

Foundations of Mindfulness Part 10 - The Five Hindrances

Gil Fronsdal

April 15, 2019

Keywords: satipaṭṭhāna, Four Foundations of Mindfulness, dhamma, Five Hindrances, samādhi, impermanence, Mañjuśrī, mettā, Seven Factors of Awakening, Four Noble Truths

Good evening, everyone. Great. So happy to continue with a series of talks giving on mindfulness practice, and specifically the mindfulness practice as is taught in the discourse teaching a scripture attributed to the Buddha called usually called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. And one of the angles I have been using for these talks is to refer to this text as presenting a journey. That mindfulness practice is a journey that we undertake. And in a variety of different ways, in this text, there's a kind of a movement that goes on from along a path, a movement along, an unfolding and deepening of practice.

And that sense of deepening is presented in a variety of different ways as the text goes along. And it isn't like it's one path or one kind of linear deepening. And as a journey, you're not really going anywhere, like physically. And I somehow I think about it like someone who is a swimmer, like an athlete who swims as their sport, and they might swim in the same pool for years, back and forth and back and forth. And it's a journey for that swimmer, the journey of learning their body, using their body, developing the concentration, the attention, refining. And swimming is a kind of thing where it gets very, very refined.

The subtle shifts and changes in the movements of the arm to make it just as efficient as possible. And some of it just slowly the body kind of learns how to do by itself slowly over time. And so it's a journey for the swimmer to perfect the swimming, to excel in the swimming, to develop themselves as a swimmer. Even though it's not a journey that goes anywhere, just back and forth in the pool. So for people who do meditation, we're just sitting on our cushion. So it's not much of a journey that way, but it is an inner journey.

We're distant, like a swimmer. We're repeating the same thing over and over again, sitting still, focusing on the breathing, on the body. Bring mindfulness to our experience. And slowly,

sometimes imperceptibly, we're refining the body, refining the mind, refining our emotional life, our ability to pay attention or concentration. And it gets more refined, or more and more developed, and acute, and supportive of this process of taking this journey deeper and deeper. But it takes the repetition.

So like a swimmer has to do over and over and over again. There's this journey in mindfulness meditation is one of repetition over and over and over again. And this sutta, this discourse that presents the is kind of coming at this journey from many different angles. Just like for a swimmer, some days they're focusing on their kick, other days are focusing on a stroke, other days they're focusing one, you know, I don't know everything but swimming, but different things about swimming. And then slowly, the overall, through the taking care of these different elements of swimming, the overall swimming journey gets deeper and deeper. So this text is kind of coming at different angles, the four big ones.

It focuses on the body, and within that, the cultivating variety different things. It focuses on the feelings, focuses on mind states. And the topic for today, it focuses on some of the deeper truths, some of the deeper insights that we can have as we do this mindfulness practice. And the beginning of this long, now long series of talks, I talked about the refrain. There's a particular passage. It gets repeated some like thirteen times in the text, over and over again.

And for years I ignored that refrain, because repetition is boring. And repetition in my young juvenile mind that I had wait too long was kind of not really where the real emphasis is, or that's kind of like us, a literary kind of embellishment, or something. So whatever it is on, I can't just kind of glossed over it. It turns out it may be the most important part of the whole text, and it's being repeated over and over again, because the composers of the text said, This is important, and it was an oral tradition. So people would memorize the text and recite it, and when you recite a song or a poem or a scripture over and over again as a refrain that sometimes really sticks and goes in deeper. And the refrain is a journey.

And it's a journey towards, from a first, just kind of being present for our experience internally and externally, our body or feelings or mind states. And it's then discovering, noticing how the impermanence of this, how the experience we have comes and goes, arises and passes, and the inconstancy of our experience. And there's a paradox in mindfulness practice that we're cultivating a lot of stability and steadiness. We're sitting here being present, the mind becoming more steady, a kind of certain kind of wonderfully soft and nice way. Mind becomes less and less moving up, moving after its thoughts, not being swept away in the thought streams. And as it gets more stable and still the inner life, then it becomes clear that the experience that we're observing from that stillness is constantly shifting and changing.

