

Sunday Dharma talk

Gil Fronsdal

September 13, 2026

Keywords: *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, *nīvaraṇa*, *vipassanā*, *samādhi*, five hindrances, sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and regret, doubt

If we take the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as a journey, a journey of settling right here where we're at, settling in the midst of how we are here and now, becoming simpler, but also becoming more awake, more aware. I use the word aware, awareness, a lot. But the way that I use it, it's kind of a synonym for being awake. What is that, after all? What is that?

It's not exactly something that you do or point to. Exactly. There's nothing. You're awake. There's nothing to point to, like, "There it is. That's the spot." Or, "I'm awake."

But it's a clear clarity, a vitality, that seems to characterize that aspect of beingness. So, to be aware, and we're slowly—not making ourselves aware, but slowly in this process—evoking a capacity to be luminously aware, to be brightly aware, to be clearly aware here. I could almost say to be luminously awake here.

So, in this process of the journey, we get to the fourth foundation, and now the mind is hopefully simple enough, steady enough, that it has the ability to know some of the inner mental processes that are operating. And to be able to know it without it triggering a lot of thinking, but rather it evokes even more sense of being aware, being present, being awake. Now, for the activities of the mind too, and the first one that's talked about are the five hindrances.

The word *nīvaraṇa*, translated as hindrances, literally means a cover over, to obscure something. So, it's said that it obscures our wisdom, obscures our capacity to concentrate. It obscures or covers over our ability to be free. It covers over the beauty of our mind, of our hearts, of our inner life.

And the idea that it does so is kind of suggested by the metaphor given by the Buddha: that the mind is kind of like gold that has a lot of impurities in it. Now, gold with impurities in it apparently is too hard to work; it can't be shaped. It's not malleable. So, part of the task of a goldsmith is to clean out the impurities from gold, so it's pure gold.

And that is malleable, it's workable, it can make something beautiful. And so the hindrances are the impurities in your gold. Or, if you don't like the word impurity, because, you know, I don't know why you wouldn't, but maybe you don't, instead of impurities, you can call them the things that make your mind unworkable, too hard and stiff to be fluid and malleable and creative and adaptable to what's happening in the moment.

But I love this metaphor because it implies that the mind is something beautiful and precious, valuable, gold, or, if you prefer, the heart-mind. And I think this works well because, as we practice, it becomes simpler and simpler, more and more awake, more present, less distracted, less caught up. We sometimes have an experience of the expanded mind, a mind that feels ultimate, a mind that's concentrated, a *samādhi* mind, unified, a mind that has some degree of being liberated from preoccupations and attachments.

And it seems like it's pretty precious, pretty wonderful. And to value that: this is valuable. Why mess it up? So there's this precious thing inside, a wonderful thing.

And the hindrances are what obscure them or make them difficult to work with. The mind is difficult to work with. And so, an important task for any *vipassanā* student is to become skilled at recognizing the hindrances when they arise. There it is, without being embarrassed or disturbed by it, or making a self out of it.

It's just a hindrance. But to be skilled at recognizing it: there it is. Skilled at recognizing how it is a hindrance, how it decreases the quality of the mind, how it makes things more difficult. We lose something in the process of being caught up in the hindrances.

To know something about how to give them up, something about how to loosen their grip, something about letting them go. And to learn, as we move on with *satipaṭṭhāna*, to learn how to see them for what they are, but neither needing to get rid of them nor hold on to them, but to see them deeply, in a deep intimate way, as part of the process of change, part of the river of changes that we're always in. And if they're just part of the river of changes, they're not a problem.

So there are two major metaphors of the hindrances that the Buddha gives. One of them is to describe how we lose our freedom with the hindrances, and the other is how we lose the clarity of vision through the hindrances. So the first one, how they prevent our freedom, freedom of the mind, is that the Buddha says that desire, the first hindrance, sensual desire, puts us in the kind of loss of freedom that happens when you're in debt.

If you're in debt, you're kind of obligated. You have to kind of do something. You have to respond. You have to go ahead and pay up what you feel is due someone.

