



## **The Five Hindrances**

Our minds do not wander in a haphazard way. In fact, if we can pay attention we will notice that they often travel along familiar grooves. This is the reactive mind at work. In the context of meditation the different ways the reactive mind functions are known as hindrances because they hinder the development of the creative mind.

There are five hindrances enumerated in the Buddhist tradition.

### **1) Craving for Sense Experience**

Sense desire is, at its most basic, a preoccupation with pleasant feeling, especially feeling as experienced through one of the five senses, and the mind, which for Buddhism is a sixth sense organ.

Traditionally it is described as desire for food, sex or sleep. But we could also add in preoccupation with fascinating ideas, pleasant memories or exciting plans for our holidays. These all give us pleasure when we think about them, and seem far more interesting than the boring old breath, or the elusive feelings of metta.

The key to working with sense desire is to notice yourself doing it – be aware of what you're dwelling upon, and make a choice as to whether to engage in this way with the object of desire again. Often when we look at the things we dwell upon, they're not as pleasurable as we think they are; indeed, it can even be rather tedious to keep planning our holiday over and over again! The breath, by contrast, can be very enjoyable indeed to focus upon, though it can be a more subtle pleasure that might take us a while to tune in to.

### **2) Ill Will**

Ill will is the opposite of sense desire – here we are preoccupied with unpleasant or painful experience. This might again be something through the five sense organs, such as a pain in our knee we really wish would go away, or irritating roadwork noises just down the street.

The source of our ill will might not be external – it could be sparked off by replaying to yourself a conversation you had with someone that annoyed you and you can't let go, what you'd like to say to that person if you had a chance, or wish you had said. Or you might analyse an idea or opinion endlessly, one that you really didn't like when you heard it, and draw out all its shortcomings. Ill will might arise in the fourth stage of the metta-bhavana practice, or just an experience of grumpiness generally in meditation!

The real trouble here is not in fact the painful experience in itself, but the preoccupation with it. People do actually do things to us that are painful, roadwork noise, car alarms and sore knees are all unpleasant. Though we try, we just can't let go of our preoccupation with the painful experience. We try to push it or the person we associate it with away, and it only returns stronger. We tell ourselves that if we could only give them a piece of our mind, if only they would stop doing that really annoying thing, then everything would be okay!



Unfortunately we can't change people, drills or car alarms, at least most of the time anyway, but we can let go of the preoccupation with the painful experience that adds an extra unnecessary layer of suffering to our experience.

The Buddha said that ill will was like picking up a burning-hot coal to throw at someone: you are hurting yourself first; ill will is seriously corrosive to our wellbeing. So the main thing we need to do first with ill will is to see it as a hindrance, as unhelpful, as corrosive, and then try to let it go. We stop adding to it, at the very least, and then it may be all we can do to sit with it and let it burn itself out.

### **3) Restlessness & Anxiety**

Restlessness and anxiety, or 'worry and flurry' as it's sometimes called, is classically experienced as a speedy, unsettled mind, and a body that just won't sit still. You may find yourself plagued by itchiness or you just can't get comfortable, and the more you move, the worse it seems!

This mental state can be a background mental state for many of us living busy, city lives much of the time. We can be in a state of worry or anxiety about work, about our friendships, about our family. And it can be very difficult to let go of this in meditation, and the stories we tell ourselves when we're in a state of anxiety are very convincing.

Restlessness and anxiety also may arise if we sit down to meditate too quickly and don't allow ourselves enough time to prepare. Or we may have a lot on our mind or even something on our conscience. Whatever it is, our minds simply won't settle, and we don't enjoy sitting there.

When we experience restlessness, the main teaching is to not move! If we move, we risk dissipating any momentum we have built up in the meditation so far. So simply sit still, and investigate the itch or desire to move. Our meditation focus can be not moving until the restlessness goes away. If we have a postural problem and really need to move, then we can move very slowly, so as not to disturb ourselves too much.