It's inconstant, coming and going. And so this refrain talks, but first establishing attention internally, externally, then seeing how things are inconstant, coming and going, and that supports the mind to not latch on to any of it. And now, too, when you see a lot of the inconstancy of our experience, people are less inclined to add a lot of labels, interpretations on that experience, concepts on it. It's easier to more likely to let it, leave it alone, leave the experience to come and go. Just let it come and go, like being in a stream. Just let it wash by you.

Many years ago I met a woman who was backpacking. I think somewhere she met this other backpacker that they share at a camp for the night or something, and that in the sky that I met had been at the Zen monastery and she did not anything of meditation or zen. And I guess that evening he taught her about how to do Zen meditation his way, and he said, It's like sitting on a rock in a stream and just letting all the river just flow right by. So that was the image he had for meditation. And that worked great for her. Just let the stream, which washed by everything, washes by everything.

But an awareness of the stream, the awareness is still. So at a or so, then seeing the rising and passing, not making anything of it, the mind gets simpler and simpler and very still, and Equanimus just sees things in the simplicity of how they are. And then with that simplicity and stillness, then at some point I can let go. So that's the path. That path goes through a stage of seeing things arise and pass, seeing things coming and going. It's very important, and emphasizing this, because what we were really going to do.

So the fourth foundation is, as in the ancient language, is *dhamma*. Foundations of the Dharma. And there's many interpretations and guesses at what this word means here, because the word Dharma has fifty four different meanings, and to which one applies here is any body's guess. And so maybe come back to my interpretation, my guess later. And it can mean something like truths, doctrine, teachings. It can refer to qualities of mind, aspects of mind, factors of mind, objects of mind.

It can also sometimes interpret in the dictionaries. It means nature. That's pretty broad to all kinds of things. Can also mean behavior. So anyway, this last foundation is *dhamma*. So usual, what people do as they see what's being talked about in that, in the section, and then they come if the this means that *dhamma* must mean this in this section.

And so there's five things in this section of *dhamma*, and they can be divided into two different categories of exercises: learning to focus and be mindful of the things that keep us in bondage, keep us stuck, keep us suffering. And the other is to us three of them, and the other two have to do with things that are explicitly liberating. Of the seven factors of awakening,

these beautiful qualities of mind that get awakened and strengthened as we do mindfulness practice, it makes this journey of mindfulness quite spectacular to have these beautiful qualities arise. And I'll talk about them in a few weeks. And then are the four, the Four Noble Truths, a very important teaching in Buddhism. So the Four Noble Truths and Seven Factors were coming about explicitly by liberation.

The other three exercises are about what keeps us in bondage. The first one of them are the is the Five Hindrances very famous a list for mindfulness practitioners in past students. Everybody who practises vipassana should memorize what these five are and think that part of the task. The part of the journey is to become an expert on these five hindrances, to study them, get to know them, and get to know them how it works in your own mind. There's a moment I allowed to go off on a tangent. There's a Zen story of So there is the Buddha, and then a kind of an in Mahāyāna Buddhism, in the hierarchy of great enlightened beings, kind of right up there near the Buddha is this body kind of a celestial sa called Mañjuśrī.

The Buddha sought of great wisdom was to have no way wisdom of emptiness, wisdom of great wisdom. So one day Mañjuśrī came to see the Buddha, and lo and behold there was a woman, a woman of all people sitting in the seat of honour next to the Buddha. Now, that's the kind of seat for Mañjuśrī. So Mañjuśrī goes to the Buddha and asks, What's going on here that a woman is sitting in the place of honor? She is meditating. And so the Buddha says to Mañjuśrī, Why don't you ask her?

And so Mañjuśrī tries to get her to come out of her meditation state, out of her *samādhi*. And so he tries everything he can. He tries psychic powers. He lifts her up in the air with her psychic powers. He does. He knows all kinds of mumbo jumbo to try to get her use, to get her attention.

And he can't snap her out of her meditation state and now, said the precisely Buddha, What's going on here? And Buddha said, No, not even a hundred thousand Mañjuśrīs could manage to get this woman out of her *samādhi*. The only person who can get this woman out of her *samādhi* is way down deep in the underworld, deep in the world, down below the ground, deep, far, deep. There is another body sati, a great being of enlightenment called wisdom about delusion. And so then up out of the ground comes this other body sati. A wonderful woman called wisdom about delusion comes and stands in front of the woman and snaps her fingers just once.

