

2004-10-24 The Hindrances: Introduction (1 of 6)

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

We'd like to start today on a kind of six part series of talks. Probably over the next six, seven weeks or so, next week, I'll probably give more of a Halloween style talk, whatever that is. But, but and the series I wanted to talk about is the hindrances. A very interesting topic for meditators, usually customers called the five hindrances. And today I'd like to do a kind of introduction to the hindrances and then over this part of the series is to take each of the five one Sunday morning and going a little more detail on the particular hindrances. And the hindrances are those that functioning of the mind which hinders our ability to see clearly, that hinders our ability to get be concentrated in focus in the present moment, it's the function of the mind that hinders, or clouds our ability to see clearly what is for our own benefit. And what is for our harm, we will see this is really this would be good for me to do. And this is not good for me to do. And, and there's five of these things, and it actually is seven hindrances, but two of the four of them, see, there's two of them, or there's two pairs. So there's five hindrances, but within that list, two of them are paired up so you get five. And the speculation for why there's five rather than seven, why they're lumped together and five, is that those of you might know about this used to correlate the five hindrances with the five genetic factors. And so each of the genetic factors kind of kind of as an antidote to each of the hindrances. So the these five are sensual desire ill will then famous expression sloth and torpor. I'm sure it's if we're, you're you're regularly use that expression. sloth and torpor When's the last time you had slot told your friend call up before and say hey you can fill the slot. My son loves animals slot animals and then slots interpret and then restlessness and agitation or restlessness and worry. And the fifth one is doubts. And what's important to understand is that each of these qualities in and of themselves is not a hindrance. What's a hindrance is when when we're so caught by them, that the healthy functioning of the mind the clear seeing the mind is not able to operate. Because we're caught by one of these five, or when these seven forces and I call them kind of black holes of the mind, because black holes is kind of, you know, Star that's collapsed, I guess. And the gravitational force is so powerful, that light goes through by it to come close to it and get sucked in and never comes out. And so when the hindrances are operating, the light of awareness, you know, gets close to it and gets sucked in and eventually it comes out I guess, but it can leak sometimes it can be a long time, kind of lost in this. Situation five hindrances are very important, very important. The Buddha put a lot of emphasis on the importance that in order for the meditative path of Buddhism, to really click or really work for a person, whether it's to develop concentration or develop mindfulness, the hindrances need no longer need to stop, hindering That's kind of obvious, you know, the mind has to be able to see clearly in order for the meditative practice to work, and so the mind is not seeing clearly, then it's not going to work properly. So a lot of what meditators are addressing, especially earlier in their practice, but often throughout, is learning to recognize the hindrances, learning how to work with them. And you

find a lot of talks given, especially if you go on meditation retreats, it's usually one talker between gave me on the five hindrances.

