

Four Foundations of Mindfulness - Week 7: Noticing Hindrances

Gil Fronsdal

February 29, 2016

Keywords: satipaṭṭhāna, four foundations of mindfulness, dhammas, hindrances, kāmaccanda, vipassanā, mindfulness, sloth and torpor, Buddhadhāra, loving kindness

So this evening I mean to continue in the series that I am talking about, which is the four foundations of mindfulness. And today we're going to start discussing the fourth foundation, which is the foundation of the *dhammas*. And I'll explain what this means. The *dhammas*. But I want to say some introductory words about this practice of mindfulness and the sequence of these four foundations of mindfulness, that there are two important ways that mindfulness works in a sense. One is that it works right away in its kind of instant benefits, and the other is that it works in time. It's involved in a progressive sequence of deepening practice, maturing practice. And both sides of this are important.

The first one, that it works instantly, is one of the great pleasures of the practice, that there's something about a moment of mindfulness, when we really understand mindfulness itself, that is deeply satisfying or something. There is a degree of liberation or freedom to be found, because a moment of clear mindfulness, there is going to be no or very little clinging or grasping or resistance or contraction. There might be all around it. There might be clinging and contraction. But in the moment, if it's mindfulness really clear, in that moment, it's kind of like, for the moment, the windshield wipers have cleared the rain off the windshield, and you know, it's not going to last. But for that, you know, for a moment, you can see clearly out.

And when I first realized this in my practice, it made me very happy. And to come to that clarity of seeing, the momentary kind of power of mindfulness, sometimes it takes on the second benefit of mindfulness, and that is the practice of mindfulness grows over time, and initially it might not be so obvious that it's so beneficial right away, the instant when it benefits. But as the practice of mindfulness slowly grows with time, the present moment clarity of awareness of mindfulness stands out in a higher and higher way. The way that the four foundations

of mindfulness are presented, they're presented as sequentially as a path that unfolds and deepens as one does it, and the path begins. In this famous teaching of the Buddha, the first instruction is to put aside greed and distress for the world.

So in order to do the practice as first, put aside greed and distress from the world, which is very confusing for people who come to the practice because they are consumed with greed and distress, and they want to practise mindfulness so they can be free of it. And then the first thing you're told is, put it aside. But I don't know how to do that. I thought I was going to practice mindfulness, to learn to do that. So the way that I understand this instruction is that in order to really deepen in this practice, particularly in meditation, we have to be willing temporarily to put aside our concerns with the world. Temporarily put aside the mind's tendency to go outward into the world, to think about the things that we want and to think about the things that we're upset about.

And now, the world has plenty of things. If you like to be greedy and upset, you've no shortage of things to get upset about and greedy about or want, and there can be fantastic reasons to justify doing that. But in order to do this practice, there has to at least temporarily be an attempt to put it aside, to somehow separate yourself from a concern with the world around you. Some people will strongly complain, protest that somehow this is a world-rejecting aspect of Buddhism, that somehow we have to turn away from the world in order to really kind of clean the mind or develop the mind in some deep way. People complain, but no one, I think no one complains when you say, I have to go into the bathroom by myself and take a shower, and you do it alone, you know. You shut out the world, you know, and now you're not available to anyone, and really, you know, and we benefit. The whole world benefits if we.

So it's a little bit similar, you know. So it's a temporary thing in meditation to be willing to put aside and it's not an easy thing to do, but there has to at least be the understanding that this is the direction we're going, so that we're no longer temporarily. We're no longer intending to keep thinking about our concerns about the world past, the future, what's outside of us, what's going on, that temporarily we're willing to have our intention be to be really present here for immediate, present moment experience. Temporarily put aside our concerns for the world so that we can find out what's going on here when, you know, when the rain is filling the windshield. Because we can't always preoccupy and concern, we can't see so well. So this turning inward.

And then as we turn inward, to our experience here. The first foundation has to do about the most obvious thing for most people. If you are aware of kind of the really present moment

experience, so you're here in a body, or it's the most accessible for some people, and the first foundation of mindfulness is to really notice you're here. You're here in a body, and this is what the bodily experience is like. As we do that, there tends to be a relaxation of the body. The actual instructions are to actually relax your body as you do this practice.

