

THE ESSENTIALS
of
BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Tiantai Master Zhiyi's Classic Meditation Manual:

*The Essentials for Practicing
Calming-and-Insight & Dhyāna Meditation*

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CHAPTER THREE

Elimination of the Hindrances

3. SECTION THREE: ELIMINATION OF THE HINDRANCES

As for “elimination of the hindrances,” it refers to the five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa, āvaraṇa*).¹

a. [THE HINDRANCE OF DESIRE]

The first involves the eliminating of the hindrance of sensual desire (*kāmachanda*). Earlier, we discussed the outward arising of desire with respect to the five sense objects. Now we are concerned with the inward arising of desire in the intellectual mind faculty. This refers to instances where the practitioner is seated upright, cultivating dhyāna meditation, and his mind generates continuously, one after another, desire-based ideations which cover over the wholesome mind, preventing it from developing. When one realizes that this is occurring, one should eliminate [such ideation].

Why should he do so? If, as in the case of Śubhakarā,² the internal arising of the lustful mind is able even to burn the body, how could it be that all wholesome dharmas would not be burned up as well when the mind generates the fire of desire? Persons possessed by desire are extremely far away from the Path.³ How is this so? Desire is the dwelling place of all manner of affliction-based disturbances. If the mind becomes attached and beset by desire, there is no way for one to grow near to the Path. This is as explained in “Verse on Eliminating the Hindrances”:

The person knowing shame and blame who’s entered the Path
Takes up his bowl and provides merit for beings.
How could one give free reign to desire for sense objects
And become immersed in the five senses?

Having already renounced the pleasures of the five desires,
One has cast them off and does not look back.
Why would one still desire to gain them,
Like a fool who laps up his own vomit?

All desires are suffering at the time they are sought.
When gained, one is usually fearful [of losing them].

On losing them, one experiences burning aggravation.
At every point there's nowhere where pleasure abides.

Given that desires are so attended by troubles,
How might one be able to relinquish them?
If one but gains the bliss of deep dhyāna absorption,
One will then no longer be subject to their deception.

b. [THE HINDRANCE OF ILL WILL]

The second is the elimination of the hindrance of ill will (*vyāpāda*). Ill will is the basis for losing the Buddha Dharma, a cause and condition for falling into the wretched destinies,⁴ the nemesis of Dharma bliss, the great thief which preys on the wholesome mind, and the repository of all manner of abusive speech.

Accordingly, when the practitioner is sitting in dhyāna meditation, he might think to himself, "This fellow is now tormenting me. What's more, he torments my relatives and praises my adversaries." Continuing, he might think, "It's been like this in the past as well, and it will continue to be so in the future. This amounts to a nine-fold torment."

Consequently, he might become full of ill will and, based upon that ill will, he might begin to cherish animosity. On account of generating animosity, he might then think to torment the other individual. In this fashion, ill will serves to cover over the mind and, for this reason, [this "hindrance" is also] referred to as a "covering." One should proceed urgently to eliminate it and should not allow it to proliferate. This is as illustrated by Śakra Devānām Indra's query which he posed to the Buddha in verse:

What thing is it which, murdered, brings peace and brings bliss?
What thing is it which, slain, brings freedom from worry?
What thing is it which is the root of venomousness,
And which devours and destroys all forms of goodness?

The Buddha responded, speaking in verse:

If one murders anger (*krodha*), one becomes peaceful and happy.
If one slays anger, one becomes free of one's worries.
It is anger which is the root of venomousness.
It is anger which destroys all forms of goodness.⁵

Having realized this, one should cultivate kindness and patience as the means to dispel anger so that the mind may become pure.

c. [THE HINDRANCE OF LETHARGY-AND-SLEEPINESS]

Third, eliminating the hindrance of lethargy-and-sleepiness (*styāna-middha*).⁶ “Lethargy” (*styāna*) refers to a dullness and dimness of the subjective mental processes, whereas “sleepiness” (*middha*) refers to the state in which the five sense faculties are so covered over by dimness that the control of the limbs is relinquished and one curls up and sleeps soundly. It is for this reason that [this “hindrance” is also] referred to as the “covering” of sleep.

It is capable of destroying the mind intent on Dharma which generates genuine bliss in this and later lives and is also capable of destroying the bliss derived in later lives from rebirth in the heavens and the realization of nirvāṇa. An unwholesome dharma such as this is the very worst. How is this so? Unlike the mental states associated with the other hindrances which may be expelled simply by becoming aware of their presence, sleep is like being dead in that an aware state of consciousness is no longer present. Because one is not abiding in a state of awareness, this remains a difficult thing to eliminate.

This is as described in a verse employed by buddhas and bodhisattvas to reprimand somnolent disciples:

Get up! Don't lie there hugging that stinking corpse.
It's but various impurities falsely designated as a “person.”
It's as if you've gotten a serious disease or been shot by an arrow.
With such an accumulation of suffering and pain, how could you
sleep?

