The Hindrances - Read by Finola O'Siochrú

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 43:15

The hindrances underlie the various difficulties we come across in meditation—wandering mind, falling asleep, getting discouraged, and so on. We have to overcome the hindrances, but not by fighting them to the death. How do we overcome our enemies? By making them our friends. I'm paraphrasing from Abraham Lincoln here, but I think this applies wonderfully to our work with the hindrances.

The analogy of a garden is also useful. A garden has grass and flowers and weeds, and needs a gardener to tend it. So too our spiritual life has restful and uplifting aspects as well as hindrances, and needs mindfulness to tend it. To a large extent the gardener can leave the grass and flowers alone, just watering or feeding them occasionally. The main work is in pulling up the weeds—if possible, doing this while they are small and before they can flourish and spread their seeds. So too, a large part of vipassana involves working with the hindrances, if possible catching these early and letting mindfulness weed them out before they prompt us into thoughts or words or actions. It might not be as uplifting as watering the flowers of metta, but it can be satisfying in its own way.

Now, as all you gardeners will know, the weeds have a way of coming back anyhow. Weeding has to be a long-term commitment, and when we've done our share for the day, we can congratulate ourselves and feel the satisfaction of a job well done.

Another gardening analogy that's useful here is to see that the basic constituents of the weed are the same as the flowers—roots and stalks and leaves, all made from carbon and hydrogen and oxygen. At heart there is no difference. And so the weed, once uprooted, can decompose to rich soil in which new flowers can grow. In the same way, the basic constituents of the hindrances are not in essence different from the more beautiful aspects of life, which also decompose into sensations and feelings and moods.

What holds the weed together is a combination of greed, hatred, and delusion. We uproot the weed by feeling these underlying drives within the sensations and emotions and thoughts. Once these drives are felt and recognized, they start to subside. That's one great power of mindfulness—it allows negativity to burn away. As the negativity in the hindrance burns away, its energy is transformed into the opposite virtue: hatred to love, delusion to wisdom, greed to generosity. So it's really worthwhile work.

What are these hindrances and how can we recognize them? The Buddha described them in five varieties: desire, aversion, dullness and lethargy, restlessness, and doubt.

Starting with desire: this is the impulse of wanting that arises in response to pleasure. Although we might not feel particularly hungry, when we see or smell pizza most of us would want to start nibbling a piece.

We might be late for work, but when we step into the shower and feel the warm water flowing over us, we want to relax and enjoy it. Seeing an erotic image might stir sexual fantasies. A pleasant memory comes to mind and we want to start reminiscing. All advertising works on desire. We suddenly believe that we would be happy if only we had a BMW, hair coloured by L'Oréal, Starbucks coffee. When we get any pleasurable stimulus, physical or mental, we normally respond with desire, wanting to get more of the pleasure.

Indulging some desires can obviously be harmful and lead to problems like overeating, drug addiction, sexual deviancy, power obsession, and so on. On the other hand, many desires are beneficial. The desire for food keeps us alive. Reminiscing about a pleasant memory can help us generate goodwill. Desire for friends helps us to develop social skills. And desire drives our spiritual journey—the desire for enlightenment, for happiness, the wish to relieve suffering. These propel us along the path.

So there's no need to judge our desires as wrong. Desire is neither right nor wrong. It simply arises in response to what we feel is pleasant. It's part of human nature. In daily life we need to be able to judge whether a desire is skilful—like wanting to put on a hat when our head feels cold—or unskilful, like calling in sick when we want to watch Wimbledon. But in formal meditation practice we rarely have to go to the trouble of judging. This simplifies matters. All we have to do is get to know what desire feels like, to learn to recognize this basic human urge for the good things in life, and to trust that mindfulness is digging away at the roots of desire as we simply feel its effects on our mind and body. Here again we have the magic of mindfulness. Very quietly, without fuss, it transforms whatever it meets.

So what does desire feel like? Look out for a sense of pulling towards something, or being pulled towards something. I often find I'm leaning forward slightly when desire is manifesting. For example, while you're waiting in the queue for food, are you totally relaxed or is there something like magnetism pulling you towards the sideboard? During sitting meditation we can sometimes feel that sense of pulling towards a pleasant experience. When I find myself slipping off into daydreams, I counter this by taking an interest in this whole business of pleasure and desire. I feel the pleasure that the daydream is giving me.

My mind is drawn towards the pleasant movie that the daydream is projecting. There may be a slight smile on my face. There is often a warm, billowy sensation around my chest or waist. There may be pleasant tingles running up and down my neck.

