

# Monday Dharma Talk – Five Hindrances

Hybrid Experienced Students Retreat at IRC

September 18, 2023

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS** *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, *nīvaraṇā*, Seven Factors of Awakening, *Kaccānagotta Sutta*,

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I believe it's helpful for us to appreciate that each of us has our own Dharma path. Each of us has our own way that the Dharma works through us. This will probably be somewhat unique, even if some of it looks similar to the developmental models, the path models, the stories, the ideas, and what other people have done. There are always going to be variations in the way that the Dharma tailor-makes itself for each of us. It's remarkable how this practice finds a way for each person that is their way. So appreciate your way, even if you don't know what it is yet. It's working through you, and finding its way to you.

I have chosen on this retreat to present the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as a sequence, a developmental model. I think there's some value to that. Sometimes people only understand after the fact that what happened to them fits neatly into that model, or actually, that model works perfectly if we look at it backward. Or the model works great except we started in the middle and worked our way outwards. So we see ourselves.

The reason I wanted to say this is that the way the *sutta* is presented with the instructions and the repeated refrain implies that any one of these instructions is enough.

If you just did the very first instruction (to know you're breathing in with a long breath, know you're breathing out with a long breath, and in with a short breath, out with a short breath, and to feel and experience your whole body, then to relax the bodily tensions) – that is enough to go all the way if you do it well, give yourself over to it, explore how it applies to you and how it supports you to get clear, still, and more concentrated to the point that you're ready for there to be insight. Then the core insight here is the insight into arising and passing.

But in the developmental or sequential model, as I'm going through it here, the third foundation on mind states prepares us for the fourth foundation.

If you have some modicum of an expanded, peaceful state, a somewhat concentrated mind, and some sense of a liberated mind, then you see so much better when the mind is not concentrated, liberated, or expanded. When greed arises, you see even better that it's a mind *with* greed. "Look at that." At some point, there's just so much equanimity. Well, today in that corner of the mind there's greed, and over there there's a little bit of ill will. And of course, there's some delusion too.

It just kind of comes with the territory of being human, and it's there. You don't have to pick it up; you don't have to react against it; you don't have to make it a problem; you don't have to define yourself by it. They should never let me back in IRC because I have some delusion. Certainly, the amount of greed I have is not permitted in a place like this.

The understanding is that whoever comes here is human. So each of us is equally worthy of respect, care, and love. We understand that, as humans, for each of us a degree of greed, hatred, and delusion might come along. It's not a crime to have them arise in the mind. There can be a lot of equanimity.

But when we have a more still, quieter mind, we start seeing the operating functions of the mind in terms of which cause more emotional and psychological pain, more suffering (*dukkha*), and which operating activities of the mind lead to more freedom, more wisdom and clarity, or insight.

We see this partly because when we are familiar with the mind states and have some degree of clarity, spaciousness, or peace around them, the effect that these mind states and activities have is much more obvious.

There are some very sophisticated ways of appreciating the consequence of different mind states (because some of us like to be sophisticated). Some of them very clearly – no doubt about it if you're really sensitive and careful – come with an “ouch.” And some of them come with, “Ah, that's good.” You don't need to be more sophisticated than that. But you see the consequence, the effect that they have. It is very important to start to see that and understand what goes on in the mind.

When you get to the fourth foundation, there are five different sets of instructions. In the way they're laid out, it's pretty easy to see that they also represent kind of a path model, especially because of how they are presented elsewhere in the *suttas*. Dealing with the hindrances comes early in practice. Hindrances have an ouch. Later in practice, we're dealing with the identity issues around the five aggregates. Identity is huge for people. Then once identity issues quiet down, we're left with just the way we relate to the simple sense experiences that come along. We get knotted up and entangled in them in some way or other. This is a movement toward what is more and more simple and more basic.

On the other end, there are the Seven Factors of Awakening. When the Seven Factors of Awakening are mature enough and developed enough in us, then we're prepared for the deep, liberating insight, which is the Four Noble Truths.

The path model with which we're going through this begins with the five hindrances. The word “*nīvaraṇā*” for hindrances more literally means “coverings.” So the hindrances are what covers over wisdom, and covers over or interferes with our capacity to become concentrated. They usually involve a fair amount of thinking.

