



40 - The Five Hazards: Tuning Out

Re-awakening the mind's brightness

"When sloth and torpor are present, one should arouse energy, examine the danger, and gladden the mind." ~ Gotama (the Buddha)

"The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgement, character, and will." ~ William James

Understanding the fog and the energy dip

In early Buddhism, Tuning Out – the Hazard traditionally called *sloth and torpor* – refers to a specific dimming of vitality. It shows up as a sinking of both body and mind. The body feels heavy or inert, while the mind becomes foggy, dull, or drowsy. Interest fades, focus loosens, and the heart quietly withdraws from what matters most.

Like ill-will, this Hazard can appear mild or even harmless on the meditation cushion. Yet its real danger lies off the cushion. Tuning Out is not simply being tired; it reflects a subtle turning away rooted in delusion. Its effects reach into daily life, dulling our engagement in relationships, work, and ethical choice – especially in moments that require care, clarity, and presence.

Tuning Out often arrives with a seductive promise of relief: *"Just close your eyes, just drift – it will be peaceful."* But this comfort is deceptive. Like nectar that lures and ensnares, attention slips into a sticky fog where clarity and vitality are slowly drained. What looks like rest becomes disengagement – not only during practice, but precisely when alertness and wisdom are most needed.

Tuning Out versus honest tiredness

As the teacher and author Christina Feldman emphasises, it is vital to distinguish this hazard from *honest tiredness*. Honest tiredness is a wholesome bodily signal calling for restoration; when we rest, clarity naturally returns. Tuning Out, by contrast, is a pattern of under-arousal and subtle avoidance that often persists even after rest.

A simple diagnostic helps reveal the difference. If the mind feels heavy during meditation, difficult conversations, or meaningful work – yet energy quickly returns for entertainment or pleasant distraction – this points to the hazard of Tuning Out rather than genuine exhaustion. This selective dullness is particularly risky in daily life, quietly steering awareness away from what requires presence – parenting, creative work, ethical decisions – and toward what merely soothes or stimulates.

In this third stage of our journey – Freedom – cultivating Joy-Gladness becomes a central task. When dullness takes hold, it is like a bowl of water overgrown with algae: the mind’s natural capacity to reflect clearly is lost, and wisdom is obscured.

As with Ill-will, this hazard matters not only on the meditation cushion but in daily life, where reduced vitality quietly undermines engagement, care, and ethical responsiveness. The clear counter to this fog is found in the complementary Seven Supports (Chapters 43–50), particularly Enthusiasm and Energetic Joy. These qualities do not force brightness, but gently re-awaken interest and vitality, restoring clarity and allowing the mind to meet experience with renewed presence.

Navigating the Doldrums – the Navigator’s countermeasure

On the RAFT to Freedom chart, Tuning Out appears as the hazard of the Doldrums – stagnant, windless waters where progress slows to a drift. Here, the vessel is not threatened by storms, but held motionless by an absence of vitality. The danger is not chaos, but under-arousal and quiet disengagement.

This hazard is deceptive because it feels gentle and harmless. Yet over time it erodes commitment, tempting us (the Captain, Navigator, and Crew) toward thoughts such as “*What’s the point?*” or “*I’ll do it later.*” Left unrecognised, the raft does not sink – it simply stops moving. To pass through the Doldrums, the Navigator’s countermeasure is gentle re-engagement. Rather than forcing energy or judging dullness, the Captain and Crew rely on learned skills that restore momentum without strain. Here, the ‘Five Defenders’ work together (Chapters 28–33):

- ★ Confidence counters the whisper of “*Why bother?*” by recalling the direction the heart has already chosen.
- ★ Courageous Effort meets dullness with wise activation – the simple

willingness to re-engage, perhaps beginning with a single mindful breath or a change in posture.

- ★ Healing Mindfulness recognises the early signs of descent: posture collapsing, eyes glazing, attention drifting. Naming these states prevents full disengagement.
- ★ A Gathered Mind re-collects attention, summoning inner brightness and steadiness to counter mental dimming.
- ★ Discernment chooses the appropriate remedy, whether shifting to a more vivid object, standing up, or moving into walking meditation.