If we experience anxiety, the main thing to do is to not get caught up in the stories involved. We should come back to our physical bodies; bring our awareness down into the body to ground ourselves. We can breathe deeply for a moment or two, and with each out-breath try to soften the physical tightness that accompanies anxiety. At the very least, we try to stop feeding the anxiety, so that it can eventually burn itself out.

### **4) Stagnation & Sleepiness**

Stagnation and sleepiness is the opposite of restlessness and anxiety. Our body feels heavy and our mind sleepy and dull. We may even nod off to sleep! This may simply be because we are tired or have recently eaten, but stagnation and sleepiness is an interesting hindrance in that it may often indicate a deeper level of resistance to meditation. We might need to clarify this outside of meditation with a friend, to find out what the resistance might be.

Stagnation and sleepiness often arises if we have previously been restless or overly busy. It is as if after all that frenetic mental activity our mind simply crashes and needs to rest. If this is the case, we just have to be patient, and let the mind recover at its own pace.

The main thing to do with stagnation and sleepiness is to try to stay awake! Open your eyes slightly if necessary. Sit more upright. Move your awareness higher in the body. And be patient – it may take some time for the stagnation and sleepiness to break. In the meditation, you might just have to wait. Outside of meditation, look at the conditions of your day and see if you can rearrange your life so it's less frenetic.



## 5) Doubt

Doubt is a mental state where you are paralysed in meditation by questions such as: Is this the right practice? Does that person teaching it know what he or she is talking about? Can I do it? Me, with all these things to think about? Shouldn't I be doing something better with my time instead of all this sitting around? Have I picked the right person here for this stage of the metta-bhavana practice? Doubt is a state of chronic indecision.

You might recognise some of this. Doubt is the inability to commit to doing the practice. It is as if we have to be convinced that it will work, without trying it out for ourselves. We end up sitting on the fence, and not meditating at all. This is usually a subtle form of avoiding doing the practice.

Sometimes the doubts may be a manifestation of self-doubt. It may be that you don't have enough faith in your own potential to grow and develop. But any normal human being can use meditation to grow and develop – it's worked for everyone else, so why not you?

Doubt is different from having rational doubts about the practice and what you're doing. But it is best to sort these positive doubts outside of meditation, not in the meditation itself. When meditating, just meditate! So the main thing to do when we experience doubt and indecision is to simply commit to doing the practice.

### *What to do when there is a hindrance present – General Strategies*

- i. The first thing to do is to **turn with kindness towards whatever is going on** in our experience. This is vital. Unless we turn with kindness to our experience, we can't really be effective with regard to working with what's going on in our experience. This includes investigating the feelings that arise in the body.
- ii. Recognise how your mind has wandered and **name** it. 'This is doubt.' 'This is sense desire.' Even just naming a hindrance can loosen its grip.
- iii. Next we have to **acknowledge** it and allow it. Simply let it be, don't fight it. Remember kindness... You must come back to faith in our own potential to grow and develop, and overcome specific hindrances.
- iv. See if you can now simply **let it go**. This doesn't mean stopping it happen; rather it means simply not being emotionally caught up in it. It is possible to watch a distraction arise, hang around for a while, and then dissolve away again, without getting caught up in it. If we can't do this yet, that's okay too. At least we try not to add any more fuel to the flames.

This is often enough in itself to work and help with whatever way we've become distracted. But if it's necessary, we can also apply the specific antidote. As ever in meditation, we can't skip stages, so do go through the general strategies before moving on to the more specific antidotes.

### *What to do when there is a hindrance present – Specific Antidotes*

- i. The first antidote is to **Consider the Consequences**. Pay particular attention to the feeling-tone of whatever way our mind has wandered. Often, perversely, we think that to do anxiety or another hindrance is actually more pleasurable than not. Check this out for yourself! Sometimes the fact that these hindrances are familiar makes them feel more pleasurable than they really are. If we can see that it is actually not really enjoyable to do anxiety or ill will etc., we have a chance of lessening its grip on us.



