

The Hindrance of Restlessness & Worry

adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal

To concentrate and see clearly, we must overcome restlessness and worry, the fourth of the five hindrances. The wise way to overcome the hindrances is to understand them well, rather than getting rid of them quickly. Investigating them is a bit like learning to farm instead of accepting food. Investigation may take time, but what is learned will support us for a long time.

The Buddhist word translated as “restlessness” is *uddhacca* meaning to shake. It is a state of agitation and over-excitement. Some people live restless lives. Constant activity can channel the restlessness at the expense of neither confronting it nor settling it. Because restlessness is uncomfortable, it can be difficult to pay attention to. 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 it.

When physical, restlessness may appear as compulsive energy bouncing throughout the body. We can't get comfortable. There may be incessant impulses to fidget or even to bolt. It can also appear as shakiness or agitated vulnerability, as when we have had too much caffeine.

When mental, restlessness can manifest as scattered or persistent thinking. It is present whenever we are caught in distraction. 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. This is sometimes called monkey mind. As a swinging monkey grasps one branch and immediately reaches for the next, so the restless mind focuses on one thing and immediately reaches out for the next, never satisfied with anything.

During deep meditation, restlessness can manifest as excitement about states of peace. Many meditators have been pulled out of such states by their amazement in experiencing the stillness. When the mind is quiet, restlessness can be as subtle as thinking, “I am not thinking anything.” It can be triggered during deep calm, when breathing seems to stop or when perception of the body ceases. Even more subtly, restlessness is present whenever there is the slightest clinging or pride in such states of calm.

Worry, or *kukkucca* 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.” There can be anxiety that one's self-image will be threatened. Many people can feel shame or guilt without any reason.

Strong regret and 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. Having a hindrance is like wandering through a maze staring at the ground. Being mindful is like standing above the maze to get an overview. Without eliminating a hindrance, mindfulness gives us better perspective of what is happening.

To be mindful of restlessness, it is useful to feel 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 like this can take away the extra agitation of fighting the restlessness. Sitting still with the restlessness often allows it to settle down on its own.

Because the settling 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 restlessness and worry includes noticing what triggered it. This includes looking back over what might have been the cause and condition. By understanding an ongoing cause, we may be able to remove the cause. 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 cause that can keep the mind restless with searching. Trying too hard in meditation can also stir up the mind. When any of these are primary, it can be more useful to be mindful of them than the restlessness. Ignoring the causes can keep us skimming the surface; being mindful of the underlying causes can help with the settling.

Once we have a better understanding of restlessness and worry, it is important to learn how to prevent them from arising and how to let go of them when they are occurring. For instance, it is important to have enough exercise, sleep, and good nutrition because their lack can cause

restlessness. It is also important to live one's life ethically, so that our behavior and speech do not give us cause to be agitated. This is using our intelligence to become skilled in working through these challenges. Developing confidence in such skill can weaken the power of restlessness.

Learning to breathe through restlessness is a great skill. Breathing consciously with the whole body, or focusing on the ongoing rhythm of breathing in and out, can calm the body. The more attention given to breathing, the less is available to fuel the restlessness or worry. Paying attention that we aren't holding or constricting the breathing can be helpful.

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 learning to separate the pain from our reaction is the first step to settling the restlessness.

When thinking is a big part of restlessness, it can be useful to relax the "thinking muscle," softening any tension or pressure associated with thinking. There may be strain in the eyes or tightness in the forehead, jaws, shoulders, or stomach that can be slowly released on a series of successive out breaths.

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.

We live in a restless age. While we might be overcoming restlessness for our own benefit, it is also helpful to the people around us. Hopefully we can all support each other in being nourished by a heart deeply at rest in itself.