As well as these pleasant sensations, I can feel a sense of strain—tension on my face perhaps, or a kind of desperate need to believe in the daydream. Nowadays I can easily recognize this straining and desperation as manifestations of desire. And I can feel the anxiety inherent in desire, the fear that all pleasure will be lost if I lose my grip on those gorgeous sensations.

The wonderful thing is that our being, physical and mental, learns from experience. Feeling the desperation and tension associated with desire, I am nowadays more willing to relax my hold on the pleasure of the daydream. The desire to daydream fades away. As desire burns itself out, we grow more

content. Those insatiable urges for more, more, more, which are so typical of our consumer society, lose some of their grip. We begin to trust that things are actually fine just as they are. What a relief!

Now, I made it sound easy, but in fact we will all be working with desire until we are fully enlightened. Letting go of deep desires is not easy. It can be quite scary—but this is an example of working with the hindrance of aversion.

Aversion is at the root of fear, anger, and hatred. At a milder level, we can feel aversion in irritation, impatience, sulkiness, and other emotions. Aversion is actually another form of desire—the wish to get rid of what we don't like. We normally respond with aversion to any unpleasant stimulus. Our knee starts throbbing and we want to move or stretch to relieve the pain. Someone coughs, disturbing our peaceful meditation, and we want to murder them.

Many of our emotions spring from aversion. We get bad news and react with anger and anxiety. Our partner leaves us for another person and we are overcome with jealousy. We fail a test and are devastated by despair.

The Buddha described our aversive reaction as getting shot by two arrows. The first arrow is the unpleasant sensation—the knee pain or the disturbing cough. The second arrow is our aversive reaction. Unwittingly, we stab ourselves in reaction to the first arrow, and it's the second arrow which really hurts.

Aversion can have a very negative impact on our lives, but in some cases the aversive reaction is the wise one. If we witness cruelty, anger may spur us to do something to stop it. Feeling shame after being caught cheating persuades us not to cheat again. So we need to make friends with the experience of aversion, so that we are not afraid of our anger when anger is the wise response, willing to feel shame when shame is the wise response. Aversion is very much linked with wisdom, so working with aversion strengthens our ability to live wisely.

Again, it's important not to judge aversion when it arises in our meditation, but to let our system learn to recognize it, make friends with it.

How can we recognize aversion? Physical pain is one we all have to work with from time to time. See if you can locate the basic pain—the throbbing in the knee, for example. And then let yourself feel how the rest of the body is sitting with that. Is your face in a grimace? Are your shoulders hunched? Is your stomach in a knot? Is your thigh tense? You may also get an overall sense of pushing, as if your body is physically trying to push the pain away. Or it can manifest as a sense of the body straining to get away from the pain, as if it's trying to tear itself away from the painful site.

While physical pain is a great teacher, we shouldn't let our enthusiasm for enlightenment run away with our common sense about how to take care of ourselves. When the pain gets too bad, it's best to move so as to relieve it. But move mindfully, as this part of the meditation can also be a great teacher, especially if you move very slowly. Keeping your attention in the body as it moves, you might feel the pain fading

away. Also, out of the corner of your eyes, so to speak, you might notice your mood brightening. This is an example of aversion fading away.

It's a really powerful experience because it shows us that the real suffering in the situation was in our mental reaction rather than in our knee. The anxiety or bad humour provoked by the pain was the real source of misery, not the physical sensations in your knee.

I remember one time when I injured my back. I was acutely aware of the injury and walking very carefully and stiffly to avoid any sudden pulls, lying down for hours each evening after work. I felt imprisoned by the pain, unable to relax or enjoy anything because of it. But because I was being mindful, I realised that I couldn't actually feel the pain.

When I put my attention on the middle of my back where I knew I had the pain, all I felt was a blank. This is one effect of aversion—causing so much mental disturbance that the basic sensation itself is suppressed. It was a few days before my mind calmed down enough to be able to feel the pain, and ironically, I no longer felt imprisoned by it. I could enjoy life again. This really helped me believe that the problem with pain doesn't stem from the physical sensation but from the mental reaction of aversion.

Another way to see this is to alternate your focus of attention. If your right knee is throbbing, let your attention dwell there for a while. Then let your attention shift to your left knee. As you switch, you might just feel a slight lightening of your mood. If so, you may also realise that it's the mood that is determining your sense of suffering, not the pain itself.

Now, it can be very difficult to sit with pain and let yourself feel all this. Your mind may be buzzing with thoughts of the sort: "This is mad, I'm going to injure myself," or "Why am I torturing myself like this?" So let's remind ourselves why we try to sit and bear the pain. It's to let our system learn about the second arrow. The more clearly we see that the hurt results from our reaction—our wish to get rid of pain—the more willing we are to stop stabbing ourselves with the second arrow. Gradually we learn to relax around the pain and may even experience moments of compassion for a being in pain. The weeds of aversion are transforming into the flower of compassion.