- ii. Secondly we can **Cultivate the Opposite**. If we are feeling *sense desire*, we can cultivate contentment with our lot, or try and get more interested in the object of meditation. If it is *ill will* we are experiencing, then we can cultivate metta, or simply look for enjoyment in our experience. For *restlessness and anxiety* we can cultivate calm, especially paying attention to our body, and the weight of it.
- iii. The third antidote is to develop a **Sky-Like Attitude**. In Buddhism our minds are often said to be like a vast, beautiful, clear blue sky, and any thoughts or emotions imply clouds that are passing across it. What our mind has wandered to is not permanent – it has arisen in dependence upon conditions, and when those conditions cease it will pass away. Things arise, things pass away. There is no need to feel oppressed by them, feel cowed by them.

So in this antidote, we try to simply allow things to arise, and then allow them to pass away, trying to develop perspective on them. It might be useful to think in terms of having big mind, and small mind. Your big mind is the clear blue sky, open and creative and free. Your small mind is the intellectual thoughts and emotional habits that manifest as distractions which pass across, and sometimes even cloud over your true nature. But somewhere behind it all is your big mind, just as behind the clouds there is always the brilliant blue sky.

- iv. Fourthly we can **Suppress** it. This really only works if what the mind has wandered onto is weak and you are not much caught up with it. This can be more successful than people think; for example, suppression is actually very good with persistent, low-level sense desire. Deciding to just not think about food in a meditation would be an example of suppression.
- v. And fifthly, we can take solace in the **Bigger Perspective**. This means to take refuge in our potential to grow and develop as a human, to become much more than we are at present, and not to get too overly-identified or concerned with any one particular meditation session we may have. It is especially useful at the end of a sit. Rather than getting despondent about a sit that maybe was not very concentrated, we can reflect that this sit might not have been easy, but in the long run, you will keep plugging away, and the mind will wander less and we will develop clearer, calmer states of mind.

## The Wisdom Aspect of Awakening

### The Threefold Path - Wisdom

This week we come to the third stage of the Threefold Path – Wisdom. The Buddhist word for Wisdom is *prajna*. This is ‘seeing things as they really are’, or ‘seeing the true nature of things.’ This seeing requires a great degree of clarity and focus. This is developed by meditation, as mentioned last week.

At the core of Buddhist wisdom is **Conditionality**. Insight into the conditioned nature of all phenomena is at the core of Buddhist wisdom. By ‘all phenomena’ here is meant ourselves and the material world around us and our ways of living our lives.

Conditionality refers to the ever flowing web of conditions that give rise to phenomena which in turn influence and give rise to other phenomena. And when conditions cease, the phenomena which they have in part given rise to cease to be as they were, and cease or change.

For example, we ourselves being here in this room is the result of a wide web of conditions which have arisen. And when the conditions are no longer there, we will be no longer here. This page of paper, these words printed in ink, the Buddhism course all arise in dependence upon conditions.



Our birth was a result of a vast network of conditions which all had to be in place for it to happen. Our death will be a result of a vast network of conditions. All our mental states have arisen in dependence upon conditions, and we can gain a measure of wisdom by being able to notice how they arise and how they pass away. So we can notice the conditions that go into us becoming angry or anxious, and work to influence the conditions to a degree that those mental states don't arise. Or if we're in a state of anger, we can look at the conditions supporting its continuation, and remove them – e.g. move away so we're not in a certain person's presence who might be causing us to be angry.

### The Three Laksanas

Conditionality is bewilderingly complicated – to see all the conditions that go into even one thing, or one mental state, is most likely impossible. Even more difficult, arguably, is to see how this thing or mental state in turn is a condition itself for future arising of things or mental states. So there are many ways of breaking this down a bit more to make it more digestible. One main way of doing this is using what are called the **Three Laksanas**, or three 'marks' or 'characteristics' of conditioned phenomena.