And being in debt is not a happy thing to be. And there's a kind of loss of freedom when there's debt. And I think there are a lot of people in this country who are struggling with that debt, and it doesn't feel good. They feel very limited by it.

Many years ago, Ajahn Amaro, when he was relatively young, from 35 years ago, came to San Francisco, and someone gave him a tour of San Francisco. They walked around the financial district, and his guide explained to him the American financial system. And then, at some point, the guide said to Ajahn Amaro, "You're more wealthy than most Americans." And he was a little stunned to hear that.

"What do you mean? I'm a renunciant. I have no money, zero money. How can I be more wealthy?" "Because you have no debt."

So sensual desire somehow puts us in debt. We treat it like a debt we have to pay. That we're obligated. We have to follow through.

We have to pay up. We have to follow. You have to do this desire thing. And so we're kind of caught in the cycle of thinking about it a lot, and we're not really free because the thoughts of desires have taken over.

The second metaphor for the second hindrance is being sick. So, the second hindrance is ill will, hostility, and how that's a kind of poison that makes us sick. Some people don't see it that way. Some people are so enamored with the vitality, the energy, the righteous self-righteousness, and the sense of purpose that comes with anger, that they really get off on it.

But, in fact, it's a poison which is poisoning them and creating something quite ugly inside. So there's a kind of loss of freedom because we're not free to live a healthy life. Some people are addicted to anger, addicted to hostility. So, a sickness.

The third is sloth and torpor. I sometimes like to translate it as rigidity and resistance, because it's not ordinary tiredness. And the metaphor for this is being in prison. We're so caught in this rigidity, caught in this sloth, torpor, this lethargy, this resistance, that we can't quite act.

We can't get ourselves to do, to practice, to do what needs to be done. The fourth hindrance is restlessness and regrets, and this metaphor is that of being a slave. Because with enough restlessness, agitation, regrets, those are controlling you; those are in charge. And there's a loss of freedom because they're churning away, we're ruminating, we're caught up, we're spinning round and around in circles, with some other energy which is not the energy we want to have.

Something besides us is in charge. And then the fifth hindrance is doubt, indecision, and that is the metaphor of being lost in the desert. And being lost is not being free. Being lost means you can't find your way.

You can't do what you need to do. So doubt is a kind of disorientation. One of the classic understandings of what doubt is in the teachings of the Buddha is not necessarily doubt, but more indecisiveness, not knowing what to do. Not knowing what is healthy and unhealthy, what is wholesome, what is not wholesome, in the next moment, this moment.

So desire, sensual desire, kind of binds us like debt. Ill will kind of poisons us. Sloth and torpor confine us. Restlessness and agitation control us. Doubt disorients us.

So they can have a powerful influence on us, and, you know, there's a loss of freedom when we're caught in them. Sometimes it doesn't feel like that because there's some of them, with desire and ill will, where it can feel like freedom is found in acting on them. And the main hindrance is the fact that I'm on retreat, and that's easy to rectify. Just go down to downtown Santa Cruz, and whatever I want is there.

I'll come back in forty-eight hours. So that's a metaphor that has a lot to do with freedom and the loss of it. And so then, you know, the opposite is to be free of that, to be free of toxins and poisons, free of ill health, to be free of confinement, to be free of being controlled, to be free of disorientation, being lost.

For the other metaphor, it has to do with the clarity by which we see things, and as hindrances, they obscure. And each hindrance obscures us in different ways. So the emphasis here is not freedom, but rather clarity of seeing what's here, clearly what's happening. So they change our vision.

They make it difficult to see well. So the first one, for sensual desire, is like—they all have to do with water. And remember, you know, how much water has been a metaphor all along here in the suttas, the two beautiful lakes for practice. So now the lakes are colored.

Someone poured dye in, and so you can't see clearly because it's colored. Seeing through colored glasses, they say in English, you don't see clearly. And so sensual desire changes our vision and biases us in a certain direction.