We can work mindfully with difficult emotions in a similar way. Suppose we start feeling irritated and angry, for example. If we don't recognise this as a form of aversion, we could spend the whole meditation period mulling over angry thoughts. Or we could judge the meditation as useless, thinking we can't meditate when we're angry. In both cases, aversion is flourishing. The weed has been allowed to grow and spread its seeds.

But if we recognise that the weed of anger is springing up, we can start digging away at it mindfully. How is anger experienced? The angry thoughts—instead of believing them and following them up, can you note them as "thinking"? Are your lips pursed? Is your jaw clenched? How does your stomach feel? This approach digs around the root of the anger. It helps us acknowledge anger as just another manifestation

of this body-mind system we inhabit. We begin to relax with the emotion, not to be so judgmental about it or let it rule our lives. Again, we may sometimes feel compassion for a being going through the pain of anger.

One other aspect of aversion that troubles most of us is our habit of judging. I've been saying there's no need to judge desire or aversion as wrong. I remind myself regularly of this too. But the habit of judging goes so deep that I don't always remember my own advice when I'm out of my comfort zone. And then, of course, we can start judging ourselves because we're judging, and the misery deepens.

It's wonderful to be able to note "judging, judging" and get to know the fierce judginess that demands and expects only the best. In mindful awareness, the judge will also boil down to sensations and feelings and thoughts—nothing to be so scared of. How does the judge manifest in you? In me, the judge makes me feel top-heavy, with the weight of disapproval I feel in my forehead especially. At times I can also feel the scared child cowering in my chest and throat. Nowadays the scared child and judge often find a way to compromise and forgive each other. The judge asks forgiveness for harshness, the child for mistrusting the protection and guidance being offered by the judge.

One confusing aspect of working with aversion is that the unpleasant feelings are amplified in mindful awareness. We avoid or suppress those painful feelings when we're letting the aversion flourish—mulling over angry thoughts, dismissing the situation as a waste of time. When we dig mindfully at the roots of aversion, we begin to feel the pain of what we've been trying to avoid. This can be confusing. We thought mindfulness was supposed to relieve suffering, not make it worse. So this hindrance can be quite a challenge to work with.

But there's no way out. It's only by experiencing the pain of aversion that our system learns to recognise that it is hurting itself. Each demonstration of this painful truth strengthens our faith in the process. Working with desire, we learn to let go. Working with aversion, we learn to come forth. Often it's like walking a tightrope as we step gingerly from one to the other—relaxing the tense grip of desire, bringing attention towards what we fear or dislike.

Along with delusion, desire and aversion are the basic urges holding the other hindrances together. In fact, working with any of the hindrances strengthens our ability to work with all of them.

So let's look at a third hindrance: dullness and lethargy, or sloth and torpor if you prefer the formal translation. This is a familiar one for most of us—snoozing happily through the hour's meditation, occasionally jerking awake to realize we're in the meditation hall, hoping we're not snoring before nodding off again. It's such an alluring hindrance. We feel so happy and relaxed as we slip off into unconsciousness. Sometimes we don't actually fall asleep, but the mind becomes heavy, sluggish, and dull.

Remember, all we have to do is register the thoughts, feelings, and sensations involved. But how can we register anything if we're falling asleep? That's our work—to stay conscious enough to feel the strong pull

towards sleep, noting "sleepy, sleepy," and to find the energy to note "dullness, dullness" when that heavy blanket covers our mind.

An upright posture helps us stay awake, so straighten the spine at the first sense of sleepiness. Noting itself is energizing, so see if you can put more energy into noting "sleepy, sleepy." Try to stir up interest by asking yourself whether this is a pleasant experience. Are you enjoying being sleepy? Often there's a lovely sense of being safe. Why not try to stay awake enough to enjoy this? There may be nice tingly sensations somewhere. Or do you feel heavy, leaden, aversive to the experience? Try to dredge up the energy to note all these.

If that doesn't work and you keep dropping off, try opening your eyes and look at anything bright—the sky outside, for example. Big wide staring eyes are best. Joseph Goldstein says he imagines there are toothpicks between his eyelids propping them open. And if that doesn't work, try elevating your hands a few inches so they need some energy to keep them elevated. You can also use whatever mental stimuli might work to keep you awake—reciting a poem you know by heart, or the Metta Sutta if you know that. And if all that doesn't work, then stand up.

