

The Hindrance of Ill Will

By Gil Fronsdal

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. It is hard to be calm and settled when we are in their grip. When strong, they obscure our ability to see clearly and choose wisely.

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 even become free of them.

Ill will

Ill will, or *vyapada* in the Buddha's language, 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 from the subtlest inclinations of mind to the grossest behavior. It is common to call this hindrance "aversion," which is a reasonable translation, for this word mostly 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 painful. It constricts the mind and heart. Our viewpoint can become narrow and hostile. Ill will can predispose us to focus on whatever is undesirable or going wrong. We become more reactive and are more likely to act impulsively. For some people, the discomfort that comes from having ill will is fuel to keep it going; aversion to aversion 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 further reason to have aversion toward them.

Aversion, together with desire, is the "caffeine of the soul." Some people depend on these for their energy, motivation, and even enthusiasm for life. Without either, life can feel flat, boring, lonely, or, at times, frightening. There are people who depend on ill will because it can be an easy way of creating companionship or community with people who share in the same hostility. As with giving up coffee, some people go through a "withdrawal" phase when they stop giving in to these hindrances.

Ways to approach ill will

One of the tasks in meditation is to become very familiar with the hindrances. Rather than rush 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 we have to be willing to shift our attention away from whatever we are hostile toward and instead turn our attention to investigating the ill will itself. Without that willingness, it's hard for mindfulness to do its work.

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

Sometimes ill will is used as a cover for something deeper. The Pali word for hindrance (*nivarana*) literally means something that covers over. So what is ill will covering? It might be frustrated desire. Possibly it is fear or embarrassment, and the cover of ill will is a way of protecting our self. It might also be discomfort; 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 beliefs that support it. Why do we believe it is important or pertinent to remain with these thoughts and motivations? How might we believe that aversion will benefit us? Why might we believe that ill will is justified? What views do we have about ourselves that trigger anger? What assumptions do we carry about how things are "supposed" to be?

Besides investigation, an alternative approach to the mindfulness of aversion is to remain attentively and non-reactively present to it until it passes away. While this is not easy, doing so helps strengthen many of the qualities that help the Buddhist spiritual life: e.g., mindfulness, resolve, patience and stability. In the process, we might have to face strong emotions, impulses, and the pull of discursive preoccupations. To mindfully ride out ill will without giving in to it can build confidence in our ability to remain present without needing to be hooked into the pull of aversion.

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. There are healthier motivations we can act on in order to do what needs to be done. Learning to be mindful of ill will is one of the effective ways to free us from its influence. It is also a way to help us act with wisdom and compassion instead.