

## The Hindrance of Sloth and Torpor

*by Gil Fronsdal*

Sloth and torpor follow sensual desire and aversion in the list of the five hindrances. Accustomed to the stimulation of constant desire and aversion, some people become tired or deflated when these stimuli are absent. After meditation has calmed the mental activity of wanting and averting, sloth and torpor may be the hindrance that needs to be overcome. Doing so renews a healthy state of energy and alertness.

The five hindrances are key psychological forces that obscure the natural luminosity and healthy functioning of the mind. Because they hinder attention, it is important for people practicing mindfulness to become wise about them.

Sloth and torpor are forces in the mind that drain vitality and limit effort. Sloth manifests as a physical absence of vitality. The body may feel heavy, lethargic, weary, or weak. It may be difficult to keep the body erect when meditating. Torpor is a mental lack of energy. The mind may be dull, cloudy, or weary. It easily drifts in thought. Being caught in sloth or torpor can resemble slogging through deep mud. When this hindrance is strong, there is not even enough mindfulness to know we've fallen in.

Discouragement, frustration, boredom, indifference, giving up, hopelessness, and resistance are some of the psychological causes of sloth and torpor. Mental and physical tiredness may resemble sloth and torpor, but differ in not arising from a psychological attitude.

The presence of sloth and torpor does not mean that energy is not available. It means we are not accessing it. With a change in conditions, energy may reappear in a moment. This can be seen clearly in young children who switch from being "tired" (while shopping, for instance) to being energetic (about an offer of ice cream, for instance) in a matter of seconds. The energy level depends on whether they evaluate the situation as boring or exciting.

Mindfulness practice can help us understand how our evaluations and reactions lead to lethargy. We might notice the role resistance plays in the sinking of energy. Shutting down energetically can be a strategy to prevent something from happening or from having to experience it. Occasionally, falling asleep in meditation can be a deep, almost unconscious form of resistance.

Sloth and torpor may arise from evaluating something as boring. But nothing is inherently boring; boredom is a judgment—an activity of the mind. It commonly arises from self-identity. People who feel highly energized when their self-image is being enhanced or diminished may deem an experience boring if it does nothing for their self-image.

Other evaluations that drain energy are discouragement, self-pity, and ideas of futility. These can come with well-honed defeatist stories about how "I can't do it," "It's too hard," or "It's too dangerous." Learning to mindfully watch our thoughts instead of actively participating in them can effectively stop them from draining our energy.

A more subtle cause of sloth and torpor can be complacency. This can occur when we are lulled by comfort or misguided acceptance. Complacency may arise when meditation feels easy and comfortable. With the warm, fuzzy feeling that everything is okay, the mind can even drift off into sleep.

Weariness can be closely entwined with sloth and torpor. Chronic excitement and tension, especially when expressed through the muscles, can leave a person deeply exhausted. Because the tension masks the weariness, people may not realize how deeply fatigued they are until they go on a meditation retreat. For such people, it can take a few days on retreat to recover sufficient energy for the practice.

When sloth and torpor appear in meditation, it is important to find ways to practice with the condition, not struggle against it. It is especially important not to abandon a meditation session because of sloth and torpor. Our energy level and effort naturally rise and fall, and this hindrance can be expected to appear sooner or later.

If sloth and torpor is mild, it may be overcome by arousing more energy. Options include brisk walking meditation; sitting up with a more erect, energized posture; opening the eyes; washing the face with cold water; avoiding being too warm while meditating; and increasing the frequency of mental noting.

Another approach is investigation. It can be fascinating to actually feel the subjective experience of sloth and torpor. This includes exploring where and how the physical feelings of heaviness or dullness show themselves. One can become curious about how they manifest in the mind.

Investigating this hindrance can also include understanding how particular thoughts, beliefs, and evaluations feed into sloth and torpor. Sometimes it is possible to change what the mind is thinking about so as to awaken more energy. A traditional Buddhist approach is to reflect on death and dying. Done the right way, this can arouse healthy energy and motivation, freeing the mind from preoccupation with insignificant things.

Chronic sloth and torpor may represent a lack of meaning or purpose in life. In this case, the antidote might involve taking time for deep inner reflection or thoughtful conversations with wise friends.

When sloth and torpor are present and energy is weak, we do the best we can. When they are absent, energy will naturally be stronger. Rather than berating yourself when you are tired or praising yourself when you are alert, just keep practicing. Certainly it will help reveal the precious beauty of your own mind.