Setting Aside The Five Hindrances

Panca Nivarana (pahn-chah nee-vah-rah-nah) is the Pali term for the Five Hindrances, unwholesome fabrications in the mind that interfere with the clarity and balance of attention and effort required for the path to Awakening. They are **Sense Desire, Aversion/Ill-Will, Sloth/Torpor, Restlessness/Worry** and **Skeptical Doubt**. These conditions can be recognized through the practices noted in the Satipatthana Sutta (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah soo-tah), the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse. Here is a quote from the sutta that describes the process:

“If sensual desire is present in him, he knows ‘there is sensual desire in me’; if sensual desire is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no sensual desire in me’; and he knows how unarisen sensual desire can arise, how arisen

sensual desire can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed sensual desire can be prevented….

(This systematic description tracks through the other four hindrances)

…“In this way, in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* internally … externally … internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising…of passing away…of both arising and passing away

in *dhammas*. Mindfulness that ‘there are *dhammas*‘ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the five hindrances.

pp.23-24 *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization* by Analayo

This quality of direct knowledge is a manifestation of coordination among the wholesome mind-conditioning factors, led by *sati* (sah-tee), typically translated as *mindfulness*. A more primary meaning for sati is *recollection* and is related to a skill cultivated by Brahman priests—recollection was required to recall and perfectly perform the rites and rituals associated with appeasing the gods. Recollection in the context of the Buddha’s teaching involves keeping in mind the transitory and impersonal nature of subjective experience, for example, as quoted above: “…and he knows how unarisen sensual desire can arise, how arisen sensual desire can be removed…He abides contemplating the nature of arising…of passing away…of both arising and passing away in *dhammas…*And he abides, not clinging to anything in the world.”

Other important wholesome mind-conditioning factors are *dhamma vicaya* (dah-mah vee-chah-yah), *investigation of mental phenomena* and *samma padhana* (sah-mah pah-dah-nah), *right effort*. Investigation discovers the phenomena as a transitory experience and right effort functions to: 1) Interrupt attention on the hindrance, 2) Redirect attention to a wholesome condition of the mind, 3) Sustain attention on this condition as long as that attention fosters Awakening, and 4) Ally with investigation to minimize the recurrence of the hindrance; these functions are monitored by sati, *re-collecting* them.

In summary, the primary wholesome functions are *atapi sati sampajanna* (ah-tah-pee sah-tee sahm-pah-juh-nah). *Atapi* is translated as *diligence*, *sati* is *mindfulness* and *sampajanna* is *clear comprehension*.

These unwholesome mental formations *hinder* the smooth and clear flow of experience. The commentaries provide two similes regarding the hindrances, relative to the freedom of the mind and compared to an otherwise clear pond that allows accurate views of what is beneath the surface; these similes will be mentioned regarding each hindrance. Here is a brief review of each of the hindrances—they can either occur momentarily, simply disrupting the smooth flow of sensations arising and passing away, or strongly, causing a total ignoring of wholesome mental formations:

**Sense Desire** is any preoccupation with a flow of mental formations that are organized through craving and clinging to pleasant feelings, either physical or mental in nature. Our consumer culture presents us with sense desire that is thoroughly researched to maximize the desire and disregard the potential negative consequences, either immediate, such as heartburn after eating too much calorie-rich food, or indirectly, as the degradation of southern Florida’s environment due to the vast sugar farms found there. Skillful practice notes with clarity and detachment the emerging formation and the degree of urgent impulsivity that accompanies it. This skillful noting catches the formation “just off-stage” before clinging takes full effect. A pleasant feeling is directly known as a pleasant feeling, without allowing it to aggregate into the misperception of an enduring self. The teachings regard the hindrance of sense desire as comparable to being indebted to the pleasant feeling and accompanying story. Sense desire can also be compared to water that is saturated with a beautiful colored dye, such that what is in the depths can’t be known. It is beneficial to observe mindfully the transient nature of the desired phenomenon and to reflect on the negative consequences of that sort of self-indulgence. A unified and tranquil mind is the most effective preventative for sense desire.