And then ill will, hatred, is water which is boiling. And boiling water—you know, the volcano under the lake begins to go off, and it's boiling on the surface—so you can't see into the lake anymore because you can't see past all the bubbles and foam and things. And then for sloth and torpor, the metaphor is that algae has grown on top of the lake. It's just covered with algae.

You can go in, but, you know, it's full of algae everywhere. You can't see through it to what's underneath. So sloth and torpor, something just shuts down, and you can't really see what's happening.

The fourth, restlessness and regrets, is a wind-swept lake. The wind is blowing and just creating waves and churning and foam, and the top of the water is all agitated because of the strong wind. And so you can't see through the water; it's not clear. So restlessness creates all this energy that spins and makes it hard to see through the wind.

And then the last one, doubt, is said to be water where all the mud from the mountainside has poured into the lake and filled it half full with mud. And then whatever mud is left is just floating in the water, and you can't get in there without seeing. You can't see anything. Put your head under, like, you can't go under the mud to see it.

It's all just too difficult to see, dark and obscured. And I also think of mud metaphors: to try to walk through water that's, you know, three feet deep in mud, you're not going to go very fast. So these metaphors, and then we have the metaphor I talked about earlier of the river. The water gets siphoned off because the farmers have built irrigation ditches.

And that one's particularly evocative because it's clear that that is something that's constructed, something that's been made. And so it suggests that we do something in our mind. We're constructing. We're building up.

We're making something when we're involved in the hindrances. It's quite popular and common to say, "Well, the hindrances are common, so don't feel shame or regret that you have them." It's just very human to have them, and that's definitely true. But that doesn't really get you off the hook.

We're a little bit squeamish in this culture these days about not being guilty, not being shamed, not being wronged, not being somehow bad. I mean, because there's so much that's overdone, people suffer so much from being caught in those constructs. And so then we swing too far the other way and say, "Oh, don't worry, you're not responsible. This is just a natural thing, and just be, just, you know, be mindful and forgive yourself."

Which I don't want to joke about too heavily, because maybe these are good teachings, for sure, at times. But sometimes they're overdone, and we don't realize that we have some responsibility here. That we're doing something, and what is it we're doing that we want to look at and see clearly? What are we prioritizing?

What are we choosing? When we get caught in the hindrances, are we really that innocent? And are you really innocent in the loss of freedom? And what's your role in recognizing how

you've lost your freedom with them?

And what can you do? So, one of the things that I've come to understand about what the hindrances are: each of the hindrances has a subject that they're concerned with. Desire has the object of desire. There's something in the world that you want.

It could simply be that you want a better meditation cushion to sit on. You spend the whole hour, because it's such a nice thing to have, designing it. And then you think it would be nice to get, you know, probably my ticket to wealth, and I'll create a business plan. And so we're caught up in sensual desires: desire for wealth, desire for pleasure, desire for—then I'll be popular.

People will love me so much because I'm wealthy, a zafu maker. And then all these delusions of grandeur arise, and it's a whole story that's so captivating. So there's an object, there's a subject that we're concerned with, and then there's a story connected to it. There's an imaginary story, sitting and meditating, that's being repeated over and over again.

And part of the strength of the desire, or a lot of the strength, comes from the story-making mind. Part of the reason it obscures and hides things from us, why we lose our freedom, is because we're caught in these stories. And stories are occasionally true enough. Occasionally, they're more like the fish that keeps getting bigger, or you never even had a fish, but you still tell the story.

And so, ill will: there's some object of the ill will. It could be that your cushion, your zafu. It's amazing how hard they get if you sit on them long enough. And so, you know, you're really angry with the hard zafus.

And rather than getting caught up in desires for nice, cushy, comfortable ones, you're making a plan for how to first slash it with a knife and then burn it. I mean, this is obviously the solution to this problem. And so you might as well review and think about all the kinds of ways you're going to get back at that zafu. So there's a story going around.