We usually call the first hindrance “sensual desire” in our scene. In the *suttas*, there is another list called the “five hindrances,” which is actually referred to a little more often, and in which the first one is acquisitiveness. “Sensual desire” might not involve so much thinking (at least that's the excuse). But biological urges...With acquisitiveness, you can't really get involved with thinking about things (like how good it would be to have that, and that person has the best socks. I wonder if I can somehow hate them.) That takes thinking and maybe even some planning. Then come the fantasies and ideas about how special you'll be with those socks. I think sensual desire often gets its power from sensual fantasies.

I would like to propose that ill will usually comes with thinking. Sometimes, occasionally, accidentally, it looks like I have ill will, or something equivalent, toward my laptop. That may be just a reasonable biological urge against the force of nature that I'm up against...Probably not. Probably there is a fair amount of cognition, ideas, desires, projections in the future, memories, and all kinds of things operating when there's ill will toward the laptop.

But the proposal here is that being involved in the hindrances is a higher-order activity of the mind. We get swept up in a thought world or activity that affects us in such a strong way that we kind of lose ourselves in it. I think of the hindrances as like the black holes of the mind. We get pulled into them because we have such strong interest. (I don't have any interest in the hindrances. It seems like they're interested in me. I'm innocent.)

But in one way or another, there's a strong interest between the two, you and the hindrance. The connection is so strong that you can lose yourself in them for hours. They're at that level of practice where there's a lot of mental activity – spinning around, and making up stories, maybe fueled by biological urges and deeper emotions. So it's a relatively coarse state of mind to be in.

The idea is to learn to quiet this state of mind and have it settle and quiet so we can see more clearly. When the veneer or curtain of the hindrances goes over the mind, the clarity is lost, and light doesn't go in or come out. When the curtain goes, the light gets turned on and we can see more clearly.

I think pretty much every meditator has to contend with the hindrances sooner or later. When it becomes your turn, it's your turn. The Dharma knows better than you what you're supposed to deal with. “So thank you, Dharma. I guess today is the day for this hindrance,” as opposed to, “Oh no, this is a mistake, this is terrible, this shouldn't happen. I was on the brink of full enlightenment, and now this happened.”

To have equanimity around the hindrances, I think it's helpful to have the idea that working with them is kind of like going to the gym where you get to work out. Okay, this is where I get to work out and find my equanimity. This is where I learn how to find a way through them to the other side. This is where I try to build up my concentration so that it's stronger than the hindrances. This is where I try to understand more deeply what's happening in me. This is where I begin to understand where it is really useful to put my attention. With sensual desire, the most useful thing might not be to place the attention on sensual desire. It might be more useful to feel the loneliness underneath the desire or the insecurity that's trying to find some pleasure to cover it up. With ill will, the ill will might not be the main thing. What really needs our attention is the fear and the hurt that might be under the ill will. I'll talk more about the others later. The idea is that we're learning where the attention needs to be and how to be with it. There are all kinds of things to learn in the hindrance gym. The nice thing about it is it's a free lifetime membership.

This is an introduction to the hindrances. Because in the *suttas*, the hindrances and the Seven Factors of Awakening are all ?, tomorrow I'll talk out of sequence about the Seven Factors of Awakening. As an introduction, I want to read something from a very famous *sutta*. (It's very famous for half a dozen people, probably more than that, but when we say it's famous in Buddhism, I don't know how many people we are referring to. If you go to Washington DC, I don't think anybody in the capital has heard of this. It hasn't reached that far, or Hollywood. It's just famous locally.)

It's a *sutta* called the *Kaccānagotta Sutta*. Some people see it as a very, very important text. It's the Buddha teaching a monk named Kaccāna. The Buddha says to him: “Kaccāna, mostly this world relies on the pair: existence and non-existence.” I like “mostly” existence and non-existence.

I think what's meant here is that people are either attached to the idea that something really exists or to the idea that it doesn't. I really exist as a – fill in the blank – as a lousy person or as a great person, whatever your choice is. But I exist – I'm solid, I'm substantial, and I'm going to exist forever because I'm young. Or I'm related to my mental states – to my depression, or to being angry. I might know better than to think the mental state is going to be there forever, but functionally I'm behaving in my mind as if this is it – it's always going to be this way. Rationally I know it's not that way, but my emotional life doesn't understand that. It is as if this is permanent. This really exists.