So relax and settle it further. Be here for the bodily experience. As we settle into the bodily experience, then we become more aware of the second foundation of mindfulness, which is what it feels like to be in the body, what it feels like to be here in the present moment. And this is the second foundation of mindfulness: the feeling tone of the experience. We start noticing more acutely, this is pleasant and this is unpleasant. Well, I didn't know I was feeling so bad. I was so caught up and concerned with my greed and distress for the world that I didn't actually not feel the impact it had on me, and how I actually feel kind of angry or stressed by that.

Or we start feeling, noticing, we feel good. It's very pleasant. Maybe as we relax deeper and deeper, there's a pleasantness that arises. And then as we do this, we settle in further into this. And at some point, as we really get more and more here, then we become, start becoming aware of our mind state. If you have a very loud mind state, you might be aware of it quickly, but to really kind of tune in and settle in, and can be aware of the mood or the general state of mind you're in is more subtle than the feeling tone. Generally, pleasant or unpleasant are more subtle than the body.

So we become aware that the general mood or attitude of the mind is how it is greedy or generous or hostile, aversive or friendly. Or we are confused or deluded. Or we have clarity and we see clearly what's true. We start seeing the mind is contracted, the mind state is more expansive, spacious, sometimes feeling like it's boundless. We start seeing something of the quality of the mind or the heart. And as I said last week, the quality of our heart, the quality of our mind, the inner quality of our state of being, is one of the most important resources or treasures that we have.

And to become the custodian of your own inner well-being is part of the task of this practice. And so to really settle in and know the quality, know what's happening inside your state of being. How's your state of being? How's your spirits? How are you inside? It is important, for this sequence is deepening that goes on or growing of the practice as we start becoming aware more and more of the quality of our inner life. It's at this point that we start seeing the fourth foundation of mindfulness, which is the foundation of mindfulness of the *dhammas*.

And there's a lot of ink that's been spilled trying to define what *dhammas* are in this context, and some people just prefer to call it, leave it as the *dhammas*. One of the meanings of *dharma*

is truth. And it could be, perhaps, I think that this is the foundation. We start seeing the truth as opposed to seeing the facts. The first three foundations are kind of like seeing the facts of things, how things actually are. In it, of themselves. We just see the body. We see the feelings. We're aware of the mind state, and there's no judgment or valuation of it. Just this is how it is.

Right now, with the fourth foundation, it's moral understanding: the processes of the mind that contribute to our mind state, that contribute to the quality of our inner state of being. So it's even going deeper into the other, to the operating software for how we operate. And there's two general operating software that can operate in our system, and there's one that leads to suffering and the other that leads to freedom and happiness. And so we want to really see these and become aware of how these operate, these principles. And so the fourth foundation of mindfulness is knowing the processes by which we get caught in suffering and the processes by which we become free of suffering. And so there are three exercises in this foundation about noticing how you get caught, and two, noticing how you get free.

Now, that's lopsided, right? There's more emphasis on how you get caught than how you become free. I don't know if it was planned this way, but I like it that way, because it's more important to understand how you're caught than how to get free a little bit, the process of becoming free. Seeing that process, it'll be the byproduct of no longer being caught. And so we want to become really wise about the processes of the mind, of how we get attached, how we get hooked in, how we get contracted, how we get caught in attachments. And now this is a little bit like the bad news. You know, you're being asked to pay attention to the bad news inside of you, the kind of your shortcomings where you get caught. But the hope is that as you deepen in this practice, you start seeing it as good news, that you can see how you get caught.

And it's actually inspiring to see, Look at that. That's greed, and I saw it, and now I can work with it, now I can find freedom from it. I suppose, Oh no, my hate. I shouldn't be hating. Good Buddhists don't hate. I'll go. I'll go sit in the back of the hall. No one notices, you know. I'll just kind of, you know, paint it over so that, you know, I pretend it's not there. But rather is to see how these things operate, turn towards them, and appreciate that by doing that you don't give in to them.

But that, yes, now you can work with it. Now, you can find your freedom and relationship to it. So you stop and really look at that. How the mind works on this, operate. So the first of these. So there's five exercises, five different areas, processes to pay attention to. And the first one could be said to be the most important for a *vipassanā* students, people who do mindfulness

practice, and if you go on a mindfulness retreat. It's almost every retreat. Traditionally, there is a talk on the hindrances at some point, or there's mention of them. The five hindrances is the first process that we study, first *dharma* process, first truth that we start noticing, and we say not.