I think that it's the duty or the responsibility or the task of people meditate or practice mindfulness, to become kind of serves as the hindrances to become experts on them to kind of like to say, study them so well, you can write a PhD dissertation on them and look for opportunities to study them. And that means kind of inviting attitude towards them, rather than the first approach, but this is bad It should be happening. say, Well, look, here I am. I'm caught. What is this like to study to investigate? They get To know it, because by really understanding something, well, then there can be a lot more. That's where a slight easier to find your freedom. If you know something really well, if you don't know something really well or kind of dismiss a bit of leftover too quickly, you don't really get to know it and you don't really learn how to be free of it. So the tests that run the hindrances, they get to know them really well. And the story that I talked about this week sometimes is when Mara is kind of like a Buddhist tempter or devil. And Mara's job description is to prevent people from getting enlightened. And Mara came to comes to visit the Buddha after he's enlightened causing trouble. And every time Mara comes in the sutras, as is described, all Mara does is say, Mara, I see you and Mara runs away. There's something very powerful in the act of seeing that can somehow liberate us from inner psychic forces. Have confusion and doubt and desire and ill will fear about seeing. But the reason why the Buddha has statement Mara, I see you is so powerful is the Buddha really knows Mara Well, he really knows Mark very thoroughly in that thorough knowing of something, there's freedom to be found. So in mindfulness practice, we talk a lot about learning to see clearly what's here, and develop the capacity to see clearly, but seeing clearly can be done with different depths of understanding. So for example, you could a person can see the arising of desire or there's desire I see it or a person can see it no desire really can easily understand the nature of desire. So when they see desire, it's not just seeing desire itself, but knows how desire works in in our lives, knows how the dangers of desire, knows what brought what triggered the rising Desire, what it takes to kind of let desire kind of fade away what it takes to learn how to not be hooked by desire to learn a lot of different things you really know desire inside and out. Then when you see it, there's a lot more power penetration or freedom possible, because you really know it. And sometimes into our tradition of mindfulness, people sometimes have to contend with just seeing because mindfulness is kind of just seeing what's happening in the present moment. And the comprehension, the clear understanding, isn't this strongly emphasized. But part of what we want to do is we don't only want to learn the ability to see a clear nonreactive way, the present moment, we've also want to develop our understanding. So we really comprehend deeply what is good proceeding. So the study of this as part of this part of the practice, the reflection on getting to know these things really well. So a couple of similes that are used in the ancient texts for One is, similarly of how is it mindfulness prevents clear seeing. And that is, if you want to look at a pond of water and see your reflection in the water, the pond needs to be really still and clean, I suppose really flattened still. And if you don't have it's clear and still you can see yourself clearly when sensual desire is operating, it's like taking a dye and coloring the water. So that when you see look into the water, you don't see yourself clearly but you see yourself red or blue or whatever the color of the dye is. And then it doesn't take a lot of reflection to realize that sometimes when the really grips of desire that sometimes we don't see clearly but we see in a colored way in the grips of lust. Sometimes everybody is just you know, attractive person. I don't know if that's a good example. But you know, we Kind of that person is you know, we see all we see about that person is that person's, you know, beautiful qualities because desire kind of put us that that lens on. And so it said that we have desire we don't see clearly because there's a filter through which we see when there's ill will present then it's like having

the water the pond boil and the surface of the water is boiling and they can't see clearly and probably some of you have been in the grips of anger and you feel the heat going in and boiling and being

consumed by it. And you don't see clearly when, because of the boiling. When there's sloth and torpor, it's like algae growing across the surface of the pond. And it just kind of you can't don't see at all because it's all this kind of, you know, just so mucky and then restless. Isn't Anxiety is like the wind blowing across the surface of the pond, agitating it and kind of keeping it kind of tossed up and churned up. And that prevents clear seeing and then the fifth one doubt, it's like the pond being filled with mud. It's just like really thick and gooey and you know, just desserts, everything's kind of, you know, maybe doesn't even not even reflective, and you try to go through it and just kind of like, can't hardly go through the water. So, five analogies for the how one of the ways ways in which is showing that these hindrances have an effect on our ability to see. Sometimes the hindrances are so powerful, there's very little seeing at all, just kind of lost in them that happen, especially in meditation, where, where we enter into a kind of fantasy world, a thought world around the hindrances, and then we get lost in those thoughts. And it might take five 10 minutes or longer before we come out of it because so lost in those thoughts. It might be useful as you kind of reflecting on these hindrances to think about first about extreme examples. You know, people you know, desire, essential desire addiction, maybe society A lot of people have addiction is a real problem. And what it's like to be in the grips of addictive state of mind, or extreme states of hate, or anger, what's that, like, you know, how that functions in our lives. And then as we as a spiritual practice develops, the sensitivity to hindrances becomes more and more subtle. So that things hindrances that might operate in daily life that you hardly seem to be an issue in meditation become a really big issue, because meditation, your mind feeling very, very sensitive to any of the subtle pools away from seeing clearly and to study subtle pools from being balanced and centered here in the present moment. If a person doesn't have any hindrances. You don't need to come to the series. Somebody. But if you have hindrances, then you might think of yourself as naturalists that this is really interesting this is something happens in the mind. And it'd be interesting to get to know it better. That's fascinating. It's like, you know, you go to a museum and you study certain things. So now we're studying just wonderful animals. So, you know, these wonderful things, ancient things, and antiques, the hindrances. And it's useful, I think, to think of the hindrances as not being personal qualities, that the hindrance is something that everybody has and to different degrees at different times. And many people when they notice these, these qualities of being hindered or caught, and you take it very personally, but part of the teachings of the Buddhism is that human beings have hindrances, this other part of how the mind functions and very rather than taking it personally taking these things being as a universal quality we all share and the task is to understand them well, so there can be some freedom.

