically it is explained as the agitated feelings of regret for what one has done or not done in the past. Nowadays it seems useful to expand the meaning to include the broader concept of "worry." Concern over imagined futures can cause much worry. And people may carry a disquieting self-concept, giving rise to agitation over "who they think they are." Many people can feel shame or guilt without any specific reason.

Practicing with restlessness and worry

Strong restlessness, regret or worry hinder being quiet and focused during meditation. Occasionally they can be powerful enough that meditation is counter-indicated. For example, with some regrets it might be necessary to make amends before doing meditation. Or when worry is overwhelming, psychotherapy may be more useful. Usually, however, restlessness and worry can be worked through in meditation. Simply being mindful is a big step.

To bring mindfulness to the experience of restlessness, it is useful to begin by feeling it physically. If there is a lot of energy coursing through the body, imagine the body as a wide container where the energy is allowed to bounce around like a ping pong ball. Accepting it can take away the extra agitation created by fighting the restlessness. Sitting still with the restlessness often allows it to

settle down on its own. Because the settling process can take a while, patience is needed. Sometimes the mind will marshal myriad arguments to convince you to act on some restless impulse. During meditation it is important not to give in to irrational compulsions, such as the notion that it is important to defrost the freezer immediately.

Once we have studied restlessness and worry, it is useful to notice when it is *not* present. Physically, emotionally, and mentally, what is the felt sense of being, at least temporarily, free of restlessness? The knowledge of what it is like to be still, calm, or peaceful is very nourishing. It can dissuade us from believing restless thoughts, and it can give us an appreciation of healthy alternatives to being caught in a hindrance.

The classic Buddhist instruction for working with restlessness and worry includes noticing what triggered it. This includes looking back over what conditions were in place when the restlessness arose. By developing our understanding of the conditions that gave rise to the restlessness and worry we can wisely avoid activities that bring restlessness or regret.

Frustrated desire and pent-up aversion are common causes of agitation. Fear and resentment are others. Dissatisfaction is a condition that can keep the mind restless with searching. Using too much effort in meditation can also stir up the mind. When any of these conditions are noticed, it can be more useful to be mindful of them than the restlessness. Ignoring the conditions supporting the restlessness can keep us skimming the surface; being mindful of them can help with the settling.

When physical pain is triggering restlessness, it is important to address the pain. When appropriate and possible, try to alleviate the pain. When the pain can't be alleviated or when we see the opportunity inherent in meditating with it, then the focus can be differentiating the pain from our reaction to the pain as a first step toward settling the restlessness.

One of the more profound skills for working through restlessness and worry is to let go of the beliefs that keep them going. Strong opinions about what is or is not supposed to be happening incite the mind; judgments of good and bad seldom lead to calm. Attachment to a self-image also tends to be agitating. It can be liberating to realize that we don't have to believe every thought we have.

Exercise

This week experiment with the ways you can live your life that lessen or prevent restlessness and worry from arising. For instance, it is important to have enough exercise, sleep, and good nutrition because their lack can encourage restlessness. It is also important to live one's life ethically, so that our behavior and speech do not give us cause to worry or regret. What other conditions can support the lessening of restlessness and worry?