

What Hindrance Remains?

What brings you to this practice? What makes you practice? Put another way: What hinders you in your practice? What obstructs you in your life? I'm not asking for answers you've learned in books or elsewhere. Realize what really makes you practice, then nothing can get in the way. And if there is something that hinders you, find out what it is and correct it.

Traditionally, Buddhism speaks of five hindrances. Put simply:

1) craving 2) hatred 3) lethargy 4) worry 5) doubt

They have already been briefly introduced in the third day of retreat lectures on "Sitting Comfortably Under the Rose-Apple Tree," so I won't repeat here.¹

Put zenistically, there is no hindrance, nor is there anyone to be hindered. What, after all, can hinder reality? Thus, Zen tends not to focus on hindrances; there is a danger of actually fueling the hindrance, of feeding the delusion.

Practically speaking though, if something is actively preventing you from entering the practice, see what it is and correct it. Discern what really fuels the hindrance, what keeps the delusion going. What, in effect, stops you from stopping? Do you need to adjust the cushion under your butt? Or perhaps face an unpleasant truth about yourself? Or do you need to just sit through?

Don't feed the hindrances you have. But don't deny them either. Practicing properly and living properly, most hindrances dissolve of their own accord.

If zazen is thoroughgoing, one's mind is not caught or hindered by anything. But if zazen is not yet settled, one may enter the concentrated oneness of Samadhi – then get stuck there and dwell in it, using it as an escape. It becomes itself a hindrance. The clarity and calmness of Samadhi should not mask but rather reveal the underlying clinging that remains. Buddhist meditation goes beyond momentary stress relief. In traditional terms, the first noble truth (that self cannot come to rest) leads inevitably to the second (that the cause of this dis-ease is the delusive self-clinging that underlies it). Then when one penetrates

¹ See: <https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/rose-apple-tree-2016.pdf>

Samadhi, consciousness of self dissolves and boundless Dhyana is entered.

Here the real work begins. Sit a few days in retreat and the mental chatter and wavering mind on the surface dissolve. The point, however, is to realize what remains – without clinging to the clear and calm state. Keep your mind, heart, and eye open. Otherwise you momentarily slow down, but you're still stuck on the treadmill of self-delusion. What, after all, is hindering you?

Put another way: what makes you practice? What really drives you in your practice? Many, myself included, may have started with such notions as: "I want to get enlightened, then all my problems will be solved!" Beware of greedily seeking some state that you assume will solve all your problems. That is ego charading as spiritual practice.

You've read statements about the great matter of life and death, that there's not a moment to waste, don't waste your life in vain, strive to the utmost, and so on. You've also read – sometimes two lines later – that there is nothing to attain, nothing to lose, neither illusion nor enlightenment. If the least doubt remains about this, "**Don't waste a moment!**"

If you're not firmly established in practice, anything can become a hindrance: hopes, doubts – this mosquito buzzing around. Firmly established in sustained practice and seeing clearly what's in front of your face, nothing can get in the way.

"But how? How can I do it?" How can you not? How can you not do what must be done? How can you not **see** what's in front of your face? My dear Dharma sisters and brothers, what really hinders you here and now? Bring that to one-on-one and your original face will be mirrored; try to run away from yourself and you'll find an impenetrable wall.

The ego-self wants what it wants, and doesn't want what it doesn't want. Thus, what it **must** do limits its "freedom." But that's not freedom at all; that's being trapped, enslaved, by momentary inclinations and blind craving. Truly be without self and see: doing what must be done is itself freedom! The ego-self cannot wrap its head around this. Thus it continues to restlessly seek and to suffer.

Practicing properly in sustained zazen, the concentrated oneness of Samadhi manifests. Once the clinging knot of pain-pleasure, illusion-enlightenment, and so on, comes undone, practice takes a healthy, natural turn. Let Samadhi bottom out, so to speak, into boundless Dhyana. Here is a tremendous vitality – yet it is completely grounded

and settled. From there, the practice itself shows you the way you must go. To where? To right here.

No need to depend on others. But since this year is the 1,150th commemoration of the passing of the Chinese monk Linji (Rinzai in Japanese), let's see what he has to say.² In essence, he states: "Let your ceaselessly seeking mind come fully to rest, then you're a Buddha as you are. Want to know the real Buddha? None other than you right now listening to my talk!"³ Now, what do **you** say? [*Pause*]

It's Linji's experience not ours, but for what it's worth, when he was still struggling and was repeatedly struck by his master, he decided to leave the monastery, humbly thinking that "some obstruction [=hindrance] caused by my own past karma prevents me from grasping his profound meaning." Have you had similar thoughts? After awakening, however, he stated, "you yourself raise the obstructions that impede your mind."⁴ Finally, what hindrance can there be? Confirm it for yourself: when the seeking mind comes to its own end, neither living nor dying is a hindrance.

After all, the real practice is not a question of easy or difficult. It's what must be done. Stop feeding your delusions, then Samadhi empties out into boundless Dhyana. Then the self finishes dying – and no-self comes fully to life. That is the end of the self-delusion that is the delusion-of-self. Linji speaks of having nothing to do.⁵ I would say to be done [with] seeking. That is, to be truly carefree – not only free **from** care, but free **to** care.

When I was young, the following paraphrase from Shibayama stuck in my craw: "You who have not spent sleepless nights in suffering and tears, who do not know the experience of being unable to swallow even a piece of bread – the grace of God will never reach you."⁶ It sounded as though he were saying that we must suffer, that we must put ourselves through ascetic extremes. No. He's saying that as long as self continues, suffering continues. Thus, if we are honest and sincere with ourselves, we must get to the point where taking even a crumb of bread is

2 See: <https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/rinzai-zen-now.pdf> and <https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/rinzai-zen-in-the-modern-world2.pdf>

3 See: <http://info.stiltij.nl/publiek/meditatie/leraren/historisch/linji-sasaki.pdf> p. 155.

4 See Ibid pp. 286, 313.

5 See for example Ibid pp. 159, 185, 193, 223.

6 Quoted in Zenkei Shibayama's comments on case 41 of *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan/The Gateless Barrier*. Cf. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Book 2, Chapter 13.

impossible, where the very urge for the self to continue is divested. At just such a point, there is no room for wandering thoughts to enter, or for hindrances to interfere.

Here is where we “find” who and what we really are. And what is that? Linji speaks of it as just being ordinary, eating, taking a rest when tired.⁷ Not to have a single thought of seeking Buddhahood.⁸ I would say, doing what must be done; and when nothing needs to be done, take a break and enjoy.

A poem by the little-known Chinese layman Yan Bing (d. 1212) sums it up:

*Doubt block breaks up – just this is awakening.
Once the fount of Wisdom opens for good, you’ll not doubt again.
Doubt and awakening – let go of both.
You’re still a beggar making the rounds!*⁹

[Condensed version of retreat lectures given in the summer of 2016 for groups in the UK, Hungary-Romania, Belgium-Holland, and Munich and Bremen in Germany.]

⁷ See for example: http://info.stiltij.nl/publiek/meditatie/leraren/_historisch/linji-sasaki.pdf pp. 173, 175, 178, 185, 239.

⁸ See Ibid p. 171.

⁹ See http://terebeess.hu/zen/Wagner_thesis_Ruru_Jushi.pdf p. 299.