These hindrances are—the word hindrance in the original language of Pāli means to cover over. In English, it became the hindrances. They cover over, or they hinder our capacity for wisdom. They hinder or obstruct or cover over our insight. And they hinder our capacity to have clear, stable, concentrated mindfulness. They really be here and pay careful attention. And so the windshield has somehow become clear enough to see. And the hindrances are the rain maybe, or I don't know, the boulders. There was a boulder this last week right up on Lake Tahoe freeway. So as the boulders in front of us, and we have to kind of see them, and because if you don't see the boulders in front of you, yes, there's going to be an accident.

And the hindrances are accident-prone phenomena in our minds. They cause a lot of suffering. There's five of them. Here's actually seven, but there's two pairs that are considered kind of in the same category. So there's greed, strong desire. There is aversion or ill will. There is sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. These are the five. So these are the five. If you're going to do this practice, you should memorize this list.

And because you one kind of begins to, you know, when you sit down to meditate, you won't be able to notice when one or the other are operating. If you are lucky, the only one operates at once at a time, sometimes with multiple hindrance attacks. So you won't be able to recognize them, because in the recognition, the clear recognition is where we begin finding our freedom from them. The clearer the recognition, the less that you're in them. It's kind of stepping back and seeing it, as opposed to being in it and having it control you and run you or influence you. So you can't really recognize it that way. That way, that's freeing unless you learn to pay attention to it and learn to recognize it. So I always recommend those of you really interested in this practice memorize this list of five.

Then there's a beautiful analogy given for the five hindrances, and an analogy of a bowl of water that you can lean over, and if the water's really still and pure, you can lean over and see a reflection of your face in it. So in the ancient world, as mirrors were not that common, they used water to see, and so they only had these mirror bowls. Maybe, however, if you put a red dye into the water, you don't see clearly. There's a lot of red dye. You don't see at all, because you can't—no reflection. And that's supposed to be like greed or sensual desire, strong desires like, everything is coloured with my desire. You don't really see accurately.

Or if you take the bowl and you boil the water and its top of it is boiling, like, you know, bub-

bles, you're not going to be able to see. If I have the mirror effect, you can't see either. And that's what it's like when the mind is consumed with ill will. It's boiling over and it doesn't see clearly. Then you have the bowl where the water is covered with algae. And so, just like, you know, thick algae, you know, skin like nothing moves because it's so thick. And that's when the mind is with sloth and torpor, tiredness and lethargy. Then the fourth analogy is that of the bowl water that the wind is blowing and churning up the water and spinning it. And maybe the boulders, you know, white, you know, whitewash you now just. And that also you can't see, because it's all churned up from the wind. And that's like agitation and worry. The mind is all agitated, and you know, so you can't see clearly.

And then the last one is you kind of fill the bowl with mud, thick, gooey mud. And if you try to walk—the bowl's big enough like a pool—you are to walk through it, just so hard to walk through it. And that's the mind that's full of doubt. You can't get anywhere. You can't see anything accurately. You don't know what's going on. It's all murky, and every step is kind of like so hard to do. So that's one analogy for them.

Another analogy is what it's like to become free of them, and it says that when you become free of greed or strong sensual desire, it's like becoming free of debt. Somehow, if you're kind of, I know, if you're in debt, you're obligated to act and to pay it back and to do something, I guess. And so it feels really good to be free of debt. In the same way, it feels really good to be free of being caught in sensual desire. Strong desire to be free of illness is to be free of ill will because you're not—yes, you know it. Strong anger and ill will. We talked about having a fever. We're all hot, and it's kind of like a disease when we're consumed by ill will. And a story of, I know, the eighteen hundreds English physician who had such a problem with anger that he said, The next person who makes me angry is going to be the death of me, and I know for the next person. But sure enough, at some point, he had a heart attack from his, you know, when he got caught up in his fury at.