And probably the zafu intended to harm you. You know, it was waiting for you. It had a plan, positioned itself in the rack just to make sure that you would pick it out. And it just really hated you because maybe you didn't pick it last time you were here, and so certainly it feels neglected, and so it's angry with me.

So I'm justified to be angry with it. Anybody who's going to argue with me gets it. So this poor zafu. And then sloth and torpor has some story.

One common story is, "It's too hard. It's too difficult. I can't do it. It's overwhelming. I'll be

crushed.”

“I’ll be broken. I’ll be somehow overwhelmed.” And there’s a story connected to that. The subject might be the grief we have, the sadness we have. The subject might be what we’re trying to accomplish and do in life, and it just seems like it’s too much.

Or there are stories, beliefs, that come along with things that make us kind of give up and drain us of our energy and vitality. The stories around restlessness are maybe stories that there are a lot of things that you should be doing. That you should see the to-do list. And everyone’s expecting me to do them all in the next two hours.

And it’s like, where do I start? And what do I do? What do I go do first? And how do I do this?

And then the regrets—certainly, it’s healthy to have some regret if you’ve harmed someone or harmed yourself. But to ruminate over that, which means to chew it like the rumination of a cow, to chew it over and over and over again, that’s when it becomes a hindrance. That’s telling yourself the same story over and over again. Like the fish gets bigger, that crime gets bigger and bigger.

Maybe the more you tell yourself the story, the more it drains something and makes you feel lousy, and the more you feel lousy around it, you know, the more powerful the story is, and it just kind of becomes harder and harder. And doubt is probably some repeated subject of uncertainty, not knowing what to do, not knowing what to decide. And then there are stories of what that means, or stories of what I should be thinking over and over again, and looking at all the options and thinking about it.

So I don’t know if I characterized your hindrances by that little narrative, but the idea is that part of what gives them their power is the story-making mind. And to see that it has some subject that usually is not the present-moment reality here. I mean, it might be the zafu, but the zafu is not really the issue. And it’s not really what’s most intimate and important here.

But to start seeing, “Oh, look, I’m involved in a story. I’m lost in the preoccupation with the same story, the same object that’s not here.” And this is where the important—then I can see how there’s a loss of freedom. And then the lawyers in the mind will say, “Well, of course. You’re supposed to feel bad. You’re supposed to be concerned with this.”

“You’re justified to have desires. It’s right. It’s very human to have sensual desires. By golly, I’m going to continue sitting here, having those fantasies over and over and over again, until you’re sick and tired of it.”

But to recognize the loss of freedom—and I can’t argue with you that that’s the case. This is

really something you have to see for yourself. And that's why having this appear at the fourth foundation after, you know, after two weeks of sitting here, then maybe you have a reference point. That you see and have known yourself well enough here on the retreat that you can feel when you get caught in these hindrances, which is a very human thing to do.

It can happen any time on retreat. But there's a reference point that's different. Well into the retreat, then maybe you can see the loss of freedom. And then the idea is not to succumb to them, to not give in to them, to not allow yourself to be overwhelmed or discouraged by them.

And this is where having deep faith and trust in this practice of showing up, being upright, having a steadiness in practice, a steadiness that holds you present, a steadiness that brings you, makes you more awake. An intention: "I'm going to meet this. I'm going to be present for it." There are a variety of ways that we tap into what awakes us, tap into what evokes a certain kind of stance and orientation of being attentive and being present and seeing, rather than losing our freedom.

Here, we gain our freedom by evoking, bringing alive, being awake, being present, being intentionally here to be mindful, to see clearly what's here. And in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, what it says is that the instructions are: when there is a hindrance, when one of these is present, know that it's present. And by now, the hope is you know something about what knowing can be like. Knowing is not just a casual noticing.

Knowing is a powerful act of the mind. "Oh, this is desire. Wow, this is desire." Kind of like you really see it in the moment, where the seeing and the knowing has its own power, its own strength, its own kind of evocative moment for attention and intentionality. Not a knowing that is stressful, not a knowing that agitates you, but the opposite: a clarity, a steadiness.