The off-the-cushion danger – the seductive fog of disengagement

The true *off-the-cushion* peril of Tuning Out is its role as a selective dullness that quietly steers awareness away from the vital areas of life that require full presence – such as parenting, creative work, or ethical decision-making. Unlike honest exhaustion, which signals a genuine need for restoration, this hazard shows up as a passive withdrawal when we encounter discomfort or overwhelming tasks.

In daily life, it can feel like a mental *fog*: attention slips into soothing distractions – mindless scrolling, emotional withdrawal, or avoidance – leaving dullness precisely when alertness and wisdom are most needed.

The Navigator's countermeasure: values-based activation

Off the cushion, the same countermeasure applies. To navigate the Doldrums in daily life, the Navigator moves beyond the seductive promise of false peace and applies values-based activation – taking small, meaningful actions before the feeling of motivation arrives. Instead of waiting for the fog to lift, we shift posture, change our immediate environment, or reconnect intentionally with the values that naturally enliven the heart. By acting from deliberate choice rather than temporary mood, we interrupt the drift and restore momentum. In this way, foggiess becomes a signal for engagement rather than a reason for retreat.

How to work with Tuning Out

Gotama offered a compassionate, graduated ladder of strategies for meeting low energy – not by forcing alertness, but by skillfully balancing calm and vitality. The aim is embodied mindfulness: relaxed enough to stay at ease, yet alert enough to remain present. It is like carrying a jar of oil filled to the brim on one's head –

too much tension spills it, too little attention lets it tip.

1. **Name it kindly and impersonally:** Gently acknowledge what is present – “Drowsy... dull... *tuning out is here.*” This non-judgemental naming loosens identification and prevents collapse into the state.
2. **Apply the diagnostic test:** Check whether this is genuine fatigue or subtle resistance. If energy is available for entertainment or distraction, treat this as a hazard to be worked with, not a need to be indulged.
3. **Brighten the posture:** Let the spine lengthen, open the eyes, and invite a sense of brightness. Turning toward natural light or adjusting posture often shifts the mind-state immediately.
4. **Stir wise energy:** Change the meditation object to something clearer and more vivid – such as the cool contact of the in-breath — or shift to standing or slow walking meditation.
5. **Gladden the mind:** Recall something wholesome, such as a moment of integrity or kindness. Gladness naturally lifts lethargy and gently re-tones the mind toward engagement.
6. **Reset; don’t wrestle:** If energy does not return, follow the guidance to lie down mindfully on the right side, take a short, conscious rest, and rise promptly to begin again. This restores balance without reinforcing avoidance.

Self-Reflection Questions

1. What are the earliest bodily cues that Tuning Out is happening (for example, heavy eyelids, slumping posture, shallowness of breath)?
2. Which conditions (time of day, specific tasks, environment) most reliably predict ‘Tuning Out’ for the mind?
3. How does knowing the *seductive promise* change the understanding of dullness? Does it feel seductive?
4. When ‘Tuning Out’ is present, what specific actions, memories, or values might awaken vitality?
5. What is the observable cost to the heart’s values when the mind is ‘lost in the fog’ of Tuning Out, and how does this state impact the capacity to remain present for others?
6. How do the ‘Five Defenders’ help the mind meet low energy without self-criticism?
7. What small environmental tweak (light, temperature, posture) most helps the being move away from Tuning Out?