And then to be free of sloth and torpor is to be free of prison. Cause something of your kind of too lethargic, too caught in your kind of tiredness and boredom and lethargy. It's like you're kind of stuck on your couch or something. You can't get out of your house, out of bed, and so can't do anything. And so to be free of that is to be out of prison. Then the Buddha said to be free of restlessness and worry is to be free of slavery, because if there's a lot of restlessness and worry, it kind of consumes you, takes you over, and you're walking around in circles, or kind of just can't sit still, or it drives you, and you can't be in charge, and so it's kind of a slave to your restlessness and worry. And then the doubt is to be free of a sea. Oh, yes, doubt is to be free of—have escaped or crossed over a dangerous desert. So you're kind of parched

in your doubt, maybe. But it's dangerous to live in the world of doubt, and you can end up just kind of fading away or getting dehydrated and dying or something. I don't know. But when you are out of the wilderness, you are out of the desert. That's when you no longer have doubt. It feels pretty good.

So these analogies are great analogies for one, I think, for a particular reason, and that is that each of these things, when you are free of them—a prison, slavery, illness, death, all these things—I think it's a fairly common phenomenon for people to be happy, at least initially, finally out of prison. This is good. Finally, I'm no longer in debt. This is great. I'm not sick because one of the functions or one of the things we want to avail ourselves in this practice. The Buddha pointed to over and over again is, when you become free of these hindrances, allow yourself to be delighted, because the delight, that well-being, the joy of no longer being caught in them, nourishes and feeds the deepening of the practice. And then it's more interesting to want to let go of them or become free of them because you know that there's something better happening than being in them. And the better thing is to feel delight, and free, and happy, and kind of just more settled. It's a great feeling not to be caught by the hindrances.

So in the practice of mindfulness, then at some point you start seeing that underneath the mind state, some of the mind states are the hindrances, the mind state that's in the early and in the third foundation of mindfulness. You pose, I know them, the mind state, the general inner state of being that's more characterized by greed or lust as being a mind state of lust or greed. In the under the hindrances, you start seeing how the factor, the quality, the working of greed in mind is the very thing that then, if it's strong enough, colours the whole mood. In the third foundation, you see when the mind is consumed with ill will. In the fourth foundation, in the hindrances, the second hindrance, you see the working of ill will, the movement of grasping, of pushing, of hate, of hostility, of aversion. You actually see how that activity of the mind is happening as opposed to the general mood. Because if you start seeing the particular activity of the mind, what you're doing in the mind, then you can start becoming free of it. You can let go of it. You can relax it. You can start taking responsibility for it. If it's just a generalized mood, it's not so clear what to do. You know you can distract yourself maybe, but you can't. You know you don't do. So this fourth foundation is a very important one. We start seeing how the mind operates with the hindrances. It's very powerful just to see them and step back, see their present, step back from them, see them more clearly, and that encourages us through a process of deepening in mindfulness.

But the Buddha didn't stop there. The instructions are also to see if they're present, and

then understand: What or how is it they arise? And what does it take to let go of them? And what does it take to prevent them from arising again in the future? And so here is where the wisdom begins to operate, so that in the fourth foundation called the *dharmas*, it's also the wisdom factor, the truth how things work. We start seeing that not just that the hindrances are present, we get wise about what are the conditions that brought them about. So it might be, for example, that you are really distressed or really lonely or feel really kind of empty in some way. And so in response to that, to comfort yourself or distract yourself, we go look for some kind of sensual pleasure, some kind of object of desire. It could be a whole range of things. It could be food. It could be alcohol. It could be drugs. It could be sex. It could be pornography. It could be TV. It could be computer. It could be all kinds of things that are not that generally so healthy for us, and that often form a loop where if we do that kind of indicative behaviour, that kind of in order to try to kind of deal with our inner ill, a disease, unease, it can often create more unease, get us more alienated, more disconnected. And then there can be a stronger desire to do more of that behaviour. And sometimes some people get caught in a vicious cycle of it.