Non-existence is sometimes an attachment to a belief that nothing really exists. It's all a mirage. It's all just kind of empty. There's nothing really here, or nothing really matters. We're going to die and that's it. We're going to not exist soon enough. Mostly we don't exist and soon we're not going to exist again. We are a little blip. We don't really exist. Mostly we're non-existence. A bunch of atoms are spinning around in a particular direction, and boom, we're here. Something like that.

Then the Buddha goes on to say:

*But when one sees with right wisdom the arising of the world as it comes to be, the thought [of] non-existence of the world won't occur. When one sees with right wisdom the cessation of the world as it comes to be, the thought [of] existence of the world won't occur.*

So the world neither exists nor does it not exist. Crazy Buddhist people: it neither exists nor doesn't exist. Why don't they commit to something? Buddhists have commitment problems.

But there is an alternative and that's what is special about Buddhism. First, there is an appreciation that things are in process. Things are always coming and going. When you see that they're coming, when they arrive, you can't say that they don't exist, because they are coming into a certain kind of existence. But if you see that things are passing, you can't say that they still exist. You can't say they have a permanent existence. So there's something in between. What's in between is to see that everything is in process. Everything is a flow of appearing and disappearing – things coming together because of conditions that come together to make them happen.

This is kind of like a wave on top of the ocean. It sure looks like that wave exists as it travels across the ocean. You can watch it go. But people who study hydrodynamics tell us that there's no wave moving across the ocean. It's just water particles that are going up and down and hitting the one next to them so they go up and down. It looks like a wave, but the wave doesn't really exist. You can't say it doesn't exist either. But it doesn't exist as an existing thing. It exists as a process, no different than the wonderful wave that they make in sports stadiums. It looks like a wave moving across, but it's just a whole bunch of hands flapping around in unison. Does it exist or not exist?

So this is maybe a teeny bit interesting, but do *you* exist or do you not exist? From the Buddhist point of view, if you're really paying attention, you can't say that you exist and you can't say you don't exist. "But my sensual desire exists, and I am consumed by it, and my whole life's been defined by it." Your sensual desire neither exists nor doesn't exist.

This is the good news. Because it's a process, we can step in and somehow interrupt the process. We can appreciate that it's not always there. If it arises depending on conditions, we can make the conditions stop. If the referees in the sports stadiums tell everyone, "Please stop and put your hands down," there's no more wave. That's all it took. "Please don't lust." "Okay." If only it was that easy.

Here the insight that makes all this possible and sensible is to see the arising and ceasing. This is one of the core insights in the refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Here we're seeing it again.

What happens next gets even more interesting. because now the *sutta* refers to something that we think really does exist, which is me, myself:

*Kaccāna, mostly this world is attached with clinging, fixation, and in bondage. But toward these mental attachments, [whatever attachments you have in relation to them] one does not attach, cling, or resolve, "This is myself." One will then have no doubt or indecisiveness [in Buddhist texts to have no doubt is a*

really big stepping stone to liberation] *that this very dukkha [namely the dukkha of attachment, the dukkha of being attached to self] when arising is clearly arising, and that suffering when ceasing is clearly ceasing.*

Here again, we see that really seeing the arising and ceasing is considered very, very important in this teaching. I think it's not always easy, even for practitioners, to come to the realization, the understanding that this is really the core insight and this is worth paying attention to. If you're really caught up in the hindrances, some of them can seem much more interesting or important than just seeing things arising and passing.

The tremendous importance of this is here in the last line:

*With this, one's knowledge is independent of others.*

One's understanding does not depend on others telling you what is true. Now you know what's really essential to know in the Dharma. This insight is that important. You become independent in the Dharma.

To drive this point home even more, the Buddha says:

*This, Kaccāna, is how there is right view.*

Right view, as many of you know, is really important. Right view is defined here as seeing the arising and ceasing.

The reason I chose to read this is this amazing statement that this world is attached, but where you want to have real insight is not necessarily into all kinds of worldly or ordinary attachments, but rather, insight into the attachments that we identify with as "This is who I am."