Journaling Prompts

1. **Tracking the arc of dullness:** Describe a recent episode where foggy appeared. Trace the sequence: trigger > first bodily and mental signs > remedy applied > result.
2. **The Diagnostic Test:** Reflect on a time you thought you were tired but perked up immediately for something fun. What does this reveal about the mind's resistance?
3. **Remembering purpose:** Write freely for ten minutes on the theme: "*When the mind remembers why, energy returns.*" Which values naturally enliven the being?
4. **Light as a support:** For one week, record morning light exposure and the time of practice. Note any patterns in alertness.
5. **A gladdening litany:** Create a short 'gladdening list' of three wholesome things accomplished today. Journal any changes in tone or willingness to engage.
6. **An If–Then plan:** Draft a stability plan: "*If heaviness appears, then awareness will [stand up / splash water / open eyes] for five minutes.*"
7. **The moment energy returned:** After any session where dullness lifted, describe the exact moment vitality re-emerged. What changed first?

Supporting Material: Scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of Tuning Out as a Hazard, the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience:** Tuning Out correlates with low cortical arousal and parasympathetic dominance. It reflects states of low physiological arousal, particularly in the brain's locus coeruleus–noradrenaline system, which regulates alertness. This phenomenon is described by the inverted-U function, where too little arousal leads to dullness. Mindfulness training gently nudges the system toward a functional middle ground. Consistent morning bright light has a powerful effect on the circadian system, advancing the body's internal clock and increasing alertness.
- ★ **Psychology:** *Thīna-Middha* is rooted in an ancient energy-conservation strategy – analogous to metabolic depression in animals during scarcity. In modern contexts, this tendency becomes maladaptive, often arising as a mechanism of avoidance – a passive withdrawal from discomfort or overwhelming tasks. Behavioural Activation (BA), a modern therapeutic approach, parallels the Buddhist antidotes by emphasizing taking

meaningful action *before* motivation arrives. Small actions interrupt the drift and brighten the mind.

- ★ **Philosophy:** Early Buddhism elevates heedfulness (*Appamādo*) as central to the path. Meeting low energy with steadiness, rather than indulgence, is part of this ethical backbone. Dullness is identified as a manifestation of ignorance (*avidyā*) – the aspect of "not wanting to know." The philosophical response involves adhering to Stoic principles of disciplined choice to act from values rather than mood, strengthening the will through deliberate engagement.

Remember to remember

Tuning Out is the mind's quiet drift into low energy, fogginess, and disengagement. Like algae on still water, it hides the mind's reflective capacity. Recognizing its presence – and understanding it as a seductive *carnivorous plant* that promises false peace – is the key first step.

Tuning Out becomes a signal, not a failure. When the mind recognizes the onset of *the Doldrums*, awareness can apply the antidote: restoring brightness, stability, and purpose through the Five Defenders and Seven Supports. This process requires gentle activation and wise effort – walking the path like one carrying a full jar of oil, relaxed yet fully attentive – shifting from avoidance to the energy and aliveness that make the heart fully awake.

"Small changes in posture, breath, or environment can shift the entire state of the mind." ~ Rick Hanson

"Just as a person might be confined in a prison cell, unable to move or act freely, so too does sloth and torpor confine the mind. When this heaviness is abandoned, it is as if that person has been released from prison, finding ease, safety, and the energy to move toward the far shore." ~ Gotama

Sutta References

- ★ **Pacalāyamāna Sutta (AN 7.61) – Nodding/Dozing**

- Summary: Gotama provides a step-by-step ladder for overcoming drowsiness, including shifting perception, stimulating the body, using water, looking upwards, cultivating the perception of light, walking, or lying down mindfully and rising promptly.

- ★ **Saṅgārava Sutta (SN 46.55) – With Saṅgāvara**

- Summary: Compares the hindrance of sloth and torpor to a bowl

choked with algae and plants, vividly illustrating how dullness obstructs clear seeing and why brightening the mind is essential.

★ **Āhāra Sutta (SN 46.51) – Food**

- Summary: Explains that the hindrance of sloth and torpor is “fed” by unwise attention to discontent and lethargy, and “starved” by wise attention to the elements of rousing energy, exertion, and continuous exertion.

★ **Upajjhāya Sutta (AN 5.56) – The Preceptor**

- Summary: Gotama contrasts a life of over-indulgence and little wakefulness (which breeds sloth and torpor) with sense-restraint, moderation in food, and a commitment to wakefulness.

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