So all things which arise in dependence upon conditions are characterised by three things:

1. They are **Impermanent**.
2. They are **Unsatisfactory**.
3. They are **Devoid of Unchanging Self-Nature**.

### Conditioned Things are Impermanent

Everything in the universe is impermanent, nothing lasts and nothing is fixed. The universe, rather than being a stable entity or a collection of stable entities, is a process of change.

Science now reckons that the universe came from 'The Big Bang', and that the universe is in an ever changing state. In modern-day physics there is the question of whether the universe will continue expanding forever or eventually collapse back in on itself in a 'Big Crunch'. This is quite a change from even a few centuries ago, when the universe was experienced as stable and unchanging, to a degree that we'd find hard to believe.

Some things in the world change more slowly than other things, but they are changing. Even a rock is changing – there are subtle physical, chemical and biological changes going on. Other rocks may be slowly grinding off it, rain may be reacting with the rock in a chemical reaction, moss or ivy may be growing on it and slowly burrowing into it. At atomic and sub-atomic levels there are all kinds of vibrant and dizzying activity going on that we can only see with great difficulty. Science has helped us see matter more as a temporary crystallisation of energy than anything really 'solid'.

Our houses, our cars, our possessions are constantly changing. Our relationships are constantly changing and evolving. With every word we say to someone, we're evolving that friendship. Even when we're not in someone's presence, our relationship with that person is changing, perhaps because we're thinking of them or simply because both we ourselves and that person themselves are changing.

We ourselves are changing. We are not the same person we were ten years ago. Our bodies have changed. Not a single cell that was alive in our body seven years ago is still there now – our body has completely replaced itself in that time. The patterns remain roughly the same, such as how we look, the shape of our face, but even they change over time.



We're not the same person emotionally and mentally as we were ten years ago. Emotionally, how are we different now to how we were ten years ago? Do we think the same way now to ten years ago? Do we hold the same views? Has our experience of life changed us in that time? Are we the same person we were a year ago? A month ago? An hour ago? A breath ago?

It's relatively easy to recognise impermanence in the world around us. It's a little more difficult to see it in ourselves, though we'll usually do it relatively easily at an intellectual level. But at an emotional level, in our heart, it's a lot more difficult. Think of how upset we can become when our possessions get lost or stolen or damaged. Think of how difficult it is when we suffer bereavement. Do we really see that one day we're going to die? In two hundred years, we'll be well gone, and nobody will be able to remember us, let alone know very much about us. Not only do we not see it, we actively don't want to see it most of the time.

### **The Positive Side of Impermanence**

All things change, but it'd be a mistake to think of this simply in terms of things ending. There's also the other side of impermanence, which is that things are constantly springing into being. In autumn and winter nature recedes and dies off, but spring comes before we know it, and flowers grow and trees spring into life. People die, but children are born and bring joy as well. Friendships end, but we meet new people who might well become our friends. We ourselves will grow and develop, and we have the freedom to change and become wiser about the world.

All this is there in 'impermanence'. It does mean the end of all worldly things, but it also means the freedom for new things to emerge. Impermanence may seem terrible at times, but without it the world would be unliveable. Positive change wouldn't be possible. Would you really want to be the same person now that you were back when you were fifteen?

So it's important to remember the 'coming into being' aspect of impermanence as well as the 'passing away' element of existence. Otherwise it's a one-sided view of existence, and, according to the Buddha, a wrong view. By doing so, we can be open to priceless new opportunities that can enrich life and make it less dull and tedious.

Most importantly, impermanence means that we can change, we can grow, we can develop. We're not fixed beings, we're not irrevocably stuck on a particular setting, which we usually think is the wrong setting! It's saying that we can change.