There's something about this tendency to latch on and hold on to the idea, "This is who I am; I am the attachments; I'm defined by them; they are central to who I am; it is important to define me by them." The attachment where I'm going to see, "Oh, this is a big ouch" is the attachment to self. We need to be quiet enough, still enough, and sensitive enough to see that the attachment to self is painful. Sometimes I think of it as a wind drag. It just slows us down.

How many of the hindrances are born because of some reactivity we have around self, some way we're attached to me? Sensual desire has an attachment. It means that we are so invested in the sensual desire that we're caught in its grip. I think it's possible to have sensual desire without it being a hindrance. That's important to see – "There it is again, sensual desire." But when it's a hindrance, I think it's closely connected to attachment to self: "This is what I need. This is what I want."

Ill will: "I'm upset. I'm angry. I've been offended. I've been hurt." Sloth and torpor: "I'm so confused. I'm so dispirited. I'm so scared that I'm just shutting down." Restlessness and worry: "They're going to be upset with me. They're going to reject me. They're not going to like me. What if I do it wrong – then I'll be rejected. I'm probably wearing the wrong socks to be accepted at IRC." (No wonder I want his socks.) Regret and remorse: "Look what I did. I'm a terrible person and I feel so bad about myself." Doubt – I suppose we can see doubt is also caught up in the idea of self: "I don't know what to do. I'm indecisive. I'm confused."

In Buddhism, the usual idea of doubt is that it interferes with our ability to act, to practice the Dharma. So who's the actor? In some ways, you are. So, "I can't do it. It's too difficult for me. I have doubts about the Dharma." I think that the "I" is very closely connected to doubt.

As we get sensitive and quiet enough to see underneath the hood of our car, we can begin to appreciate that everything is in process. Everything is moving. Everything is shifting and changing all the time. Attachments are part of that, and those attachments hurt. They limit us. They undermine us. They make life harder. Sometimes they make other people's lives harder. Our attachments are troublesome for others.

We need to see the attachment to self that's at play. We're attached, yes. But the strength of our attachments might be because they are an expression of our attachment to self. If such a core attachment is connected to our suffering, we need to see that it's not fixed and it's not irrelevant. It doesn't exist, but it also doesn't not exist. It's not fixed and it's not nothing. It's a process of coming and going. That's the kind of massage that begins to loosen up the attachments. When we see the coming and going, something begins to give and soften.

Seeing the arising is also important with the hindrances. This is what the instructions say for the first one, sensual desire:

*Here, when sensual desire is present, one knows, "Sensual desire is present within me."*

I like that here is another example where the word "me" is used. There is a definitiveness and an owning up to it. There is no doubt about it. Maybe that's useful. Maybe that's an honest thing to do. Sometimes Buddhists who hear about not self go around saying, "Oh, there is sensual desire." There's wisdom in seeing it that way, especially in deep meditation. There's just sensual desire. We are not defined by it. But before you get to that kind of equanimity, spaciousness, and stillness, if you're just a generically neurotic person, and you say, "There's just sensual desire present," you might not really be owning up to it. You might not be honestly, clearly saying, "There is sensual desire in me." In this statement, we are clearly taking responsibility. This is where our practice is.

*When no sensual desire is present, one knows, "No sensual desire is present within me."*

It was a surprise to me to read this line. Because of the way I was introduced to insight practice in Asia, I had the idea that you're only aware of something that exists, something that's occurring. And there are a lot of things not occurring all the time. If I were going to note all the things that are not occurring, there are more things not occurring than occurring. So it would be a big job to include that in practice too. Then you have to decide which non-occurring thing to pay attention to and know, and there's no evidence that one is better than others. So I was surprised to read this:

*When no sensual desire is present, one knows, "No sensual desire is present within me."*

I think this is very helpful when you're caught up in some kind of attachment or caught up in a hindrance. When it's not present, register that. Take that in. Don't just go on quickly to the next hindrance. Take time to feel what it's like to be free of sensual desire. It might feel good sometimes. The way it feels good might give you a perspective on how not good it is to be caught up in sensual desire – there's a lot of clarity. There's wisdom. I can think straight. I feel more at peace with myself. When there's sensual desire, there's a fire, an urge, there's compulsion, and I'm caught up in this world of fantasies. Desire is kind of providing me with pleasure, or the fantasies are very good. But, I'm alienated. I'm not really connected to myself. When desire is not there, I feel more fully myself. I feel present.