**Aversion/Ill-Will** is any preoccupation with avoiding or attempting to control and get rid of unpleasant feelings, either physical or mental. Aversion specifically is a contraction of the mind, a rigidity and tension in the mind and body. This is often accompanied by an urgent aggressive reaction of anger or attempts to destroy the unpleasant object. Aversion/ill-will can often be directed towards a person’s self-image when the mind creates an ideal self and the circumstances of the experience don’t fulfill that expectation. Aversion and ill-will is a root cause of the conflicts in our culture, and various powerful social entities find ways to use this to gain and maintain control of large segments of the populace all over the world. Once again, the protocol mentioned in the above quote provides a way to identify the emerging urgency of aversion before it becomes aggressive, fostering the ability to let go of the rigidity and aggression sooner rather than later. The specific antidote for aversion/ill-will is lovingkindness, directed either towards oneself or to whomever the aversion is directed. The mind is “hot” with aversion/ill-will, much like having a fever. Comparisons to a pond suggest that the water in the pond is “boiling”, which interferes with knowing what is in the depths.

**Sloth/Torpor** is dullness, drowsiness, and unresponsiveness in the mind. There are two hormonal systems in the mind that are integrated and mutually influential—the parasympathetic and the sympathetic. Sloth/torpor is the results of an overactive parasympathetic system. The mind is in a dreamlike mode and the body feels heavy and drowsy. This hindrance is more prevalent than typically understood—we walk around with a level of inattention and physical laziness that we don’t even realize. One of the benefits of strong commitment to intentionally investigating the breath is the increase in mental alertness. On a one-week retreat the mind “wakes up” after several days, provided there is a significant and persistent application of mindful investigation of the breath/body experience. The absence of sloth/torpor is a level of tranquil alertness. It is difficult to notice sloth/torpor initially as it has a normal quality of daily awareness, but repeated efforts to notice the quality of attention increases alertness over time, and then it becomes easier to notice the potential emergence of dullness and deny its access to consciousness. Sloth/torpor is compared to the mind being imprisoned, while the pond simile suggests the pond is filled with algae, sluggish and immobilized.

**Restlessness/Worry** is the opposite of sloth/torpor in that the sympathetic system is overactive. Restlessness is a fundamental obstacle to tranquility in the mind. It is curious to investigate the mind’s flow and discover that the mind can rapidly flip back and forth between sloth/torpor and restlessness, often without the worrying. The antidote for restlessness is tranquility, and this can be misperceived, actually being sloth/torpor. Tranquility comes about as the result of unification of wholesome mind-conditioning functions, reducing the agitation. As tranquility becomes more established it becomes easier to disregard the repetitive nature of worrying, particularly when the mind is well-trained to notice emerging narratives impersonally and return to the refuge of breath/body awareness. Restlessness/Worry is compared to being held captive, while the pond simile suggests the surface of the pond is disturbed by waves and turbulence, interfering with the ability to know what is in the depths.

**Skeptical Doubt** is the characteristic of conflict, confusion and resistance to commitment in the mind. It is like being at a fork in the road and not being able to decide whether to turn to the left, to the right or to turn around. The uncertainty regarding what is true and what is false in contemporary society provides an example of doubt, about neighbors, about vaccines, about the economy, about leadership, and so on. It is very important to realize that life is inherently uncertain, especially in a very complex and conflicted culture such as ours. *Cultivating mindfulness provides confidence in one’s ability to gather information and make well-informed choices, while also being prepared emotionally to contend with events when our choices are not favorable in outcome.* It is important to identify the characteristics of doubt early on and make best use of the clarity and emotional balance mindfulness provides in our decisions. Skeptical doubt is compared to being at a crossroads in the desert and being unable to make a choice as to commitments to moving forward. Regarding the pond simile, the water is saturated with suspended mud, preventing any knowledge of what is in the depths.