### **Conditioned Things are Unsatisfactory**

Buddhism says that all worldly things are unable to bring lasting satisfaction. It's important to clarify that Buddhism isn't saying that everything is painful, or ordinary life is never enjoyable. What's **not** being said is that all things are unsatisfactory *under all circumstances and from all points of view*.

It is a certainty that there is pleasure and enjoyment in life. Rather, there is no conditioned thing which is pleasurable and enjoyable in all circumstances and from all points of view. For example, we might enjoy a sunny day, but someone else from a hotter climate might experience it as painfully cold. We might like doughnuts, but if we had to eat ten doughnuts every day we'd grow to hate them pretty soon! Even though we love our friends dearly, to be around them all the time could be hellish.

We experience things as unsatisfactory for three reasons. Firstly, we expect a pleasure and happiness from things that they're just not able to give us. We think things will give us an ultimate, lasting satisfaction, which they simply can't give us. This is, according to Buddhism, foolish in the extreme.



Secondly, we don't really see that things are impermanent. So when they are taken away from us or they change we get upset and disappointed. And we run the danger of becoming so concerned with making sure that they can't be taken away that we destroy our own enjoyment of them.

Thirdly, we are dimly aware, at some level, that there's something higher in us that can't really be satisfied with mundane, conditioned things. We're not to be satisfied, really, with mundane things – they simply can't fully satisfy us. Because of this, the Buddha said that 'Enlightenment alone is peace'.

### **Responding to Pleasure**

Our usual response to pleasure is to tighten around it, to try to hold on to it. This generally has the effect of not allowing us to fully enjoy it. We become concerned with prolonging the pleasure we're experiencing – for example, eating a box of sweets, we start thinking of the next sweet we're going to eat before we're even half way through the current one. We try to capture a beautiful sunset on camera so that we can continually refer back to it and enjoy it, but usually it never comes out right, we experience dissatisfaction at how it comes out on film.

Instead we should 'kiss the joy as it flies', as the poet William Blake says. Enjoy life, but do so with an awareness that it will pass, that it is impermanent. Doing this will prevent us from trying to bind the pleasure to ourselves and thereby destroy it.

Again, Buddhism is not pessimistic. This impermanence is just how life is – Buddhism didn't make it this way. Rather Buddhism asks us to recognise it as such. When we can see the impermanence of things, we can appreciate them much more, in the way that being aware of the delicate, transitory nature of a flower makes it all the more beautiful. Because of this, Buddhism is very much a path to a deeper beauty than we normally experience.

Again, Buddhism is concerned with finding lasting satisfaction where it can truly be found – in pursuing a spiritual life, in living out and realising the Dharma. From a Buddhist perspective, that's the only place lasting satisfaction can be found. Living our lives from a Buddhist perspective brings a deeper happiness and joy.

### **Conditioned Things are Devoid of Unchanging Selfhood**

This *laksana* is probably the most difficult to understand, but it comes directly out of the fact of impermanence.

Most of us take it for granted that we've got a fixed nature which has been largely determined by our youth and upbringing. We think that this fixed nature is in some way essential to us. We have habits, likes, dislikes, opinions, emotional patterns, strengths and weaknesses. And we feel that we can do very little to go beyond this. We can even feel that this nature is eternal, and remains intact even beyond the body, even beyond the conditions that went into creating it.

But it is conditioned; it has been shaped by the world around it, as well as by our actions and choices, and will continue to be shaped by conditions into the future. As we get old, the speed of this change and being shaped probably does slow down, but it's still there. So really, there's no fixed self, no essence above and beyond this flow and change. There's no part of us that's exempt from this process of change.

Ultimately what we want to see through is the idea that the self is permanent, see through the idea that the person that we think we are is fixed and unchanging. In actuality, we're more of a flow than a thing. Consciousness is often described as a stream, rather than a solid thing. The stream flows and is shaped by rocks and the banks of the stream, but is not defined by them. Nor is it given any permanent shape at any stage, it flows around and in the conditions it finds itself in.