Really take time to register when some attachment has been difficult for you and it goes away. Even if it accidentally goes away for a while, take the absence in and register it, feel it. You don't have to know all the non-occurrences. But with certain non-occurrences that have been troublesome, it's healthy to really register and take its absence in.

The text goes on:

*As for sensual desire that has not yet arisen, one knows its arising.*

For instance, I am minding my own business, practicing nicely, just being present. Then at some point, I realize, "Wow, you just spent the last five minutes, or five days, in some sensual desire fantasy."

Someone asks, "Well, when did this start?"

"I don't know. I think just this last week it's all that was there."

"But didn't you see it begin?"

"No. I think it just was there."

It's a big knot, a big swirl, and lots of activity. Sometimes it's hard to see what's going on because the hindrance is so compelling.

Something different is available to us, if we are quiet enough and still enough to be able to see the hindrance arise the first time, because then we know it wasn't there before, and now it is. We can see that it doesn't have to always be this way. In fact, it wasn't this way just a while ago. Some process conditioned it and triggered it to arise.

In that first arising, there might be more opportunity to have a mindful distance from it and some wisdom about it. "Oh, look at that. Look what's arising. Am I going to pick this up? Am I going to go along and join in? Or am I going to see it as just a little corner of my mind? There it is, sensual desire. I've heard that everyone has it, so I'm not abnormal for having it. I'm pretty normal. But I don't have to do anything with it or participate in it. Let it be."

The instructions are, if it's there, know that it's there. If it's not there, know that it's not there. But if you can be there as it arises, know that it's arising. I find this whole thing about seeing things when they arise so helpful. Because if I see something arise, I can put a question mark after it: Is this so? This is especially true with thoughts. My mind seems to have its own thoughts about things – nothing to do with me, thank you.

I can, for example, have a judgment about someone, about someone's socks. But if I see the judgment arise, it's kind of second nature now to have a question mark: is this so? Then I take a second look. Maybe I take a second look at myself: "Gil, you're okay. You don't actually need to be cooler with cooler socks." So I do a course correction. There's more room for wisdom to operate when you see the arising. And you see it as something a little more tentative than it is once it's there, when it can be locked in.

Then the text says:

*As for sensual desire that has arisen, one knows its abandoning.*

So one abandons it, lets it go, or relinquishes it. This is interesting language. Some translators translate this, "One knows *how* to abandon them," a skill that is useful to learn. But the literal Pali doesn't say that we do the abandoning. Rather it says that one *knows* its abandoning.

This is another gift from mindfulness practice. We can see things clearly and not participate in them, not feed them anymore, but just let them be there. Because everything's in process, for something like a hindrance to

exist, we have to keep feeding it and being involved in it. When we simply step back and see a hindrance clearly for what it is, and see its arising and passing, it's not just the passing we see. Something inside of us says, "Enough is enough." There's an abandoning, a letting go, a relinquishment, and there's wisdom operating in it. We are not doing the abandoning and letting go. A deeper letting go happens that is just the nature of what the heart does when we have wisdom and clarity about what serves us and what doesn't serve us, what harms us and what benefits us.

The hindrances are valuable sources of practice. A lot of inner strength, mindfulness, and concentration can develop as we take them on to practice with them, and as we find how to have equanimity and non-identification with them. We discover how to have mindfulness and concentration that don't get hijacked by them. We practice until we can see with wisdom. We can see they're arising, and we get a sense of how valuable it is to see something arise, how there's freedom in having that kind of clarity, before we latch on.

Then we see the hindrance pass. This is more than just seeing its passing and its coming and going because that can be a constant, ongoing process of appearing, disappearing, and coming right back. We see that repeatedly until something inside lets go – "Enough." Some tightness, some tension, some holding, some suffering lets go.