So in terms of comprehending and seeing the hindrances, well, the discourse in the four foundations of mindfulness, which is the kind of like the foundational teachings of the Buddha for our center here for how we teach mindfulness, what we do, has a whole section on the hindrances. And it has a number of suggestions about what we can do and paying attention to the hindrances. So we understand them well. The first is to understand their presence when their presence and you know, if you can really see that as you're caught by desire when you're caught by desire, then you're not quite caught, then you're a little bit free by free from it. But if you don't even see that you're caught, look out. If you see that you're caught by one of the hundreds Are all of them sometimes appear together? A rule, a rule, a good rule to live by, that I found is don't make a decision. When you when you're caught by hindrance, if you're filled with lust or greed or desire for something are filled with animosity and anger, ill will, or filled with restlessness and anxiety or just really kind of lethargic and tired or filled with doubt. It's best not to make a decision. But it's something I've done a lot of people who've made it myself made decisions in that kind of state, and later regretted it, partly because the reason not to make a decision is that the big decisions are that we're seeing things through the filter of that hindrance. We're not seeing clearly. So the idea is to wait until we see clearly. So the first task is to know to see that we're, that we're caught by any hindrance it's operating. And then to see it clearly for what it is In our particular tradition of meditation, we put a lot of emphasis on clear seeing nonreactive seeing the kind of seeing this kind of

in some ways, some people talk about being accepting, accepting awareness, that just sees it for what it is. We train ourselves to learn, learn how not to react to the presence of something, we're not pushing it away, we're not grabbing hold of it. We're not getting reactive to the, it's there. So we see anger arise, for example. And rather than being angry that we're angry or embarrassed or angry, or jump on, to justification, wagon, justified, angry, these are all the reasons why. Just Oh, his anger has arisen. And let's just see it. There's something very powerful can happen. That kind of nonreactive awareness that sees something as it is. However, in the discourse in the four foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha goes further than just says, See the hindrance for what it is when it's there. The wood also says, No, when the hindrance is absent And that's a very interesting thing also, because I think many times people hear the instructions of mindfulness, it sounds like the instructions, just pay it just notice what is here. You know, notice the absence of something that's not here, right? So what's the point of that? But here the Buddhist is also know when the hindrances are not present. I think it has a number of values. One is, if you can feel clearly how we are when hindrance is not operating, we have a contrast proceeding when the hindrances are operating. And that contrast helps us to really understand the hindrances. We can catch them earlier, we can understand them, we can see the effect they have on us, we can see how we're different when we have them when we don't have them. So to be able to study a little bit, what it's like to be without them is important. Also, but you have to look around all the time, you know, noting it's not happening now. It's not happening now. You know, just occasionally, but in particularly helpful to notice when the hindrance has just passed away. You're caught in the grip of one of these And then for some reason or other, it's no longer there. And then notice, oh, it's gone. And then as a couple of values, one is the value of contrast. What is the value is when you recognize a healthy state, the healthy state gets strengthened as part of the power of recognition. But the third, that's very important, is that there's a kind of a joy that can come when you recognize the absence of the hindrance when Henderson's not caught or gripped or lost in hindrance. It's nice not to be caught right? To the mind kind of free. And if you notice that he was just gone, and then avail yourself of the kind of natural, hopefully natural kind of delight or joy, oh, look, I'm free. That joy is a factor which feeds meditation feeds the Buddha's spiritual life. So that's one of the reasons notice its absence so we can take advantage of the joy that can come and the delight or the appreciation of that now, the simple The Buddha gave for appreciating the absence of the hindrances

where he gave some similes and as you listen to the similes you might hear, think about the extreme cases of being caught maybe the times you were most powerfully caught by sensual desire. You know, you kind of just, I don't know, just, you did foolish things, because you were, you just couldn't help yourself and yours are just such a struggle, or ill will or anger any of these. Or if he doesn't really happen to you imagine someone else.