And the woman comes out of her meditation, something that Mañjuśrī couldn't do. So that's the end of the story. So it's what it is. It's kind of a koan. It's a teaching story. And the question is, why is it that the greatest wisest disciple of the Buddha could have no influence, couldn't

get the attention of this woman who was sitting there meditating?

And why is it that the being that was represented by is called wisdom about delusion. Why could she wake up the woman? So that's the interesting question. Some people think that wisdom is about knowing great, wonderful, perfect spiritual things. But there's a long history in Buddhism that real wisdom is to have wisdom. But how we get caught, wisdom about delusion, and that that's what's portable, that's what's useful, that's what's applicable in so many different circumstances, and that's what gets us free.

So it isn't so much about studying emptiness and studying great, I know, powerful, wonderful cosmic consciousness kind of spiritual states, but getting really wise about how we get caught. And so these five hindrances are considered kind of by the tradition at least some of the things that meditators in particular really need to understand if they want to have wisdom about illusion, wisdom about how not to get caught. And these five are actually seven because two of them are paired. So it's a sensual desire, ill will. Sometimes in usually in English we say aversion, and then the third one is despair of I think of it as resistance and lethargy. Or stupor and lethargy, that's probably closer to the original stupor and lethargy.

And then the next pair is restlessness and regret, and the last one is doubt. So these five are things forces in the mind, concerns of the mind, that can pop up quite strongly, so we get preoccupied by them, and we can't stay on track with them. They're swimming. We can't stay track, you know, with our mindfulness staying present, we get off and go off in other directions. And so we have to really understand how they do their tricks, and how we get pulled into them and get hooked into them, and how to become free of them. And now, so a big part of mindfulness practice meditation is to learn to recognize these, work with them, and learn out, be free with them.

And there's a lot of different strategies for this one. The preeminent one is just to learn to really recognize them when they arise. And that's why studying them, get to know them really well, gives you a lot of choice and power over them, because you're less likely to wander off into them when they're present. Not only they preoccupy us, they say. It's kind of like having a seeing through coloured glasses or seeing in ways that you can't really see clearly. They hinder clarity.

They hinder concentration. They hinder wisdom. They say that the widow said that when there's a lot of sensual desire for sensual pleasure, craving, addiction of all kinds, that it's like having a water upon a pond where they some as thrown in red dye, and so everything you see is red, and you know you like. When you fall in love with someone, everything is but erroneous, perfect until you get a divorce, and then everything is imperfect, and so then ill

will, aversion, hostility is like the water, a water that's boiling. And when the water is boiling, you can't see reflection in the water. This stupor and lethargy is like having a mud.

Is that when mud does not run right? Algae, what is it? Is it algae or algae for that one? Okay, so algae, like as the pond is full of algae, it's hard to make your way through it. It's all kind of, you know, thick. And then our restless and regret is that the top of the pond is wind swept, and so it's all churned up. And also you can't see your reflection, can't see through. And I guess it's doubt that it's like mud and it really, you know, gets us stuck, maybe because doubt gets us stuck so much like quicksand or something pulled in. And so these are the forces. So the instructions are to notice these things.

And now, so I'll read you what specifically what the instruction is in relationship to it does the same thing for each one. Oh, I printed out the wrong one, wrong page. But I can read from here. I wanted to do two different interpretations for how this is, this famous passage for how to do this. And one is literal, which is the one I was going to have. We shall try to do from memory.

And then there's one that the most common one is interpretive. Afrebasonnapoly and I'll say that. I'll explain a little bit these two things. I think it's remember I said the refrain emphasizes seeing the arising and passing, the impermanence of things. So the two different interpretations or translations of this instructions for how to relate to the hindrances one, the literal one, I believe, emphasizes seeing the impermanence of the hindrances as they come and go. The interpreter translation says, Notice the conditions that cause them to arise and the conditions that cause them to go away.