And so if we know that then, you know, I feel lonely or stressed or feel empty inside, that's a condition for getting caught in the hindrances, then we may be able to look for more healthy ways of meeting that, taking care of that. Are there healthy forms of pleasure and well-being that can fill us? Are things we can do? There are things we can do so. Or with ill will, it might be that one of the conditions for ill will is that we are filled with expectation. And if our expectations are not met, some people get very frustrated and very angry, but they didn't understand how much their expectation was kind of a condition for and how much they were living under expectation. Sometimes expectations weren't reasonable, but we can't start thinking that. So without seeing how we know the conditions by which that gives birth to the hindrances, so that also requires us to really take time with them, look at them, be with them, see them, see how they operate. Be quiet, calm enough, centered enough in our normal life that we can start tracking what is going on that leads up to them. And then, as we get more familiar with how all this works, then it becomes easier to discover how not to get caught by them, how to step back from them, how to let go of them. I don't have to do that. I can relax. And we start learning the different techniques we can to kind of settle them.

Some of these hindrances are dealt with through what's called antidotes. Sometimes people will practise loving kindness when they have a lot of ill will or anger. Sometimes people will practise relaxation practices when they feel a lot of restlessness. Sometimes people will—the classic antidote for sloth and torpor is clarity, clear mindfulness, stronger mindfulness.

Really going to see what's going on here. Try to wake up, brighten up the mind. An antidote for doubt is to consider what is inspiring for you, what you have faith in, since, come somehow settled back in that to help you with your practice further. And then once you've let go of these hindrances, then the last piece of wisdom is how to live so they're less likely to come back. And this might be the most important one. And this is where the delight that arises when the hindrances are not there, the sense of well-being that comes when not there is very important to notice. Even if it's very small, the relief of not being caught, you know, the absence of the hindrances, can feel nice. Take time to feel what it's like not to be caught in hindrances.

Some people are so driven that maybe they work really hard not to be caught by the hindrances, and finally they're free of them. That's nice. But then there's important things to do, so they're off to the next thing, the next hindrance, the next desire, the next ill will, because mind always has to be kept engaged. But to stop, take your time and sit and have a cup of tea, or do something, and really feel what it's like to be settled, to be calm, settled, to be free, to be out of debt, to be out of prison, to be out of slavery—all these things that to really be here and allow yourself to be nourished by that, nurtured by it. Let it feed you. Let it register in you what this feels like, because the more you let it register and feel the goodness, feel the well-being that comes, the more it becomes apparent. More easily you'll recognize it when it's there, the more easy you'll feed it and support, and the more it'll grow and become more present in your life.

So it's actually quite useful in the *dharma* practice to notice how, in doing the practice, any way in which doing the practice helps you feel nicer, better. Even if you're a little bit more calm than you were before, and maybe you're still restless, but you are calmer, appreciate it. Appreciation of these, of what, of the good things, tends to support it to happen more often and stronger next time. But if you don't take time to appreciate it, you're on to the next complaint, whatever. Then you don't benefit from, you know, what's happened there. So the fourth foundation of mindfulness has to begin with noticing the hindrances. It's very important for meditators, because at least in the Buddhist tradition, this is considered one of the primary forces of the mind that get in the way of meditation going deeper.

So as you're meditating, you find yourself kind of distracted or caught up in different thoughts and concerns, and it's hard to get focused. You might take a look around and see if what's driving the distraction or driving the, you know, not being present? Is it desire? Is it ill will? Is it sloth and torpor? Is it restlessness, agitation, or worry? Or is it doubt? And if one of those five, one of these categories of five are present and you see it, I'd encourage you to be happy.

Not happy because you're content that they're there and let's get into a better, but rather happy that you see it because seeing it is the *dharma* door, seeing it is the step forward to developing the wisdom we want to learn. And so you need to have these hindrances present enough so you can develop wisdom about them. If you're in a hurry to get rid of them because they're rather embarrassing, then you won't learn about them.

So look for opportunities next time you're meditating and a hindrance comes along. Say, finally, great. Let me now take a good look at this and start seeing how it operates. Really, it's kind of be present, and see it, and understand it, so that in the future you're less likely to be caught by it. So at some point in the future, how you can create the conditions where it doesn't arise at all, and then you're free of those. So we have five minutes or six minutes. Do you have any questions or comments you'd like to make about that?

Yes. What's a good antidote for greed and desire? What's a good antidote for greed and desire? One of the classic ones in Buddhism is to cultivate whatever you can do to cultivate good feelings inside your body to feel contented and happy and well-being. And so you want it, because often desire is desire for some to feel good. But if you can create a healthy feeling of good here, then there's no need to go out and get it. So meditation is a nice activity that the traditional antidote is generosity. To give, then take and get something. Offer, but then I offer. Be generous in a way that helps you feel happy, feel really good: Oh, that was a really good thing to do, like a good deed. And then let yourself feel the goodness of that. That's one of the classic antidotes.