[The entire world is burned up by the fire of death.
When you should be seeking to escape, how could you sleep?]⁷
You're like a man in shackles being led to his execution.
With disastrous harm so imminent, how could you sleep?

The thieves of the fetters haven't been destroyed and their harm
has not yet been eliminated.
It's as if one were sharing a room with a venomous serpent.
It's also as if one were entering a battle's gauntlet of swords.
What would you do then? How could you sleep?

Sleep amounts to a vast darkness where one can't see anything.
Every day it deceives and steals away a person's clarity.
Because sleep covers over the mind, one can't see anything.
As it has such great drawbacks, how could you sleep?

For all manner of reasons such as these, one remonstrates against the hindrance of sleepiness. One becomes alarmed by and awakened to impermanence, pares down one's need for sleep and prevents oneself from being covered over by its dullness. If the mind becomes severely afflicted with dullness and sleep, one should resort to a dhyāna wake-up device or staff to get rid of them.⁸

d. [THE HINDRANCE OF EXCITEDNESS-AND-REGRETFULNESS]

The fourth, eliminating the hindrance of excitedness-and-regretfulness (*auddhatya-kaukrtya*).⁹

1) [EXCITEDNESS]

As for excitedness itself (*auddhatya*), there are three types:

a) [PHYSICAL EXCITEDNESS]

The first is physical excitedness which is characterized by the body's habitual enjoyment of wandering about engaging in all manner of foolishness while having no ability to feel even momentarily peaceful when sitting down.

b) [VERBAL EXCITEDNESS]

The second type is verbal excitedness which is characterized by the habitual enjoyment of singing, chanting, disputation over rights and wrongs, useless and frivolous discourse, the discussion of worldly matters, and so forth.

c) [MENTAL EXCITEDNESS]

The third type is mental excitedness. Here, one's mental inclination is towards neglectfulness and towards indulging the mind in its manipulation of circumstances. This may involve musing over literature, the arts, worldly talents and artisanship, as well as all manner of unwholesome ideation and discursive thought. These are characteristic features of mental excitedness.

The function of excitedness as a dharma is to destroy the mind of the monastic. Even if a person strives to focus his thoughts, he might still be unable to develop meditative absorption, how much the less so if he falls prey to excitedness and scatteredness. Someone under the influence of excitedness and scatteredness is like a drunken elephant unrestrained by the trainer's hook and like a camel without a nose ring. None of these are subject to control or discipline. This is as described in a verse:

You've already shaved your head and donned the dyed robe.
 Taking up the clay bowl, you go out on the alms round.
 How then can you delight in and be attached to dharmas of
 frivolity and excitedness?
 Being neglectful and giving rein to your inclinations, you lose the
 benefits of Dharma.¹⁰

Since one loses the benefits of Dharma, one loses worldly bliss as well. Having realized one's errors, one should strive with urgency to eliminate [the excitedness hindrance].

2) [REGRETFULNESS]

As for regretfulness (*kaukr̥tya*), it is regretfulness itself which brings about the creation of a hindrance in this context. If one merely experiences instances of excitedness in which there is no operative regretfulness, this situation is not one wherein a [true] hindrance has been created. How is this the case? It is because at such times of experiencing excitedness [pure and simple], one may not yet have become involved in objective conditions. However, later, when one is desirous of entering meditative absorption, one may then experience regretfulness over what one may actually have done. Then worry-based afflictions cover over the mind. It is on account of this that there is the creation of a "covering" [hindrance].

a) [TWO TYPES OF REGRETFULNESS]

Regretfulness itself is of two types. The first is regretfulness which arises as a consequence of excitedness as explained above. The second is exemplified by the person who has committed a major and severe offense and who thus constantly experiences feelings of fearfulness. The arrow of regretfulness has entered his mind and has become stuck so firmly that it can not be pulled out. This is as described in a verse:

Through having done what one shouldn't have done,
 Or through having failed to do what one should have done,
 One is burned by the fire of the regretfulness affliction,
 And, in a later life, falls into the wretched destinies.

If a person is able to feel regret for an offense,
 Then, having regretted it, he should not continue to feel troubled.
 In this way, the mind can be peaceful and happy.
 One should not constantly seize upon it through recollection.

If one possesses either of the two kinds of regretfulness,
 Whether it be over having failed to do what one should have done,
 Or over having done what one should not have done,
 This is the mark of a stupid person.

It is not the case that, on account of being regretful,
 One will somehow be able to do what one failed to do.
 All of the ill deeds which one has already committed
 Can't be caused thereby to become undone.¹¹

e. [THE HINDRANCE OF DOUBT]

Fifth, eliminating the hindrance of doubt. Because doubt covers over the mind, one is unable to develop faith in any dharma. Because one has no mind of faith, one encounters the Buddha's Dharma in vain and gains nothing from it. This is analogous to a man's entering into a mountain of jewels. If he has no hands, he is unable to acquire anything at all.