So develop understanding about the causality and conditionality of them. Both of them are very important and very effective. Getting wise about the conditions that bring them about is one very important way not to be caught by them. And be wise about makes them go away. It's a powerful way not to be so under their sway. But I think of those as preliminary.

That ability to see the conditions and conditionality, how they come into being and how they go away, is preliminary to coming to the stage. A very deep, settled, focused attention in the middle of the stream and let everything go by, and not thinking so much about it, not being so involved in why it's there or how it's there, and just see it as impermanent phenomena, impersonal, impermanent of movements of the mind. It's very common for people, when they have an undesired mental activity, you know, a few of us occasionally will have do things in our mind which we are not particularly proud of or happy for, or things which are may be painful to think or do, or attitudes, all kinds of things. And people can have a lot of shame about that. They can be very upset about it. But one of the strong characteristics about these

kind of mental foibles that occasionally arise in human minds.

If people take them personally, it reflects badly on me. I'm a bad person. I shouldn't be this way and I hope no one notices and now that. But the ability to sit, to cultivate, to keep practising and practising and practising, keep swimming in the Dharma, swimming in mindfulness, until you're able to watch. And just watch all the stuff. Just go by the stream, go by stream of the hindrances.

Thoughts, ideas, even if they're undesirable, but don't identify with them. Don't take them personally. Don't do anything with them like, Oh, this reflects badly on me. I shouldn't be this way. I have to get therapy. I have to meditate. But I am meditating and now. So the idea is to just be really simple and just see it, just be with it. And at some point, what we see is that things come and they go, they rise and they pass, just go through. And that's a phenomenally powerful state to sit in, to be able to see our whole inner landscape with respect, with care, with attention.

That mindfulness is, but not take any of it personally and see it is just phenomena that goes by, goes through. It's kind of like you are out for a walk, and the leaves in the trees are kind of rustling in the wind, or the wind blows by you, or, you know, the clouds overhead are just kind of floating by. To be able to sit still and quiet in meditation, and just watch everything just kind of stream by come and go, sets the stage for releasing the mind, for letting go deeper. And so the literal translation of this, like this, is go something like this here. There being sensual desire within one. A practitioner understands, There is sensual desire in me.

So that's just very straight mindfulness. It's no judgments. There's no criticism. There's no holding on to it, no being for against it. Just sensual desire arises, and we just know it, This is what it is. And when there is no sensual desire in one understands, There is no sensual desire in me.

So it's very useful to know the absence of these things, because the absence of being caught teaches that if we pay attention to it, it teaches us what it's like to be uncaught. It helps highlight what it's like to be caught. And if you really see the difference between that, after a while we get disenchanted or disinterested in being caught. It's not so interested any more. These sexual fantasies having in sensual desire, you know enough of that already. And then one says, So this here, here's this words.

The causal or conditional interpretation is done in this translation. And one also understands how there comes to be the arising of unarisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the abandoning of arisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the future non arising

of abandoned sensual desire a mouthful, but how it arises, how it goes away, and how it doesn't come back ever again. That's a nice thing if you can do that. And that has to do with conditions, the causes, and all that. But literal translation is something like this: one understands, some like better, from memory readily as for the sensual desire that has not yet arisen, that has not arisen, one sees its arising, one understands its arising. As for the sensual desire that has arisen, one sees its going away, its fading away.

So one is conditional, and one is has to do with impermanence. And so that's what I wanted to emphasize today, the deep insight that we're looking for in mindfulness practice is an insight into impermanence, into the changing nature of the phenomena that we can't see very clearly if we take things personally, if we react to things, if we're judging things, if we have preferences about things, if we try to fix things. What we're looking for in mindfulness meditation is an ability to sit on that, you know, rock in the river, and just let everything just stream by. That comes. Everything comes and goes. Everything that comes into awareness will go.

And to watch that go by. But to get to that place, it is a journey to get there, and it requires tremendous stability of the mind, steadiness of the mind, where the mind is no longer drifting off in thoughts, the minds been trained, the wandering mind has been quieted down, and we've settled here. To get to that, a journey to get there, is a little bit like the journey of a swimmer: repetition over and over again. Come back, come back. Focus. Be here.

