Hindrances Dharma Talk

June 5, 2024

We’ve been studying the Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Breath/body

Feelings

Mind

And now Mindfulness of Dhammas

Pali word dhamma (dharma in Sanskrit) has many meanings:

Truth

The law

The teachings of the buddha

Calling

Joseph G says, Each of the mental and physical elements is called a “dhamma.”

So it can get confusing.

The three previous foundations of mindfulness have focused on training the mind to concentrate (on breath/body, on feelings, on the mind) in meditation. So if the fourth foundation is translated as “mindfulness of mental objects,” we might be moved to ask, “How is that different from mindfulness of the mind? We just did that, right? What is distinctive in this foundation, then?

Analayo in his book on the Satipatthana Sutre says that dhamma means “categories of phenomena.” Or elements of experience and how they function. This seems helpful to me, because what the Buddha is doing here is making a comprehensive list of the basic organizing principles of his teachings. So we might take each of these lists of “mental objects” as templates to help us examine our own minds and move toward clarity. And they are:

The hindrances,

the aggregates,

the sense spheres,

the factors of awakening,

and the four noble truths.

JG says that in this foundation, the Buddha is showing us how to investigate these truths (these dhammas) for ourselves.

So you can see that this fourth foundation of mindfulness contains a wide scope of instruction.

In the Anapanasati Sutra, the Buddha gives specific directions (four for each foundation for a total of 16 directives) for learning how to focus and concentrate on each of the foundations of mindfulness. In this fourth foundation, mindfulness of dhammas, he gives this guided meditation instruction:

13. Breathing in, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.

Breathing out, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.

14. Breathing in I observe the disappearance of desire.

Breathing out I observe the disappearance of desire.”

15. Breathing in, I observe cessation.

Breathing out, I observe cessation.

16. Breathing in, I observe letting go.

Breathing out, I observe letting go.

As we move into the various lists of the fourth foundation of mindfulness, the Buddha gives us directions for post meditation investigation and gives us a protocol for how to work with each one of the lists. This might be the mother of all self-help books.

He strategically begins with the five hindrances, according to JG, “because the hindrances envelop the mind and obstruct it from developing wise discernment regarding skillful and unskillful actions. They hinder the mind’s developing concentration and other awakening factors, and they prevent the realization of the four noble truths.” (JG in *Mindfulness* )

The hindrances obscure our perception and in effect hobble us in all we are trying to do in our practice. By studying them, we can notice more clearly and directly how they influence and condition the mind. Often, they have become such entrenched parts of our inner landscape that we are not even aware of them. Or we conveniently ignore them. To notice them would require some sort of action, and so often we skillfully avoid action that seems difficult to undertake. But by not noticing them, they are silently impacting our lives in destructive ways and derailing our practice.

In *The Connective Discourses*, the Buddha said of the hindrances: “they are makers of blindness, causing lack of vision, causing lack of knowledge, detrimental to wisdom, tending to vexation, leading away from *nibbana*.”

So you know the five hindrances, undoubtedly, but as I read through them again, see if there is one that most affects you in your practice or in your life.

**Desire**:

craving comfort; clinging; compulsion; lust; wanting things to be a certain way; expecting certain behavior or result, etc.

**Aversion**:

anger, rage, resentment, indignation, irritation, vexation, discontent, loathing, abhorrence resistance, avoidance, hatred, dissatisfaction, striking out, running from discomfort, pushing away from what you have judged to be unacceptable, complaining

**Sloth and torpor:**

excessive desire can lead to weariness; forces in the mind that drain vitality and limit effort; lack of vitality; the body feeling heavy, lethargic, weary, or weak; lack of mental energy; the mind dull, cloudy, easily drifting in thought.

**Restlessness and worry:**

Difficulty concentrating and seeing clearly; compulsive energy; impulse to fidget or move; inability to focus; a mind jumping from one thing to the next; worry; anxiety; agitated feelings of regret

**Doubt:**

mental preoccupation involving indecision, uncertainty, lack of confidence; hard time settling into meditation or believing that meditation is worthwhile

It’s important not to think of these as personal flaws, irredeemable qualities that you struggle with. These are normal functions of a human mind (and central nervous system) that have formed as a result of all manner of causes and conditions leading to these circumstance. It’s important to recognize them and not blame yourself, but gain skill in disarming them if they are hindering you from moving forward in your meditation or in your life.

Wonderful book by neuro-scientist Bruce Perry, *What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*

In this book, Perry reframes the question our critical minds often use toward our unbeneficial behavior : “What is wrong with you?” Perry creates a useful reframe of that approach by asking instead “What happened to you?” What influences, what traumas, what role models, what social and culture standards, what events made one of these unbeneficial behaviors option for you?

Also a podcast with Bruce Perry being interviewed by Dan Harris of 10% Happier.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSvfvHe1_Yk>

So choose one right now that you can focus on for the remainder of this talk.

Good source for studying the hindrances is Gil Fronsdal’s book *Unhindered: A Mindful Path Through the Five Hindrances.* It is short, clear, concise and gives detailed examples of how the hindrances manifest in our lives, as well as brief descriptions of what causes and conditions might have led us to a particular hindrance.

This book, along with Joseph Goldstein’s *Mindfulness* and Shaila Catherine’s *Beyond Distraction* offer a good bit of what a student of the dharma would want to know about the hindrances.

