

Dhammas (1 of 5) The Five Hindrances

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Hello. For this week, I would like to discuss the fourth foundation of mindfulness. The foundational teachings of the Buddha on mindfulness practice come from a text that is sometimes called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It has four different areas in which to cultivate this clear awareness of mindfulness.

Over the last four months, I've dedicated one week to each of the first three foundations. I talked about mindfulness of the body in June, *vedanā* in July, and *citta* in September. Some of you were there for those talks. If you missed them, you could listen to the recordings on AudioDharma.

The fourth foundation of mindfulness is called the foundation of the *dhammas*, the *dhammas*. It's commonly said that the word *dharma* has many meanings. People

have struggled to figure out what the proper meaning is in relation to the fourth foundation.

I propose translating *dharma* as “action” or “activities.” One meaning (among many) of *dharma* is actions. These are not just actions that we do, but activities of the mind. What we’re doing in the fourth foundation is building on the foundation of the previous three. We’re now taking an interest in the activities of the mind that either keep us in bondage or set us free. Either those that keep us in the karmic stream or those that lead us into the Dharmic stream, which was the topic of last week’s talks.

Mindfulness of the *dhammas* is laid out progressively, as many things are in the suttas, almost like a map of practice. It begins with the Five Hindrances. I don’t know if this is still the case, but the hindrances used to be a standard talk given on the second day or so of weeklong or ten-daylong insight meditation retreats.

It’s really invaluable to understand how the hindrances work. These are five forces in the mind that act like a black hole, where the gravitational force is so strong that light doesn’t come out. In our case, its pull is so strong that awareness doesn’t come out. Our awareness gets sucked in. We get involved or lost in a hindrance in a way that’s unproductive for clear awareness.

The Five Hindrances are sensual desire, ill will, sloth and resistance or sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse or regrets, and doubt or uncertainty. Sensual desire is the first hindrance taught at vipassana retreats. One reason for this is that sensual desire is often the coarsest or the first line of mental activity that gets in the way of becoming settled in meditation.

Sensual desire has a lot to do with a desire for things. In fact, the first three parts of the fourth foundation (hindrances, aggregates, sense spheres) can be seen as expressions or manifestations of desire.

The first two hindrances are the desire for sensual pleasures and the desire for getting rid of something or pushing it away.

The third hindrance is sloth and torpor – sloth and resistance. Particularly what we call resistance is the desire to not participate, to shut down, or go numb. So, sloth and torpor isn't just as innocent as being tired. It's wanting not to pay attention or be here – and instead, being deflated, maybe because we cannot fulfill our desires or we're not satisfied with them.

The fourth hindrance is restlessness and regrets. Agitation or restlessness can often come because of our unfulfilled desires. We don't know how to fulfill our

desires. Regrets can often come when we had a desire that was not fulfilled. Perhaps, we didn't do what we had hoped to do. Maybe we did something that in retrospect we wish we hadn't done because our desires were a little bit askew or a little bit off.

Finally, the fifth hindrance is doubt. Doubt is when we're not sure what to do in relation to all of this.

So, we get pulled into the world of objects, of things, of experiences, of people. These five hindrances can be the fuel for getting lost in that world, sometimes for decades. If we settle the hindrances down, then we're ready to take on something more subtle that keeps us distracted or keeps us from getting *really* settled. That has to do with various kinds of attachments or identifications as self. We're working through deeper ideas of self, which are called the Five Aggregates (the second part of the fourth foundation).

When that is settled – when attachment to self is no longer there – there is a simpler desire that is left. And that's just simple desires for anything and everything – just simple experiences in the moment. We hear a sound – or a taste, whatever it might be – and there's a movement for or against it. This is called mindfulness of the sense spheres (the third part of the fourth foundation) – how we experience sense experience in the moment at all the different sense doors.

Once that quiets down, the Dharmic stream has a chance to surface. Then there can be the arising of the Seven Factors of Awakening (the fourth part of the fourth foundation) – seven wonderful qualities of this Dharmic stream that begin coursing through us almost like a stream when it gets strong. These core states of meditation set the foundation for a quiet, calm, steady mind that can then see the fifth part of the fourth foundation, which is the Four Noble Truths – having the insights that lead to liberation. These are progressive and we can go through them.

Today we'll talk briefly about the hindrances, and tomorrow we'll start going through the other parts of the fourth foundation. It will be a whirlwind tour of these big topics.

I have given classes on the hindrances that are on AudioDharma. You can look them up if you want to review the hindrances in more depth. I strongly encourage you to do this. I'd like to think that vipassana students, especially ones in the early period of their practice, should become experts on the hindrances – to get a PhD in the hindrances – to really understand them, to see them coming, to be able to recognize them, to know how to work with them.

The way that the Buddha discusses the hindrances in this text, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, he says very simply that when there is one of these hindrances, one recognizes it is there. When the hindrance is not there, one recognizes it is not there. If the hindrance has not occurred yet, one is present, bright, and clear enough to recognize it arising.

We'll talk more about this idea of seeing the beginning of the arising of something. It's phenomenally important. It's only possible if the mind is steady and stable so that we can see the arising of things. And then we recognize that we've abandoned it. We recognize that it's gone away. We recognize: "Yeah, it's really gone. It's not coming back. Wow!"

As mindfulness and concentration get stronger, we have the ability to let go easily. Seeing it go is meant to inspire faith and confidence in this practice – that we're not stuck in these hindrances. We have some agency around them and we should exercise that. There is a healthy desire to let go of the hindrances. It's not easy to do. That's why I say we want to do a big study – to get the equivalent of a PhD in the hindrances – to really understand well how to do this and how to prepare the ground so that we can avoid getting caught in the hindrances.

We learn to let go of the hindrances. There comes a time when the mind is so stable and begins to have such a feeling of freedom, we recognize that the hindrance is not going to arise again, at least in the short term or in this state that we're in. It might come back later. This is such a nice feeling, especially when we have been caught in the hindrances for a long time and have been struggling with them. It's *such* a relief to have them go away and then feel confident that for now, they're not here.

Nīvaraṇa, the Pali word we're translating as "hindrances," literally means a covering. So, the hindrances are what covers over the depth of what goes on for us. It covers over our freedom, clarity, and wisdom. Part of the reason to practice with the hindrances and have them quiet down is so that we can see clearly. Then wisdom can begin operating in relationship to what goes on.

Part of that wisdom is to begin to understand the nature of desires, to know which desires are healthy to have, and how to have healthy desires in a healthy way. By no longer getting pulled into the world of desires of the hindrances, then we can have more freedom and more ability to have this healthy desire: "Yes! What I'm going to do is to practice mindfulness. What I want to do is to be present here. Yes! Recognizing what's happening in

the present moment is better than not recognizing and wandering off in the highways and byways of my mind.”

So, the Five Hindrances, a part of the fourth foundation of mindfulness – a journey from our contracted, difficult states to liberation. Thank you.