See this. Come back. See this. And then the strokes of the mind, the strokes of mindfulness slowly get more refined, more particular, more exact. What is weak gets that needs to be strong, a stronger mind, stronger concentration gets stronger. The things that are strong, that shouldn't be strong, like the strength of being a preoccupation, gets weaker and quiets down.

And it's phenomenal. The shift that happens in the mind and the body and the heart as we stop being preoccupied, you know? It's kind of like, Now I'm finally home, now I'm finally myself. Everything else was kind of dis kind of disconnected for myself here. I'm finally connected. And in that deep connection to oneself, that's where freedom can be found.

So what I said about what I read about the sensual desire is true for the other hindrances as well. Ill will. I see it stream by coming and going, and this stupor and lethargy. I love these terms, and that's this is not tiredness, but there rather their strategies of how people respond to challenges. And so, you know, people can be completely, you know, plenty of rest. You see ten children really well that the children can be quite rested and, you know, had a good nap and everything, and then you asked them to do something.

And when I was I was not quite a child. Maybe I was a silly child. I was slow to grow up. I think I was maybe thirteen or so, not a child. And so I was given a weekly allowance a growing up of ten dollars a week. That was a lot of money back then.

And I had to model on I was so tired, and that I was mowing that law in was just like, Oh, I got so tired. That was resistance, boredom, aversion. So it was a stupor and lethargy. So he's all kinds of you now. So that makes a little more interesting to study these hindrances, if you can recognize that what's going on in us? What are the conditions that bring on this?

And then restlessness and regret are also very powerful things. And they sometimes are strategies of how to avoid challenges. And sometimes there are ways in which we get caught in the web of our challenges, web of our habits in our mind, and we get all restless and running around. And doubt also is a fascinating way in which we sometimes avoid being committed to facing our challenges and being present for things. So these are great playgrounds of mindfulness, swimming pools of mindfulness. The Five Hindrances So I'm repeating myself, but it's such an important point.

If you get visited by some of these hindrances. Don't be discouraged, be encouraged, because this is the material you have to learn. This is your opportunity, mister. Boy, I get to study my aversion. How will you do it? You know, in your privacy of your own little mind, so that you know it doesn't spill over and cause harm to other people.

But don't, boy, I get a look at my aversion. Isn't that great? And at a great attitude I posed yet. So that's probably all I wanted to say today. But we have but ten minutes. If you won't ask any questions about this, or clarification, any of it, or the mindfulness, the instruction so far, I'll be happy to hear what your questions are.

Be heard you combine regret and restlessness, says wondering why it doesn't go together in my head. Why do the same, or why they're combined as one? I don't do it. It's the Buddha who did it so. And yes, I don't have a good idea. It's possible that we don't really know what the original to be translated in English, but a I understand them to be these two paired ones.

I think of one is being physical, more physical. The other will be more mental. And sloth and torpor, or this lethargy and torpor, are forces that bring on the sinking mind, the mind that gets tired, or sinks, or kind of gets dull. Restlessness and regret in what keeps activates the mind keeps energized and keeps it going. And so maybe that's why they're put together there, because these two restlessness and regret, because both of them keep us excessively agitated. That's good enough. Thank you.

During your talk, I thought you mentioned that you were going to share your definition of drama or *dhamma*. Yes, I said leaving a few. Yes, I want Yes. So on these, there's five exercises in the in this section. And I select what the first one I talk to day is the five hindrances. And it's because the hindrances I get are re what's prominent. People talk about the hindrances. People think that the drama, the word, relates to the hindrances. And so, because the one of mental states are mental factors, or they call these are *dhamma*, are mental factors, or mental states, or something like that. And I think that I suspect that what the *dhamma* referring to here is not the five hindrances or the same factors of awakening. There's folk emphasizing the seeing of the impermanence, because elsewhere we have places where the Buddhist says emphasize what the *dhamma* is the seeing and permanence, recognizing in permanence. That's the key to the key insight that then gets repeated throughout his teachings, over and over again. And so I suspect it's the at the teaching or the doctrine or the of the core *dhamma* here is the insight into impermanence. That's so, in that sense, a *dhamma*, you know, maybe maybe can be translated as insight, or maybe it can be translated as a teaching, or, you know, if we want to be really bold and reckless, we mean as a truth.