So the the, to be free of sensual desire is like being free from debt. And some people are certainly heavily troubled by death. This really feels great to be free of it, but somehow essential desire. It's like we're investing when someplace else, we're taking our energy. And we're kind of putting it someplace else. We're draining ourselves. And when we, when we're Long, long in the grip of desire, we found ourselves again, we kind of, you know, become wealthy again, rather than feeling poor and feeling a need in need of something. The when there's when So, so, freedom from desires freedom from debt, freedom from ill will, is like being free of an illness, or wound. And sometimes when you feel a lot of anger, it's like having sick, you can actually fix your Second Sight people get heart attacks sometimes if you get angry. So, if you've been freed from ill will, is like being freed from an illness. being freed from sloth and torpor is like escapism remembering beings. stressed my mind a minute think free from rest. Isn't agitation is like being freed from prison. Because if you're agitated, restless, it's kind of directing the show. It's like you're not in charge. You're kind of imprisoned by this stuff. And freedom from doubt is I don't know why I don't remember these right now is Oh, I've been free from danger. And danger.

That's a simile is like you're lost in the desert. And, and then finally you find the safety after being lost in the desert. So the doubt can be like, you know, the desert like quality. And finally, you're free from this desert flat kind of barren situation. So sloth and torpor is

I think sloth and torpor. Yeah, is slavery, like being freed from slavery. You know, you can use you can even You can weigh down, the chains are heavy, and it can't do much. So when these things are really strong, and they're absent, then there can be a joy that gets born for meditators. I think that the, the, the appreciation of the absence of hindrances can be for even subtle hindrances. To discover the great delight of a mind that's clear and present and awake and here, and not being swayed this way, in that way, by these forces, is really a wonder one of the great things in human life, the clarity that can happen. So to feel the delight and the happiness of that. So and the next three instructions to the Buddha gave around getting to know the hindrances as well have to know I have to be have to do with understanding the causes and conditions around them. So to understand something about when what is it that triggers the arising of a hindrance what triggers your mind getting caught? being hindered and lost, you know, so for example, perhaps, you know, you get the paper in the morning and you read it, and you find yourself. You know, the next three, four hours, really caught up in stock market thoughts, greed and desire and fear. No. And you realize that every morning, what you do is you turn to the stock market page and look at see how your favorite stocks are doing. And it just kind of like triggers your preoccupation with, with stocks. And maybe it's not useful to be in the grips of financial preoccupation for three, four hours every morning until it kind of wears off and you can start your day. So maybe it's a seat Do you see how that causes the arising of that particular Caithness desire. You know, if you spend all morning on Sunday morning, it's phenomenal. Mental the net number of advertisements it comes in Sunday paper. It should be illegal I think. And but, you know, you spend all morning kind of looking through all the advertisements. And then you wonder why the next two, three hours you filled with desire for things. It's been a trigger for it. So to start seeing what is a trigger, so what is the conditions of the soil for which you're likely to get caught in one of these hinderance attacks. So that takes some analysis or some reflection or some thinking it's more than just seeing clearly is when a Henry there's a reason to spend some time reflecting on it. Thinking about what's going on here what it was that about, or even when it's past, no longer there, stopping, who said about what's going on there. Or if you sit in meditation, you don't want to think so much in meditation. When you come out of meditation. And you've spent a session kind of cotton in the hindrances spend some time reflecting and they Maybe talking to friends about your experience of being caught in the grips of sloth and torpor during that last session of meditation or happens regularly. So you spend some time maybe read some books about it and explore it get to know it, spend some intelligent time trying to understand the nature of what triggers the arising of the hindrance. When the hindrances do arise, then understand what it takes to become free of that quietness. What does it take for you to become free? When you're in trouble, know how to get out of trouble. Pretty good advice, right? So, so. So one of the things we do in our tradition is we cultivate awareness. So a clear recognition is something about awareness. If it's strong enough and clear enough, dedicated enough, they can pull us out of the muck out of the black hole. We have a counter for To the force of the hindrances, and we use awareness that sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. And sometimes we use antidotes so sloth and desire and ill will, it said that it tends to arise when we have a kind of prejudiced view of what we have desire ill will towards with desire we tend to over evaluate the beautiful qualities or the good qualities I think we want with ill will we tend to over evaluate the bad qualities or invent them and so one simple antidote when there's desire, look at kind of look at the situation and look at the way use the word bad but the kind of the bad quality so that thing