These three scholars agree, recognizing the hindrances and accepting that they are present is vitally important to the serious student of Buddha’s teachings. But of course, what we ultimately want most is strategies for disarming them. When it comes to firmly entrenched patterns in our psychology, recognition is necessary but not sufficient. And it is often painful.

**Joseph Goldstein** has a more traditional way of working with the hindrances, very close to the words of the Buddha in the sutra:

1. Recognize desire when it is present.
2. Know when desire is absent.
3. Know what conditions underlie the presence or absence of desire.
4. Know what conditions underlie the removal of desire.
5. Avoid future arising of desire

>Goldstein’s suggestions for getting at the causes of aversion (pp.132-137)

**Bhante G** says it like this:

Know when hindrance is present.

Know when hindrance is absent.

Know what to do to make hindrance go away.

Know how to keep hindrance from coming back.

**Fronsdal** offers a system for disarming the hindrances that he calls BELLA.

Be with it. - Let it be, see it, accept it, name it.

Examine it. - This is where utmost care and compassionate understanding must come

into play. The examining of our patterns is often painful, even embarrassing.

But we examine with diligence and honesty.

Lessen it. - Relaxing the body and the mind lessens the intensity of hindrance.

Let go. - Dropping/changing the thinking that perpetuates the hindrance. Letting go

of self-identity. Coming to see how the hindrance is a part of your selfing story.

Appreciate. - Appreciating the times we become free. Remember from my talk on right

effort I mentioned the work of Rick Hansen who advocates the practice of “Taking in

the good” as a powerful method for reordering neural pathways.

This book is quite useable if you want to take up a practice of working through each of the hindrances. Though I like Fronsdal’s acronym BELLA, I prefer to use Shaila Catherine’s extremely thoughtful and helpful process for investigating hindrances. And this is the process of inquiry that I used in teaching a workshop on disarming the hindrances.

In *Beyond Distraction*, she gives insightful descriptions of the hindrances and provides antidotes and alternatives for handling them.

**She emphasizes that Mindfulness is the universal antidote to all of the hindrances.**

*“When the mind is undisturbed, a wellspring of energy becomes available for deep spiritual practice.”* - Shaila Catherine

That being said, beyond our practice, we must engage in investigation of our thinking or order to achieve insight. On the third Wednesdays of the month, I’ll be working with sangha participants on some of these investigative practices.

So here is the protocol I created based on her book.

**Step 1: Observe (and accept) (same as first strategy in Goldstein and Fronsdal)**

The power of the pause: Many unwanted habitual patterns can be countered by simply stopping. In the moment of pause, you are *observing* rather than *reacting* to experience. Noting and naming is a primary teaching of the Buddha.

**Step 2: Investigate your thinking.**

“Is this really true in all situations?”

“What are you getting out of it?” or “What is it serving?” or “What has this habitual pattern or addictive urge done for me”?

*(right view)*

“Is it fulfilling a craving for sense pleasure or personal need or confirming a view,

value, or identity?”

*(craving and clinging)*

“Is my way of perceiving and thinking about life leading to happiness, or is it

perpetuating suffering?”

“Is there another way of seeing this?”

“How would I feel if this hindrance was not in my life? How would I act?

*(suffering and its causes)*

“What are the dangers, costs, risks of not dealing with my hindrances?” Given the days that you have left, are you willing to pay this price?

*(kharma)*

“What positive thought could replace this condition I’m having?” (replacing

thoughts with wholesome alternatives= “right effort")

Remember**, “Whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will**

**become the inclination of the mind.”**

*(right effort)*

* We want to note whether our thoughts are supporting or sabotaging our deepest aspirations. Are they nourishing our personal values and lifegoals?

*“A brief inquiry into the formations of thought performed by a tranquil mind can penetrate entrenched habit patterns and produce a more accurate and useful perception of experience.”* Shaila Catherine

See also, pp. 148-149 in *Beyond Distraction*

**Step 3: Act** (Take wise action by eliminating non-beneficial thinking; establishing brave action; creating accountability). *“Act so that defilements are weakened and wholesome states are strengthened.”*  - Shaila Catherine

“What are some alternative thoughts or reminders that might make a positive shift

in the pattern?”

“Could you starve the habit by working with the *desire* or *fear* that unwholesome

thoughts feed on?

“What might be a healthier way of getting your genuine needs met?”

“Does the change you seek require verbal or bodily action or a shift in the way you

think?”

“Are you willing to make changes in the way you think?”

“Do you feel the urgency to improve the quality of your own mind.”

“What would it take for you to make these changes?”

I want to say something about the value of doing this work in a group. Reading about what constitutes a hindrance is good. The sutra gives directives for extinguishing the hindrances, but Fronsdal and Shaila Catherine give us concrete steps for investigation, showing us how to skillfully investigate the issues. But nothing compares to being in a safe space where you can examine your own patterns and see them reflected in the caring responses of others. In the hindrances workshop I teach, we examine the descriptions of each hindrance, and each participant decides on a hindrance that most plagues them. Once the hindrance is clearly on the table, we investigate ways to disarm the hindrance.

\*\*The importance of investigation : p. 148-149 in *Beyond Distraction*.

In my experience, studying the hindrances with other dedicated students of the dharma is so instructive, and so motivating. We investigate our patterns together. We get more insight, more confidence, more eagerness to move forward in our practice. And most dramatically, we get to experience the “Oh, you have this problem, too. . .” feeling.