The doubt, the last of the five I think of that as strike me if I am wrong, is doubting the efficacy of what we're trying to accomplish, what we're doing. To the ten. That's certainly one very important form of doubt. I doubt that this is a work, a certain efficacy of the practice, the truth of the teachings, the efficacy of me as a practitioner. These teachings are great. This practice works for most people, but I can't do it. I don't know if I could do it. Yes, those are all things that worked out. Sometimes doubt is seen as uncertainty and decisiveness. So something keeps us indecisive, non committed: So I can't do this. I don't know how to do it when it was to do here. And so it manifests as indecisiveness, whereas in practice there has to be some decisiveness: This is what I'm doing. I'm engaged. But talk about I think that then when we're so comfortable, so at peace in our physical home, we might not be thinking about ourselves at all. So I think that when there's a deep sense of harmony, of peace, of well being, we've let go a lot, you know. We can, in kind of conventional language, say, when we're at home in ourselves. But really, in that state, there's no reference to self going on any more. It's us be us kind of like, if you have to say something convenient, you can say, You know, at home with yourself or something. But don't take it too seriously. Don't take it as a technical dis discuss description.

Is there another Mike? I'm so early in your talk, you are talking about the lists of things that keep us caught in those things that wake us up, and that the hindrances are one of those. On the Lisyenitis in detail about the things that keep us caught, I was expecting *mettā* to

be in there somewhere. *Mettā* Oh, and as something that would keep, that would wake us up. But It's not part of this discourse. I, yes, I'm wondering if it fits in to these. It's not one of the four foundations of mindfulness. How does this, how does *mettā* interact with this is separate, is it? I think that the what we're looking at, what were looking for here, is the operating system of the mind, whereas for *mettā* *mettā* is usually an object of meditation, but it's not the different factors of meditation that allow us, the different mental faculties that allow us to do the *mettā*. And so if you are doing *mettā* meditation, loving kindness meditation, the hindrances might come into play. They interfere with your ability to do that. If you are doing breath meditation, or hindrances might come into play interfere with your playing. Focus on the breath. You do a loving kindness meditation. You might get really concentrated, and the factors of awakening come up in relationship to their doing the *mettā*. If you do breath concentration, breath meditation, the factors of awakening might arise. So these are kind of like the background operating systems, in a sense, maybe, whereas *mettā* is the object of the meditation practice. Kind of.

So with impermanence, I have a question. Do you like just watching things arise and pass away? Will that automatically give knowledge to knowledge of impermanence, or do you have to kind of note it, or This was permanent, to constantly kind of acknowledge that it's in prominent, or does it just not? Because what we're looking for in order to really see the rising and passing, the stream go passing by. The mind can't be that busy. And so if you're constantly kind of that's permanent, that's, you know, you can't keep the mind kind of active and agitated. Just trust that it'll be obvious as you get, as you settle in. It'll become obvious and just you sit back and watch it. Maybe this is a kind of reverse metaphor that doesn't quite work. But it's kind like you're sitting on a river bank, and you're there, you know, through the winter, and the river is frozen. But slowly, over time, the rise river melts, and then you start seeing that it's flowing, but you're not looking for the flow, just notice that it flows. Some The reverse metaphor means that as the mind, and the mind that's very concerned with concepts and ideas, and is a little bit of a hard, frozen mind, paradoxically, even what's busy, and a mind that gets really still and soft as one that flows, or can flow with things, or can watch the stream go by something like that, I think. So it's almost like what you might just let go of doing at some point. At some point, once you get some stable and you're more or less stabilized in the present moment, you want to let go of the doing. But if you're caught up completely and agitated, then you might want to use the labeling and not. There's desire. There's aversion there. It is up there. It is. And that helps you free a little bit to make me distance. But once you are really present, it just get out of the way, and you watch the river.

Okay, and so there were no questions about this wonderful little story about the identity about delusion. You might want us. You might want to consider why the great Borisattva wisdom couldn't get this woman out of her meditation, but the Porisatva wisdom of delusion did. What is it about? What is it about? Why is the wisdom about delusion so important? And if it's important, what does that mean for you? What you should be doing. So thank you very much. And thank you very much. And.