

The Five Hindrances

Tonight I'd like to talk about the Five Hindrances. This is essentially a list of everything that can go wrong in our meditation. This sounds like a depressing topic, but as Chris often reminds us, the diagnosis must precede the cure. The simple recognition of these five factors in the mind is a big step toward getting rid of them.

Sensual Desire (Kāmacchanda)

The first hindrance is the desire for sense pleasures. In its most gross form, this can take the form of a definite craving: "I sure could go for a latte" or "the TA in my econ. class is kinda hot." These cases can be troublesome, but at least they're easy to spot. Sense desire can also appear in much more subtle forms, like a desire to be slightly more comfortable than you are at the moment. A lot of shifting around on meditation cushions is due to kāmacchanda.

The Buddha used a series of similes relating to a bowl of water to describe the hindrances (SN 46.55). In each case, he describes how the hindrance is like a distortion that prevents a person from accurately seeing his reflection in the water. Sense desire is like water mixed with colorful dyes: it's pretty, but ultimately deceiving.

A traditional antidote to this hindrance is to reflect on the less pleasant aspects of our bodies. Consider what happens to the latte after you drink it, or whether the sexiness of your TA extends to his or her pancreas.

Aversion (Vyāpāda)

The second hindrance is the opposite of the first: aversion or hatred. In its grossest form, it might include dwelling on the guy who cut you off in traffic this morning or some injustice against yourself or a group with whom you identify. In a subtler form, it might take the form of irritation with one's current surroundings: "I wish I'd sat on the other side of the chapel—it's drafty here" or "my knee really hurts—I wish it would stop."

The Buddha compared aversion (presumably its more extreme forms) to boiling water: it has a quality of agitation. The antidote, not surprisingly, is metta (loving friendliness) meditation. Taking a few moments to cultivate thoughts of metta will not only counteract any gross hatred, but will also increase feelings of contentment.

Dullness (Thīna-middha)

The third hindrance is mental dullness. This can include outright sleepiness or a desire to just zone out and not really meditate. The Buddha compared this hindrance to water covered with algae and pond scum. Meditation teachers have

developed a lot of ways to counter this hindrance. Whether a particular method works or not seems to be an individual matter. Some popular ones include opening your eyes slightly (assuming that you're meditating with your eyes closed), visualizing a bright light, and mentally reciting texts. Bhante Gunaratana recommends doing a complex form of breath counting (1 to 10, 10 to 1, 1 to 9, 9 to 1, 1 to 8, &c.) until your mindfulness returns.

Restlessness (Uddhacca-kukkucca)

The fourth hindrance is the opposite of the third: restlessness and agitation. This is often more of a feeling than a definite thought, and is closely related to aversion. We may just feel that we would rather do *anything* than sit still. The Buddha compares this to a bowl of water with its surface disturbed by the wind. As with the third hindrance, the antidotes tend to be highly personal. Do anything that helps you to calm the mind. Metta can be helpful, as can taking a few intentionally deep, slow breaths. If you're in a state of extreme agitation, it can be useful to do a transitional activity like walking meditation or yoga before attempting sitting meditation.

Doubt (Vicikicchā)

The fifth hindrance is doubt. This may surprise you a little. After all, Adeesha taught us about the Kalama Sutta (AN 3.65), in which the Buddha told the Kalamas that a certain amount of skeptical doubt was appropriate. In examining the teachings, doubt is a useful quality, but once you have committed to a particular course of practice, doubt becomes a hindrance. In meditation, doubt may take the form of "What am I doing? Is this really working? Maybe I should try tai-chi instead." This kind of thinking impedes concentration and weakens our resolve. The antidote is anything that inspires confidence in the practice. You might recall times in the past when you have realized that your practice is bringing benefits. You might recall the qualities of your teacher or of the Buddha, perhaps even mentally reciting the *itipiso*.

So, those are the five hindrances: sensual desire, aversion, dullness, restlessness, and doubt. If your meditation isn't going well, one or more of those things is to blame. But this is not just something to be aware of when we meditate. The Satipatthana Sutta (MN 10) lists the hindrances first among the mental states of which one should be constantly mindful. If the hindrances have free reign during most of our lives, we're unlikely to be able to subdue them when we want to meditate. If we work hard to subdue the hindrances all the time, then we can look forward to more productive meditation sessions, and, eventually, the complete eradication of the hindrances.