Sensual desire is the first hindrance. Ill will is the second one. In English, the third one is usually called "sloth and torpor." Just the words produce sloth and torpor. Maybe there was a polite English gentleman from the 1880s for whom "sloth and torpor" was a nice expression. In the English I learned to speak, those words were not part of the language. Maybe some of you grew up with people saying, "Honey, are you slothful?" "Mom, I have torpor today." But it's a little confusing to me. I never really got behind this translation of "sloth and torpor." Recently, I saw that in the Pali-English dictionary, it also has the meaning of being "stiff or immobile," and unable to work or to act.

So it means freezing up, becoming rigid. Now it makes more sense to me. The second one can be torpor, sluggishness, or lethargy. Why use both words when they're so close in meaning? It makes sense to me that the first one means something like "to be rigid or stiff," because we know that in challenging situations, that's one of the responses the system has. We freeze up; we get tight, rigid, and immobile. Doing that is a fear response. That's one way to deal with really big challenges. It can be a real hindrance. People often ask, "Where's fear in the five hindrances?" They try to slide it in somewhere. But one of the places I think it appears is that when fear is strong enough, we freeze, and get tight and stiff. It is a very common experience. That's a real hindrance because it really interferes with our clarity and our mindfulness.

I don't know if we'll ever decide what the ancients thought this word really meant. But practically, for many of us, I think rigidity and sloth, or rigidity and sluggishness, or rigidity and lethargy work. I like lethargy. Then I think it's easier to find the forces within us that are really hindering us, preventing wisdom, and preventing clarity.

The fourth hindrance is restlessness and remorse or regret. Maybe this is partly where fear is too, because a lot of restlessness is fear-based. It is about the future and what's going to happen. Sometimes remorse and regret have a lot of fear also. We might regret what we did, but also be really afraid that we're going to be caught, or we'll have to confess. They make it very hard to be present.

The fifth hindrance is doubt. It's possible that the English word "doubt" shouldn't be the translation. It also means "indecisiveness." It is an inability to decide what to do. The importance of action is a really important part of the Buddha's teaching. This is a path of action, not passivity. It's just that some of the central actions we do are to sit still. This is an activity of quieting the mind and an activity of not reacting in the mind. It is still a kind of choice. It's a decisive choice to not react to what's happening, but instead, to see it clearly. There is decisiveness in the practice. Doubt is the loss of decisiveness.



The hindrances can be an issue at any time in practice. But when they appear this late in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the context means that we can have a very different relationship to the hindrances when we are pretty calm and settled – when we're already kind of expansive, or concentrated, or have some degree of liberation, and are not caught in attachments. This is where even the hindrances can be a source of liberative insight.

We think of the hindrances as just bad news. But this is less true when we already have a capacity to be really present, and we've learned how not to react to them so they don't become second arrows, third arrows, and 90 arrows. We just see, "Look, there it is. There is sensual desire. Let's take a good look at it. Let's really be present for it. Let's not believe it. Let's not feed it, but let's really be here with it in this calm, expansive, spacious mind that has room for it. This mind is not so sticky. Look at that. The desire seems to be oscillating; it doesn't seem to be so solid. Yes, I feel it. Where's the 'ouch'?" Oh, the 'ouch' – the place where it feels stressful to have the desire – is behind my eyes, or in my chest, or my throat. Or there's tension and pushing and leaning forward or shutting down."

Does that "ouch" exist or not exist? That's the wrong question. If we relate to it as something that exists, then we're already making it more complicated than it needs to be. But we can relate to it instead as: what's the process here? What's the flow? What's the pattern of change? What's the texture of its inconstancy? What's the rhythm of its arising and passing, and coming and going? Maybe we see it not in the abstract, but by feeling the hindrance close in physically. How is this hindrance manifesting physically? How is it manifesting in terms of thoughts?

Thoughts are inconstant; they come and they go. When we see a new thought, we can put a question after it – "Really?" We can see it so clearly that we might see the attachment to self that's in it. If we can see that the attachment to self neither exists nor doesn't exist – it's also something that comes and goes – right then and there, we have a chance to see in such a way that our knowledge is not dependent on others and we have right view. Right there, we have the chance to not cling to anything in the world, to abide not depending on anything.

What a great thing – to have set our heart free, so our heart is not dependent, not unduly influenced, and not caught by anything in the world.

So the hindrances do not need to hinder. The hindrances can be a stepping stone to greater freedom. May it be so for you.

Thank you.