"Look, this is desire." Well, you know, this is kind of like desire. It's kind of a nice desire, but I know I have the desire, but, you know, I'm supposed to investigate it. Yeah, yeah, it's a good story.

Yeah, eventually I'll kind of see it more clearly. I know if I keep showing up, and, but, you know, it's very interesting, the story, and the desire is a good one, and it's probably justified. After all, it's just about food, and, you know, they don't really feed us enough sweets here, and so of course I have the desires. And yeah, I know that I have desire.

And you're kind of wishy-washy and kind of swimming in the murky waters of desire, as opposed to, "Whoa, I'm going to sit up straight here. This is having desire. This is what it's like. Let me know it. Let me feel it."

So the knowing is this powerful act. I think of it as the powerful act of a flower opening. Isn't that amazing? So your powerful act of knowing opens something into a freedom of knowing and seeing and being present.

"Wow, this is desire, and I know I have desire." And the knowing is not tied to the desire. The knowing is not half in the desire, ready to run off with the desire. It's like standing on my own two feet, and desire is here.

So it's very strong. When desire is there, know that it's there. And then the Buddha goes on to say something very interesting. He says, "When desire is not there, know that it's not there."

This is mostly, I think—I mean, there are a lot of desires which aren't present, so don't get busy naming all of them, because that doesn't make sense. But if you've been struggling with a desire for some time, and then it's no longer there, take time to feel and know what that's like. Know, "This is what it's like to not have that sensual desire." This is what it's like, not caught up in dessert food, dessert thoughts, and stories.

This is what it feels like in the body. It felt in the body in one way to have the hindrance, and now the absence of it. My body feels different. Maybe feeling and recognizing the freedom that comes when it's not there.

And then the Buddha goes on to say, recognize the arising of it, or how it arises. And now we're getting into a very important area of practice. And that is, as the practice deepens, as we get more and more settled in the present moment, it isn't that you find yourself swimming in a hindrance and it's been there for five minutes before you recognize it. But rather, you're quiet enough and still enough, you see it being born.

You see that you were minding your own business, and then there were dessert thoughts that arose, and, "Oh, there's a desire for dessert, and that's a good desire to have, isn't it? I wonder what recipes I like. I want one of my favorite desserts," and suddenly you're off in the dessert world.

But you were right there, and you didn't go that far because you saw right away, "Oh, there's a desire for dessert," and you knew it with that clarity. I'm suggesting you take a stand on your own two feet and say, "Oh, I just saw it. It just arose. It wasn't there, and now it's there."

There's a lot of wisdom. There's a lot of freedom to be had when you see it just as it arises. It's easier to put a question mark after it. It's easier not to be fooled by it or believe in it.

We say, "Oh, it was not there; now it's here." It's easier to see how you lose your freedom,

how you lose clarity. But now I see it. And then the Buddha goes on to say something very unusual for the *Satipaṭṭhāna*.

I think it's the first time he says this in the text. Know how to abandon it. Know how to let it go. And that's kind of a big ask, so maybe there are some stepping stones to it.

I don't know what the Pāli literally means, but maybe it's lightening up on it. Maybe it's stepping away from it and seeing it. Maybe it's letting go of the attachment to dessert thoughts. "I'm gonna not."

I feel the tension in my mind. I feel the grasping, the leaning into those dessert thoughts. At least I can not do that. Let me relax the tension.

Let me settle back, so I'm not leaning towards the kitchen. And that's a beginning to let go of it, a beginning to free yourself from it. And what I find interesting about this is that this is one of the more active actions the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* offers to us. The first active one is to feel your whole body and then relax your body.

That's pretty good. The second active one is to abandon the hindrances. And it makes some sense to have these be abandoned because they're constructs of the mind. They're irrigation channels you've dug.

They're things, they're stories, we're building up and creating, that often are stories that maybe sometimes have you as the main character of the movie, of the story. And so there's this construct. So you have a role here in perpetuating it and building and making it. And you have a role in letting it go, saying, "No, no, thank you. That's enough."