Again, remember that you're not trying to get rid of sleepiness or dullness, but only to stay awake enough to feel their manifestation as sensations, feelings, thoughts. As we do this, our system becomes more able to deal with powerful forces of suppression that keep us dull and passive in life.

At one retreat, I was working a lot with dullness and sleepiness until I suddenly recognized the sense of waiting running through them. I realized I was waiting for the dullness to pass, not wanting to engage with the experience. With that recognition, the dullness disappeared. But afterwards, when I went to meetings at work where I didn't have much to contribute, I often noticed that subtle undercurrent of waiting for this to be over—a form of passivity preventing me from engaging with the meeting. Whenever I recognized this, to my surprise, I would suddenly pipe up and say something. And it was always a useful contribution, well received. So the work on retreat with sleepiness helped me become brighter, more forthright, and more engaged with others in daily life.

Don't judge a sleepy meditation as a useless one—an easy mistake to make. If you're doing your best to stay awake despite the powerfully suppressive urges towards sleep, then you are uprooting weeds at a great rate.

The fourth hindrance is restlessness, which the Buddha links with remorse, guilt, and shame. We can become physically restless—fidgeting, scratching our head, looking at our watch, repeatedly adjusting our posture. Or it can manifest as a mental state, as our mind hops from one inconsequential thought to another. We might not be aware of the underlying emotions of guilt, shame, and remorse, but these can manifest as a knot of worry or self-judgment.

It's so easy to believe our worries and judgments. If we do, we can spend the whole meditation period in a

frenzy of thought, probably not even noticing that we're shifting around and fidgeting as well. This is letting the weed of restlessness flourish and sow its seeds. So our first task is to recognize: "Oh, this is restlessness," or "This is worrying, this is judging." If we can do that, the gardener of mindfulness starts the great work of weeding, replacing each persuasive worry with the note "worrying, worrying." We begin to feel the manifestation of this hindrance.

If you find yourself shifting around on the cushion, feel the movement. If you want to scratch your head, desist. Feel the itchy sensation instead. I often get sudden prickles like needles sticking into my thighs. They really make me jump. Sometimes the restlessness fades away after a while of mindful awareness. Sometimes we can't maintain mindfulness and get caught up repeatedly in worrying and fidgeting. It can help to open your eyes and gaze at something in the room to ground you as the worries swirl around in your mind.

As some of you will know, I underwent major surgery in 2013 and lost my voice box. For weeks following this, I was seething with restlessness and worry.

The first days in ICU were the worst, but then I was moved to a ward, and luckily I was placed beside a window. There was a tree outside, and as soon as I saw it, my eyes became glued to its branches. I even sent my visitor Margaret away, though I had relied on her so much while I was in intensive care. The tree was what my psyche wanted, not human company.

Although I still had a cauldron of restlessness and worry bubbling away inside, it was as if the worries could die away into the strong, steady branches of that tree.

Remember that all we're trying to do is let the hindrance manifest in whatever way it wants to, using whatever supports we can find so as to maintain mindfulness rather than believe the worrying or judging thoughts or succumb to the urge to fidget. All the while, restlessness is expending its energy. The weeds are springing up at a great rate—maybe an alarming rate—but each one meets with mindfulness before it gets a chance to sow its seeds.

In my own case, I can look back and see that a huge level of restlessness burned its energy away during those first weeks post-op. As it did, I began to sense a vast ocean of calm that permeates the world. In my imagination, it's there in the spaces between things, quiet and gentle, willing to let my flurries and worries sink into it, endlessly receptive to all my woes.

So I have great trust now in the benefit of sitting still with this hindrance, opening my eyes to look at something if I need to anchor my mind more firmly. I might feel almost as if I'm exploding, but after a while I often sense again that quiet ocean lapping at the borders of restlessness. The explosion of sensations and feelings shoot into its darkness and disappear, leaving no trace.

The final hindrance is doubt. It's really challenging for us to sit with our desires and aversions, nodding off to sleep only to awaken all fidgety and worried. So who could blame us for doubting whether any of

this is doing us any good? We come on retreat with high hopes of deep insight, but after a day or two we can get dispirited. In our disappointment, we fall into the hindrance of doubt.

Sometimes we doubt the teachings and wonder whether we should go back to Christianity or try some other path. Sometimes we doubt the teacher—they don't seem inspiring or to have much wisdom. At other times we doubt ourselves. We think we're not up to this practice.

Just like worry, it's so easy to believe the thoughts generated by doubt. If we do, we can spend the whole meditation period mulling over unanswerable questions. Is this the right way? Does she know what she's talking about? Even more harmfully, we can confirm our doubts: "I'm useless at this. I can't meditate. I should have known better than to come here."