Streams flow and are shaped by that which is around them. The self is like that – it flows, it doesn't have any fixed, ever-lasting shape. It is conditioned by and adapts to the conditions around it, but the conditions don't define it. There is continuity, but the fixity we ascribe to it is mostly an illusion. So we need to see through our sense of fixedness, need to see ourselves as more of a flow, and thereby more adaptable and changeable than we had ever previously suspected.

### Wisdom

Buddhist wisdom, then, is seeing that all conditioned things are changing. It's about seeing that because these things change, they can't really give lasting satisfaction, and we look for a satisfaction and happiness from them that they simply can't give. And it's about seeing that there's no part of us exempt from this change, no essence that's above and beyond change.

So it all comes back to impermanence. For this reason, the Buddha's last words, before he died, were 'All things are impermanent – with mindfulness, strive on'.

### How do we cultivate Wisdom?

The big question, then, is how do we cultivate wisdom, how do we really see the laksana in our life? How do we see impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality? There is a helpful traditional teaching of the 'Three Levels of Wisdom' – listening, reflecting and meditating.

Firstly, there is **the wisdom that we hear**. This is what we're doing in this Buddhism course, for example – hearing the teachings, hearing what the wise have described as the truth. We read books, we hear talks, we chat to other Buddhists about what the nature of wisdom is.

This might seem like a really mundane level of wisdom, but it's actually very important. Buddhism places a real emphasis on clarifying what the Dharma actually is, intellectually as well as at deeper levels. Sometimes we can rubbish intellectual understandings, but they're vitally necessary as a stepping stone to a deeper understanding. So it's really important to be intellectually as clear as possible about things.

Part of this is checking it against the testimony of the wise – the Buddha and other Buddhist sages – to make sure it's in accordance with what they say reality is. It's not that we should blindly believe, but if the Buddha said it then we should take it seriously – he knew what he was talking about.

Next is **the wisdom we gain by reflecting**. This is where, having clarified our intellectual understandings, we reflect upon Buddhist teachings. We make the truth our own, we apply the theory to our particular circumstances. Having clarified what we mean by impermanence, we reflect upon impermanence, what it is in our experience. We also do Buddhist vipassana practices to see the truth ourselves.

At this level, it's important to keep it relatively simple. You don't try to see everything at once – you just look for simple, down-to-earth examples of impermanence. A classic example of this is to look at the breath, and simply see its impermanence. You see how it's ever changing, never the same. By practising in this way on small things, you gradually start to see it everywhere.

'As you think, so you become' – when you reflect on impermanence, you become impermanence. Drop by drop, the large bowl fills with drops of wisdom, until eventually you move on to the third level of wisdom – meditating. This is where **you come to embody wisdom**.



'Meditating' here is a translation of the word 'bhavana' which can be translated as 'to cultivate' but really means 'to become'. So it's not meditation in the normal sense we use the word, rather it's that you 'become' the wisdom. This is where you completely embody and have realised the truth of things yourself.

### **Being Open to Things**

In all this, what Buddhism is saying is to stay open to the mystery of things. We can't explain anything, really. It's about loosening up our tight relationship with things, and being open to the magic. It will result in us living in a beautiful and amazing universe, in touch with the mysterious flow of conditionality.

Here's an exercise: Move your hand. How does it move? What tells it to move? Did you decide to move it? If so, how exactly did you do it? Did you say 'Hand – move!?' How did you decide whether to move your right hand or your left hand? Investigate exactly how your hand moves when you want it to move. It's much more mysterious than you think, and not easily rationally explained. Sure, you can talk about neurons and muscles and that, but the interesting part is 'What is it that decided and made the hand move?'

Be open to the magic of things, and don't think you know it already...

### **Home practice this week**

1. Practise the metta-bhavana and the mindfulness of breathing each day. This week alternate the practices.
2. Write down five things you are grateful for each day.
3. Do one thing for others each day that you wouldn't normally do.