THE FIVE HINDRANCES-PANCA NIVARANA

At the beginning of the section of the Satipatthana Sutta that focuses on mind-objects, Dhammanupassana, these stanzas are found:

The Five Hindrances

“And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects? Here a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five hindrances. And how does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five hindrances? Here, there being sensual desire in him, a bhikkhu understands: ‘There is sensual desire in me’; or there being no sensual desire in him, he understands: ‘There is no sensual desire in me’; and he also understands how there comes to be the arising of unarisen sensual desire, and how there comes to be the abandonment of unarisen sensual desire; and how there comes to be the abandonment of arisen sensual desire, and there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned sensual desire.

“There being ill-will in him…There being sloth and torpor in him…There being restlessness and remorse in him…There being doubt in him, a bhikkhu understands: ‘There is doubt in me’; or there being no doubt in him, he understands: ‘There is no doubt in me’; and he understands how there comes to be the arising of unarisen doubt, and how there comes to be the abandoning of arisen doubt, and how there comes to be the abandoning of arisen doubt, and how there comes to be the future non-arising of abandoned doubt.”

These five unwholesome mind conditioners obscure or drain the potency of wholesome mind conditioners. Buddhist commentaries use different comparisons to natural processes to describe their function. In one example, the purified mind is like gold, brilliant and malleable, free of contamination. The hindrances represent those contaminants. Another comparison is described by Gil Fronsdal in *Unhindered-A Mindful Path Through the Five Hindrances*, on page 8:

“An ancient Buddhist analogy for the hindrances is a steady, strong river. If channels appear on either side of the river, the water is diverted away. As this happens more and more, the amount of water in the river decreases, as does the strength of the river current. If enough water is redirected the river dries up. In the same way, when the hindrances are particularly strong, mindfulness dries up. Similarly, we can have a strong direction or intention in our lives, but that sense of purpose can be siphoned off by the hindrances.”

How does the “arising of unarisen sensual desire” happen? A few weeks ago I talked about a “seed” stimulus, called a *nimitta*. Usually the nimitta is referred to as the original mental formation from which a jhana process emerges, and this is certainly valid; however, any mental formation can originate from the nimitta, whether it is wholesome or unwholesome. The formation of a hindrance begins with a momentary stimulus, which could be the initial perception of a sinuous shape on the ground. A perception is a not-fully-formed mental formation. When the mind is not well trained with mindfulness, Right Effort and renunciation, that initial impression can more fully form, derived from previous memories of similar perceptions, *along with the emotional tone and urgency associated with the memory*. If the memory is of pleasant memories of prior experience with snakes, a mental process can become more fully formed through craving and clinging, becoming the hindrance of sensual desire. Alternatively, when the memory associations are unpleasant, even fearful, the hindrance of aversion and ill-will can arise. Of course, the sinuous object might be just a piece of rope!

I regard the hindrances as “energy dumps”, relying on modern neuroscientific discoveries for comparison. When neural pathways in the brain are activated, the arteries and capillaries supply fuel to them in the form of glucose and oxygen. When the pathways associated with the hindrances are “fed” with attention, the increased food supply makes them more densely interconnected and more easily activated.

Of course, when the river maintains a steady course, the water supply doesn’t diminish and instead supplies the flow of dhamma unhindered. The same is true of the supply of fuel to the neural pathways associated with wholesome mind conditioners, such as the Seven Awakening Factors, also in the realm of Dhammanupassana, to be discussed in future talks.

There are five countervailing functions that can drain the energy out of the hindrances called the Five Faculties (downloaded from Wikipedia):

1. faith or conviction or belief ([*saddhā*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saddha))
2. energy or persistence or perseverance ([*viriya*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viriya))
3. [mindfulness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness_%28Buddhism%29) or memory (*sati*)
4. stillness of the mind (*[samādhi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam%C4%81dhi%22%20%5Co%20%22Sam%C4%81dhi)*)
5. wisdom or understanding or comprehension ([*pañña*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom_in_Buddhism)).

In the course of my years of study and practice, I’ve created a graphic that demonstrates how these factors work, with some modifications: I’ve substituted “investigation” for “wisdom”.

ENERGY-overcomes sloth/torpor.

MINDFULNESS and RIGHT EFFORT

INVESTIGATION-overcomes sense desire & aversion

FAITH-overcomes doubt

STILLNESS-overcomes restlessness

The faculty of stillness overcomes restlessness; the faculty of energy overcomes sloth/torpor; the faculty of investigation overcomes the identification of sense desire and aversion/ill-will; the faculty of faith/confidence overcomes skeptical doubt. This process is dynamic, due to changing circumstances, so it must be monitored by mindfulness. Right Effort adjusts the interactions due to changing circumstances and makes appropriate adjustments.

The practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation cultivates these qualities, even when the mind becomes distracted by, say, a sinuous shape on the ground. Samadhi/passadhi (stable attention/tranquility) foster the stillness of the mind in a dynamic harmony with the energy of investigation. The mind’s operation is nimble enough to find the right mix between conviction (that’s a snake!) and investigation to foster a clearer determination of what the object is and the best way to respond. Even if it is a snake, the mind is calm enough and creative enough to find a way forward with no harm to the body or the snake!