

# Definitions of The Five Hindrances

*Ajahn Brahmavamso*

Taken from his article "The Five Hindrances" found at <http://www.buddhanet.net/budsas/ebud/ebmed051.htm>

**1. Sensory desire** refers to that particular type of wanting that seeks for happiness through the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and physical feeling. It specifically excludes any aspiration for happiness through the sixth sense of mind alone.

In its extreme form, sensory desire is an obsession to find pleasure in such things as sexual intimacy, good food or fine music. But it also includes the desire to replace irritating or even painful five-sense experiences with pleasant ones, i.e. the desire for sensory comfort.

The Buddha compared sensory desire to taking out a loan. Any pleasure one experiences through these five senses must be repaid through the unpleasantness of separation, loss or hungry emptiness which follow relentlessly when the pleasure is used up. As with any loan, there is also the matter of interest and thus, as the Buddha said, the pleasure is small compared to the suffering repaid.

**2. Ill will** refers to the desire to punish, hurt or destroy. It includes sheer hatred of a person, or even a situation, and it can generate so much energy that it is both seductive and addictive. At the time, it always appears justified for such is its power that it easily corrupts our ability to judge fairly. It also includes ill will towards oneself, otherwise known as guilt, which denies oneself any possibility of happiness. In meditation, ill will can appear as dislike towards the meditation object itself, rejecting it so that one's attention is forced to wander elsewhere.

The Buddha likened ill will to being sick. Just as sickness denies one the freedom and happiness of health, so ill will denies one the freedom and happiness of peace.

**3. Sloth and torpor** refers to that heaviness of body and dullness of mind which drag one down into disabling inertia and thick depression. The Buddha compared it to being imprisoned in a cramped, dark cell, unable to move freely in the bright sunshine outside. In meditation, it causes weak and intermittent mindfulness which can even lead to falling asleep in meditation without even realising it!

**4. Restlessness** (\* see below) refers to a mind which is like a monkey, always swinging on to the next branch, never able to stay long with anything. It is caused by the fault-finding state of mind which cannot be satisfied with things as they are, and so has to move on to the promise of something better, forever just beyond.

The Buddha compared restlessness to being a slave, continually having to jump to the orders of a tyrannical boss who always demands perfection and so never lets one stop.

**5. Doubt** refers to the disturbing inner questions at a time when one should be silently moving deeper. Doubt can question one's own ability "Can I do This?", or question the method "Is this the right way?", or even question the meaning "What is this?". It should be remembered that such questions are obstacles to meditation because they are asked at the wrong time and thus become an intrusion, obscuring one's clarity.

The Buddha likened doubt to being lost in a desert, not recognising any landmarks.

(\* A note from Andrea) The hindrance of restlessness is usually paired with a second quality, often translated as worry or anxiety, or sometimes as remorse. This hindrance usually has a feeling of mental agitation; in addition to the feeling of "monkey mind," it also includes the mental state of replaying the past, wishing one might have done something differently (remorse), as well as well as the mental state of being worried or anxious about the future. Restlessness can also manifest as a strong bodily experience of physical agitation.