if you have if you caught an ill will then look at the good qualities, the beautiful qualities. So you know, can look back and forth. So I know you know, one more Classic antidote for less you really lust after someone's body is you imagine, you know

you guys have good imagination. Okay, well leave it leave it to that.

And when and when you have ill will for someone that you imagine your beauty find what's beautiful about them their good qualities. So the so it went to start having strategies, understanding ways of dealing with these hindrances when they've arisen because who wants to take up caught you know, if you're caught if you're really find a way to get out of trouble. And then the third kind of comprehension understanding is to know how to prevent the arising of the hidden riches in the future. So the first is to know why it arose when you risen, the causes the conditions for it, to know how to get out of trouble when you're in trouble, and then prevent getting yourself in getting in trouble in the future, the preventive medicine, preventive medicine, so, you know, don't open this paper in the morning, you know, or the stock markets do not read the financial section, that's what gets you, you know, be much more judicious how you read advertisements, you know, you figure out better examples. So, five hindrances, or six seven hindrances under five categories.

The beginning of freedom in meditation is to be free of these fights, and then they're not operating. And the way to do that is to begin studying them, get to know them, learn about them, learn about them really well. And the better you know them, the more likely you'll be able to be free of them, the less you know them, and they operate, the less you'll be able to be free or free from it. So those are my thoughts. So that not not maybe not, maybe not next week, but maybe the following weeks. I'll go over each of those five sets one by one, and we can explore them and get to know them. So now it's your turn. Do you have any questions or comments about this? Please?

So the rest of this restlessness is quite physical the correlation between restless restlessness and anxiety is one is physical near there's mental and sloth and torpor one is physical and one's mental. So wrestling is more safe, more physical, right? And, and so you feel like you're crawling how your skin are about to burst or both for the door something and it can be very hard. Occasionally meditation it can feel like you're in the rodeo and in the rodeo, and a successful session of meditation is when you didn't leave your seat before the end of the time. That's success mean literally means you didn't you don't measure success by great clarity and freedom and great cosmic bliss or anything. Even Henry's and you're really in a powerful grip of restlessness, the fact that you hung in there and didn't fall off the horse. That's really great. And it takes something you might break into a sweat, you know to stay here, no matter what It's very powerful to do that, I find that one of the most effective things to do with restlessness is to feel it physically. And just to let it let the energy of restlessness move through the body coursing through the body kind of open the gates in the body to let it move through, but be committed for example not to move. So just kind of not moving but let the energy flow and then not believe the thoughts that are connected to it. Not not act on the impulses and motivations with with restlessness with desire, and Ill will in particular, there's a practice I recommend, which I call was desire, writing out the desire writing it out. People who have very strong addictions find this very useful. Their strong desire can arise. Powerful, I'm in the grips of it, you I need that cigarette right now. And then you can commit yourself to not acting. I just okay, I'm not gonna lie. couldn't do anything just gonna hang out here and be with it and not act on it. So he gets it, get a meditation posture and sit there sit down in a chair or something. And then watch everything that happens. Watch tremendous surge of energy that can happen. And watch all the powerful thoughts and feelings in the mind that can happen. And the sense of compulsion and necessity and eminence it has to be now or else now. And the mind will muster all its lawyers, you know, to argue its case and all its advertisers to alert you, but you've got your state, I'm not going to move, not gonna move, and sooner or later, the desire passes. It's guaranteed, I guarantee you get money back guarantee. Sooner and sooner or later, maybe later. And the desire will pass away and the wave will break. And when the wave breaks, you find yourself on

the other side. It's very empowering. It produces a lot of confidence for people. Wow, I can do it. I was able to kind of not give in to those powerful impulses and compulsions, I was able to be separate from that. Identify with so strongly. And if I just stayed still eventually passed. And if you do that a few times, and over time becomes easier and easier. So with restlessness, it might be that way, too. So you might try, you know, sit down and see, you know, how long it takes tension, okay, I'm committed to sit here until the restlessness passed. That's one that one thing to do. And there's a lot of other things to do and restlessness and, and sometimes there's an emotional root for the restlessness. And so you might have to go and pay attention to the root. So for example, a common one is anxiety or fear. And so it might not be more useful sometimes not to feel physically, but to feel emotionally and then do mindful. So that emotion. So we'll talk more about that in a few weeks. Please think about his expectations.