There are other ones, like for a sexual lust. Sometimes, I know, it's a real problem. I imagine that the person you have lust for is a skeleton, or start visualizing certain body parts that for which you probably would decrease your lust. Whatever it takes, you know, because sometimes you know and you need strong medicine. Otherwise, we get in trouble. And when I was in Thailand, practising there with a teacher named Buddhādāsa, he had a kind of jungle monastery, but back corner of the jungle there was a made kind of a meditation hall, and monks in Tibet often like to have skeletons that they use for this purpose, and other purposes to contemplate death and Catholic monks sometimes also would have to that kind of, and so he had two skeletons hanging from the rafters hang down. One of them had a sign underneath it, and it said, Miss Thailand Nineteen thirty-two. So there are these kinds of antidotes.

I've tried some of the antidotes that you talked about. For me, loving kindness works the best, just letting go of the desire to have a certain belief about myself. And that was the openness to expansiveness of who I thought I was. And you mentioned, the antidote for sloth and tor-

por was clarity. And I was wondering if you could go a little bit deeper into what you meant by clarity of mindfulness. And another antidote for sloth and torpor, like in meditation, for example, is to do walking meditation and do it somewhat vigorously, so there's energy builds, for example, and so you got to break out of it somehow. I know that then that clarity means that brighten the mind. Suddenly the mind is kind of like mud, you know, swamp mind, and so you want to, you need to apply more energy of some kind. And so it's mental energy to try to see or brighten the mind, to see more clearly. And so you do it in small, little, you know, moment dosage: Oh, this is sloth. This is tiredness. This is dullness. Really dull. This is what it's like. Oh, it feels so heavy round my eyes. This is just keep looking, keep looking, keep recognizing. And some people find using the mental notes very helpful when there's sloth and torpor. Just keep on going, you know, Oh, tiredness, heavy sloth, hearing, touching, feeling. Just kind of noting. And maybe pick up even the speed of the noting just to get more energy. And that sometimes will help it to break through. And then, for many Americans, it helps a lot if you get enough sleep. More kind of sleep-deprived culture.

Maybe this is semantics, and Buddhism has a different explanation for it. But I find desire to be invigorating, and it brings focus. And I don't particularly feel discomfort desiring something or somebody. I know someone who's addicted to going to see prostitutes. It's very invigorating for him, and he struggles with it, and tries to find out—he doesn't break the cycle when he does, and then he always goes back. Well, you could desire also to run a marathon, or to be in shape, or, you know, get not a degree, etc. You know, it is semantics. Buddhism is not anti-desire. The word for the first hindrance is one of the—there's two different words used for the first hindrance. One of them is being avaricious, so really wanting other people's things. And the other is *kāmacchanda*, which is probably better translated as lust, but not just lust, sexual lust, lust for money, lust for anything, kind of strong desire for sensual things. But there's all kinds of healthy desires and useful desires. And like I suggested doing vigorous walking meditation, we have to have desire to do that. To become free of the hindrances is a desire. So I think having healthy desire in Buddhism is when we tap into what inspires us, when we have faith, awakens a strong desire to practice that can sometimes break us out of these kinds of things. So desire in terms of its by itself is not a problem. It's actually a very important point, and I appreciate your bringing up, because how often people hear talks like this and think, Oh, Buddhism has a problem with desire, not supposed to have any desire at all. And generally, people who have no desire at all are depressed. So, you know, that but Buddhism is not trying to make it, you know.

Another thing finding is that if you detach yourself actually from the outcome, sometimes you

desire something, and you go through the process to get whatever it is that you desire, but sometimes doesn't work out. And if you're okay with that, actually it, like, is not terrible. Yes, and if you, if you really enjoy doing more than getting or succeeding, then you can always be happy if you do a little bit like that. You know, I like doing things and more than succeeding because I'm happy to succeed, but then I then once I've seen it, then I just let it go, and kind of is like the water to wash us off the boat and disappears, and then on to the next thing that I like to do. So we should stop, but I want to keep people a captive audience here. So it's after nine o'clock. So thank you all very much.