

# *Satipaṭṭhāna* (43) Hindrances: Sensual Desire

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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Today we are beginning the fourth foundation for awareness – the support for developing a heightened sense of clarity and awareness – that begins to move us into our potential for liberation and freedom.

All along, this is the direction that the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, mindfulness practice, is going: toward greater clarity, so that there is really clear mindfulness. I like the expression “lucid mindfulness.” It is not just a simple knowing experience. The knowing has qualities of clarity, lucidity, stillness, freedom, non-reactivity, and equanimity. Something is special about the knowing, the awareness itself, which comes from being settled, concentrated, and calm – and having a heightened capacity to be aware. Almost like awareness and knowing is a muscle that gets stronger.

This knowing also comes from being less preoccupied with our attachments and concerns. Then our natural capacity for knowing, for awareness, can be there and shine. To have the naturalness, spontaneity, and simplicity of it just arising and being there, without a lot of agency, is one of the stepping stones to developing mindfulness. At first, there is more agency – and then over time, it is more a matter of getting out of the way and letting go.

We come to the fourth foundation for mindfulness. Like the second and third, there is a journey through this. In the beginning, it talks about three different ways that the mind gets caught up, attached, or entangled with experience. Then it talks about two ways in which the mind moves towards disentanglement, towards freedom. So there is a journey from being attached to becoming free.

First, the journey goes through the five hindrances. Then it goes through the five aggregates, and next, the six fetters (the six ways that we get entangled, fettered, or knotted up in the experiences of the senses). Those are the ways we get caught up. Then freedom is found within the Seven Factors of Awakening and the Four Noble Truths.

There is a journey through this, and I love that we start with the ways we get caught up. We want to understand that. The idea is to become wise about this. If you feel like you are supposed to quickly get to some beautiful, wonderful state, it might be that you are not going to take the time to know yourself in a deep way. To know how you get entangled or know the entanglement itself, so that in the future, you are not going to get tricked by it. If you know it well, you will not be tricked and pulled into its orbit and make mistakes.

This week is the five hindrances. We will cover one hindrance each day and today, a bit of introduction for it. In the teachings of the Buddha, the hindrances are often paired with the Seven Factors of Awakening. These are beautiful qualities of mind that arise as we practice: awareness or mindfulness itself, investigation, effort or energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. In many texts, the Buddha puts these together where one is the problem or what we are overcoming and the other is what grows and develops as a result or instead of that.

These two have different impacts on us. The hindrances cover over our wisdom and make wisdom difficult to access. They contract and limit the mind. The Seven Factors of Awakening allow for the functioning of wisdom – an expansive, open, free mind. One pulls us down and one lifts us up in a certain way. To illustrate this covering over effect of the hindrances, the suttas use the image of a tree growing in the forest. There is a larger tree covering over a smaller one so that the smaller tree does not get any light. It is stunted. It does not grow and develop.

The hindrances are covering over the light of awareness and keeping it from operating clearly. When the light of awareness is free, the tree of Bodhi, the tree of awakening, can grow within us. Some people will call the sap of that tree the Seven Factors of Awakening. The light of awareness lets it grow and develop. The idea is to let go of, or be free of, these obscuring qualities of the hindrances, so that something beautiful can grow and develop instead in that space, in that clearing in the forest.

The first hindrance, in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, is sensual desires. In the teachings of the Buddha, sometimes it is alternatively called avariciousness, wanting things. It is usually called sensual desire, wanting sensual pleasures of all kinds. The alternative is wanting things, acquiring things, more and more stuff. Both can be a big entanglement. Sometimes people call the first hindrance desire to include all those things.

The problem with calling it desire is that not all desires are problematic. The desire to be free of the hindrances may be healthy and appropriate. There are innocent versions of wanting sensual pleasure and wanting things. It is innocent to want something – I've run out of toothpaste, so I would like to have a new tube of toothpaste. There are innocent, maybe beautiful ways of desiring pleasure that are simple and easy. You want to cook your broccoli to just the right tenderness so that when you eat it, there is pleasure in eating it. It feels nourishing, delightful, and fresh to eat it.

What is not innocent are desires that we are grabbed, caught, and, preoccupied by. There is sometimes a strong biological force within us behind that desire. Sometimes it is strong enough to be like the propellant for a rocket. It is so powerful. Some forms of sensual desire have a strength that is hard to resist. For the purposes of *Satipaṭṭhāna*, it is not like it is immoral, bad, or wrong to have sensual desire. It just happens to be that it makes it difficult for this clarity of awareness, this open, expanded mind to grow. For this quiet, still space of freedom to show itself.

Since that is the direction we are going, we want to learn how to be mindful of sensual desire, so that path is supported. It does not support freedom to go along with sensual desire – to spend time in meditation thinking about sexual fantasies or food. Or thinking about trying to make meditation as pleasant as possible, like how to recapture a past meditation experience where there was wonderful bliss. The desire for that bliss is just another desire for sensual pleasure.

Rather than negating or condemning sensual desire, we have very clear, purposeful, and dedicated mindfulness: "Oh, this is sensual desire. Sensual desire is present." We get to know it. I find it very useful to feel it physically. Feeling the physicality of desire very quickly shows me the downside of it. It is not pleasant within the body to be caught in the force of sensual desire. Sensual pleasure might be pleasant, but the force of the drive for it is not. There is a loss, an alienation from myself in having it there.

Know when it is absent. There are times, as meditation deepens, that there is no sensual desire at all. It is very important to register that, to take that in. Get to know what that is like. Know the benefits – the way there is clarity, freedom, and ease. You can breathe more easily or you are not being pushed by some kind of inner force.

The instructions are to know when sensual desire is present and know when it is absent. As we know the absence of it, this gives us a new possibility. This gets to the heart, the insight, of the whole purpose of *Satipaṭṭhāna*. That is, to be present, still, or clear enough to see how any phenomenon, any experience, arises – to see it appear.

Nothing is there all the time. When anything that qualifies as an experience is in perception for a while, it appears and then disappears. When the mind is quiet enough and not involved in thoughts, you can start seeing this arising of sensual desire, and you might see its passing. Seeing the arising, it is easier to have a very different, freer, more disentangled relationship with sensual desire than if it is already there full-blown.

To be right there and see, "There it is," then it is easier to just leave it alone. It is easier to abandon it, to let go of it. Exercising our capacity to let go – let go of the clinging, the wanting, the reaching for – is a wonderful thing to cultivate and develop.

The Buddha describes working with sensual desires this way:

*One knows sensual desire is present when it is present. One knows it is absent when it is absent. One knows that it is arising when it arises. One knows the abandoning of it, letting go of it, when it is let go of.*

If that letting go is thorough enough, it can lead to a deep freedom, where we realize that sensual desire is no longer there and is not going to rise again, maybe at least in that meditation session. There is such full clarity, peacefulness, and settledness. It is like: "Wow, this is so good. Sensual desire is not going to arise in this context because it feels so free. The freedom is so good."

To become wise about how the hindrances obscure wisdom. The Buddha said:

*Fools who know they are fools, to that extent they are wise.*

To use that, practitioners who know they have lost their wisdom are starting to become wise.

For the next 24 hours, until we meet again, I would encourage you to notice sensual desire – the desire for sensual pleasures, desires for comfort, that might exist for you. There are lots of them throughout the day for most people. See if you can notice when it is present and when it is absent. Particularly see what is the opportunity, what happens for you, when you see it just as it arises. "Oh, there it is." That is a fascinating place.