And then the question is, if you're able to do that, how can you do the letting go in a wholesome way? How can you do the letting go so the letting go itself isn't tainted by one of the hindrances? You're letting go because you have a desire for the pleasure of freedom. "I can't wait to taste it again."

Or I'm letting go of ill will, or any of the hindrances, with ill will. "I really hate having dessert thoughts all the time. They're pleasant, and I hate them because I have important work to do here, and I'm supposed to be a good meditator. So I really need to blow them out of existence."

The idea is to do this in a skillful way, in a wholesome way. Maybe letting go means just taking a step back and seeing them clearly for what they are. Maybe that's all that's needed. You've let go, and now the hindrances are on their own.

You know, you're not feeding them anymore. You're not telling the stories anymore, and

that's letting go. Maybe it's letting go of the thoughts. Maybe by now you've learned something about how you can soften thoughts, let go of thoughts, let go of the tension in the mind, the thinking mind that holds on to thoughts.

Maybe you've learned something about how to understand the emotions underneath our thinking, so that we can get to the root of why we're having all these dessert thoughts. It might be that underneath it all, you're lonely, and that's actually the emotion that's feeding it. And that needs a different attention than letting go. But maybe then it's easier to let go of those thoughts about dessert if you've identified what really needs attention here.

And that gets to the last point I want to make today about these hindrances. This idea of approaching them in wholesome ways and seeing them clearly and doing this work and not being caught by them is that I think one of the ways to approach dealing with the hindrances is because you do it out of love. Not that you love the hindrances. The hindrances are the very thing that obscures your love, obscures some deep connection to yourself that is precious.

And to know the hindrances out of love for yourself, that doesn't mean you have to love the hindrances, but you also don't have to hate them. You just let them be. But out of love for yourself, you want the best for yourself. You don't want yourself to be harmed.

You don't want to lose your freedom. So then, approach them—not to love them, as I said—but tap into your own love for yourself, and for what's happening here, and the process you're involved in, and the love of the practice. And maybe if that can awaken you, that can awaken attention, that can motivate attention, maybe that can help support you to find a way to practice with the hindrances, to know them clearly, to be able to identify them when they first appear.

To be able to see what is a healthy way, in loving yourself, to free yourself from them, to let them go—is there a way of doing that? And then doing, engaging the hindrances this way, you know, it's really the second active activity that we're suggested to be doing: to abandon the hindrances. And it might be a gradual process.

But one of the things that this abandoning, letting go, hopefully evokes in you, is that as you learn to let go in such a way that you become more aware in the process, there's a letting go into awareness, a letting go into greater clarity. And then at some point, what you might see is not necessarily the abandoning of the hindrances, but something much more profound. And that is leaving the hindrances radically alone, and just simply seeing.

Whatever all the different factors of the hindrances, all the different activities, all the different mental processes are going on, are just phenomena arising and passing, coming and going,

appearing and disappearing. And to settle back and watch the river of change that's even present in the hindrances. And it's a way that the hindrances then disappear in terms of their content, in terms of their power, in terms of their subjects, in terms of even themselves.

Because the clarity of attention has gotten so clear that you just see them as processes. You see them as activities that are coming and going, flowing, moving, changing. And that's one way to become free of the hindrances: to see them as part of the endless stream of change that's coming through.

So I hope that this talk on the hindrances can inspire you or support you to find a way to sit still, upright, metaphorically upright, in the middle of yourself, to see with more clarity, hear what's happening. And if it's a hindrance, part of your task as a *vipassanā* student is to take time to become more familiar with them. See them clearly. See the loss of freedom.

See how they obscure your vision. See what they are themselves. Find out for yourself if they have subjects of preoccupation. See for yourself if there are stories connected to them.

And when you feel like you see them and know them well, and find you can return to a clear knowing of the hindrances, then and only then maybe there comes a time where it's appropriate to let them go, and have it, and take, and feel a taste of the freedom, the release that letting go provides. Oh. Thank you.