Doubt can have a very negative impact on our lives. It makes for cynicism. We see the flaw in everything and everybody. We grow suspicious and mistrustful. One reason we indulge doubtful thoughts is that they're easy on our psyche. They don't challenge us. They look to past doubts and confirm them: "I can't do this. I knew I wouldn't be able to." In the short term, it actually feels comforting to confirm our doubts. We can feel strong because we were right. We're always right. Doubt forms an effective border to prevent change and the pain of growth.

But as with all the hindrances, doubt can be appropriate at times. If someone lets us down repeatedly, it makes sense to doubt their word and take steps to protect ourselves against further hurt. On the spiritual path, we are continually being pushed beyond our comfort zone, needing to verify the teachings again and again. These are healthy doubts. We need to be able to note "doubting, doubting" and be at ease with that state.

The big step is to become aware that this is nothing more than the hindrance of doubt. Sounds easy, but those thoughts can be very persuasive, deliciously confirming of our sense of knowing exactly what to expect of ourselves and the world. If you get as far as noting that you are being hijacked by a storm of doubt, that is a major achievement. From then on, it's a question of maintaining that perspective rather than falling into the temptation to believe the thoughts generated by doubt.

Ground yourself in your body, feeling your posture or the breath to provide a solid foundation for your observation of this hindrance. Keep noting "doubting, doubting" so that the thoughts won't get a foothold. But remember that we're not trying to overcome doubt by suppressing it. We're letting it manifest, getting to know the experience, allowing ourselves to feel doubtful. Sometimes I tend to space out when doubt arises.

Physical sensations become vague and distant, as if I'm in a cloud where things seem intangible. I have a sense that something is wrong but can't put my finger on what it is. The noting word "unsure, unsure" is helpful here, or "distant, distant."

Then I might become aware of some quiet but insistent thoughts that repeat themselves over and over.

"No, no, no," for example. I change the noting word to "insisting, insisting" to help me feel the intensity associated with the thought. This has a physical component—tension in my face, perhaps. Once I can find the physical manifestation, it's much easier to maintain mindfulness.

The thoughts might subside while the tension grows, until eventually I feel myself capitulate and another thought—"maybe, maybe"—slowly starts to manifest. Thus, some boundary to my psyche is beginning to dissolve, and self-doubt edges towards self-confidence.

Self-doubt can also manifest as anxiety. The doubtful thoughts are formed as questions like, "Am I doing this right?" I find this easier to work with because, in my experience anyhow, anxiety is more tangible and has more physical energy. Again, it's a question of allowing the stresses and strains of anxiety to be felt—various tensions in the body, perhaps—and the breath may grow shallow and rapid. I usually find some pleasant tingly sensations as well, and can feel how the anxious thoughts seem to buzz around those.

The driving force of anxiety, in my experience, is quite a pleasant buzz. But there is a lot of unpleasant physical tension needed to support the buzz. And as my attention broadens to take this in, the buzz of anxiety loses its pleasure and starts to subside.

Self-doubt was the last temptation to trouble the Buddha before his enlightenment. To overcome it, he touched the ground with his fingers, calling the earth as witness that he had done enough work to merit enlightenment. One teacher suggested we follow his example when we are assailed by doubts. I've found it very helpful at times, and so I'm passing on this suggestion.

In summary, then, the hindrances represent our various challenges in meditation. They come in five different flavours: desire to keep hold of the lovely stuff, aversion to the rotten stuff, falling asleep, getting restless, and being assailed by doubt.

Now, you don't have to worry about being able to categorise each difficulty as one or other of these. In fact, several hindrances can be working together at times to make our lives miserable. For example, anger includes a pleasant buzz of self-righteousness. Impatience includes a pleasant suggestion of self-importance.

Sometimes we get a multiple hindrance attack. Our mind wanders restlessly, picking up one thought then another. We get angry at being so restless. We want to get in control of the restless, angry mind, to make it conform to what we think a good meditator's mind should be. But we can't get on top of things and start to doubt our ability to meditate. In despair, we grow sulky, we dull out and fall asleep.

At other times, we find we can relax and feel each passing disturbance without reacting. We feel the prickles of restlessness but let them be. To our surprise, perhaps, restlessness dies away. After a moment's quiet, the tension of anxiety surfaces, and we let it fill our bodies and minds as much as it wishes till it too subsides.

We can let each hindrance grow until we recognize it from its basic manifestation as physical sensations, moods, and thoughts. Upon recognition, the hindrance dies away to leave a moment's peace till we feel the next one sprouting up, disturbing us.

That's okay. This is our path. The hindrances form its borders.

May we and all beings be free from suffering.

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