Well, sometimes, sometimes hindrances are strategies to, for the mind to avoid discomfort or avoid something. And so if there's expectation or there's a desire or some clinging to some outcome, and the outcome is not happening, that's an uncomfortable situation. So we get frustrated and willen arise, or further desire can arise. As a result, if sometimes when people feel some sense of discomfort, the strategy of the mind to deal with that is desire. You have to get let's get food that'll you know just come for food or something. Sometimes we feel discomfort. We do strategies if you will. So when there's frustrated expectation, these hindrances might get born as a result, one strategy is sloth and torpor, I just give up. I'm going to try anything anymore or restless and anxiety don't know you're not you don't know what could stand on just calling but happening it's not I don't know whether to go forward or backwards or what to do Should I give up the expectation Should I keep up the position or then doubt I guess similar. So I think they can all you know, attachment to expectation is a big source of suffering. Is respond to

a number of months ago

noticed is that cognitive development sense of certainty. I feel happier. I feel happier if I had that. If that person hadn't done that. Certainly where you heard the, I don't know. I remember to do it. It surfaces all that false certainty underlies white, I don't know.

One of the ways one of the antidotes to the hindrances is to understand their danger. It's kind of, you know, ancient language and help with the danger of them. But again, if you reflect on, you know, being gripped and very powerful endurance, you can see the danger, but they're kind of fragmenting forces. They prevent us from being whole and complete. And so You know, it's not so healthy or it's kind of dangerous to be fragmented desire fragments, ill will fragments certainly ever restlessness, fragments, doubt fragments, keeps us kind of split and scattered in different ways. And part of the function of meditation is to unify us to bring us together to harmonize us. So we no longer have these scattered scattered psyches that are going off in all kinds of directions and desire scattered, scattered so fragments just by going outside of ourselves often, it will, you know, it's in his own ways of operating. Okay, maybe Time for one more, if anybody has anything else. Yes.

So the mind is caught your mind is caught sometimes in the whirlwind of judgment, evaluate It's hard to know without more detail. But sometimes judgments can be part of a version to kind of often sometimes judgments. When people are troubled by judgments judging, it's usually because they're judging things negatively, harshly or critically. And it's kind of ill will built in there. Often it's not always often it's a form of self protection. So sometimes it's more useful to turn the attention away from work or judging to the fear that or the desire for self protection that might be there. It can also be evaluation can also be as a hindrance we've caught by it can also be a form of doubt, uncertainty. You know, if we don't know what

to do, and so we're wondering and evaluating and thinking and causing, you know, conjugate conjugate cogitating over and over again. Those are some thoughts I have. So It isn't.

We don't do it. We don't do it. You want to do it anyway? Oh, oh in here. Oh. Okay, so those of you who are inspired to stay and do help with counter cleaning, we're very grateful for that inspiration. Inspiration goes a long way. And we're all glad and happy by that. And rather than going to the cleaning, if you'd like to stay Instead, it was a little community meeting. It's gonna informal, mostly, I don't think the board members have anything particular they want to present, but it's a kind of time to meet the board and ask questions and concerns and can stay as long as you'd like. So that'll happen in here. So just stay Come back after going to the bathroom or something. And so thank you. And so we'll do those over the next while next. Not next week, but the following five weeks we'll do the hindrances. So it'd be very helpful if each of you just waited hold off your particular hindrance for that week. So you do desire one week and will the other week so we're all on track together because if you're doing different hindrances or different weeks and what we're talking about, I'll get confused and you'll get confused. So do your best. Thank you