This being the case, the faults of doubt are extremely numerous. Still, they need not necessarily obstruct the acquisition of meditative absorption. Now, as for those sorts of doubt which may directly obstruct meditative absorption, they are of three types:

1) [DOUBT IN ONESELF]

The first is where one doubts oneself and thus thinks to himself, "All of my faculties are all dim and dull. The defilement from my previous offenses is deep and severe. Could it be that I'm not the man for this?" If one indulges in creating these doubts, then the dharma of meditative absorption will never be able to manifest. If one desires to cultivate meditative absorption, one must not slight oneself, for it is difficult to fathom the extent of one's roots of goodness planted in former lifetimes.

2) [DOUBT IN ONE'S GURU]

The second type of doubt is that wherein one doubts one's own guru, thinking, "If his deportment and appearance are such as this, he must not have any realization of the Path. How then could he be able to teach me?" If one develops such doubting arrogance, then it constitutes an obstruction to meditative absorption.

A method for one wishing to be rid of this [hindrance] is mentioned in the *Mahāyāna Treatise*: "This is comparable to when gold is encased in a smelly leather pouch."¹² Because one wishes to possess the gold, one can't just pitch out the smelly pouch. The practitioner's situation may be just like this. Although the guru may not

be immaculate, still, one should look upon him as one would look upon the Buddha.

3) [DOUBT IN THE DHARMA]

The third type of doubt is that wherein one doubts the Dharma. Worldly people are usually attached to their own ideas and thus are not able to immediately believe the Dharma which they have received, thus accepting it and cultivating it with a respectful mind. If the mind becomes hesitant, then, even though one has immediate exposure to the Dharma, it makes no imprint on the mind. Why is this the case? It is because doubt hinders it. The concept is as described in a verse:

It's just as when a person stands at a fork in the road
And is so deluded by doubt that he goes nowhere at all.
In relation to [fathoming] the true character of dharmas,
Doubt functions in precisely the very same way.

Because one has doubts, one doesn't diligently seek
[Realization of] the true character of dharmas.
View-filled doubts arise from delusion.
Among all of the ills, they are the very worst.

As for good versus unwholesome dharmas,
[The dharmas of] birth-and-death and nirvāṇa,
And dharmas which are definitely genuine and truly valid,
One must not indulge any doubts about them.

If you cherish the delusion of doubt,
The King of Death's hell messengers will tie you up.
Just as when a lion pounces on a deer,
You'll be unable then to achieve liberation.

Although whilst living in the world, one may have one's doubts,
One should still happily accord with wholesome dharmas,
Just as when one contemplates a fork in the road,
One should follow that path which is most beneficial.¹³

In the Dharma of the Buddha, it is through faith that one gains entry. If one has no faith, then, although in the presence of the Buddha's Dharma, he will finally gain nothing whatsoever from it. Based on all sorts of reasons such as these, one realizes the faults inhering in doubtfulness. Thus one should urgently strive to eliminate it.

f. [QUESTION: WHY ONLY GET RID OF FIVE?]

Question: Unwholesome dharmas are vast in number and the sense objects are countless. Why is it that one must only get rid of five dharmas?

1) [REPLY: ALL ARE SUBSUMED]

Reply: These five hindrances basically take four dharmas as their foundation, namely the three poisons as well as instances of “equal-distribution” [in relation to those three poisons.] These in turn subsume all eighty-four thousand points of entry into toilsome involvement with sense objects. First, the hindrance of desire is just synonymous with the poison of desire. Second, the hindrance of ill will is just synonymous with the poison of anger. Third, the two categories of dharmas consisting of lethargy-and-sleepiness and doubtfulness are just synonymous with the poison of delusion. The fourth is excitedness-and-regretfulness. It belongs to the “equal-distribution” category.

Together, these constitute the four categories of afflictions. In each of them, there are twenty-one thousand. In all four of them, there are collectively a total of eighty-four thousand. Hence, when one gets rid of these five hindrances, one thereby eliminates all unwholesome dharmas. Based on all manner of reasons such as these, the practitioner strives to eliminate the five hindrances.

g. [BENEFITS OF ELIMINATING THE HINDRANCES]

The practitioner is like a person who has gained freedom from a debt or one who has been cured of a serious disease, like a starving man arriving in a prosperous country, or like one who has been rescued safe and unharmed from a band of villains. When he eliminates these five hindrances, his mind becomes calm and secure and he feels clear, cool, and blissful.

Just as with the sun and moon which may be obscured and prevented from shining brightly by the five phenomena of smoke, dust, clouds, fog and the hand of the *asura* known as Rāhu, so it is as well with the human mind and the five “covering” hindrances.¹⁴