Reviewing What Conditions the Mind, Part One

The Five Hindrances

The Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness is *Dhammanupassana* (dah-mah-noo-pah-sah-nah), which is typically translated as *Mindfulness of Mental Objects*. Analayo, in his excellent book “Satipatthana-The Direct Path to Realization”, provides a more useful description of the contents of this part of the Sutta, on pp 182-183:

The Pãli term *dhamma* can assume a variety of meanings, depending on the context in which it occurs. Most translators take the term *dhammas* in the *Satipatthana Sutta* to mean “mental objects”, in the sense of whatever can become an object of the mind, in contradistinction to the objects of the other five senses. In regard to s*atipatthana*, however, this rendering appears strange. If the term *dhammas* were to refer to “objects of the mind”, then the other three s*atipatthana* should also be included here, since they too can become objects of the mind. Moreover, one of the exercises listed under the fourth s*atipatthana* is contemplation of the six senses together with their respective objects, so this contemplation of *dhammas* is not confined to the objects of the mind as the sixth sense only. In fact, the *dhammas* listed in the fourth *satipatthana*, such as the hindrances and

the aggregates, etc., do not naturally evoke the classification “mental objects”. What this *satipatthana* is actually concerned with are specific mental qualities (such as the five hindrances and the seven awakening factors), and analyses of experience into specific categories (such as the five aggregates, the six sense-spheres, and the four noble truths). These mental factors and categories constitute central aspects of the Buddha’s way of teaching, the *Dhamma*. These classificatory schemes are not in themselves the objects of meditation, but constitute

frameworks or points of reference to be applied during contemplation. During actual practice one is to look at whatever is experienced in terms of these *dhammas*. Thus, the *dhammas* mentioned in this *satipatthana* are not “mental objects” but are applied to whatever becomes an object of the mind or of any other sense door during contemplation.

My preference is to render *dhammas* as *mental phenomena*, conditioned by the various functions described within the Fourth Foundation. The larger context of the word is capitalized as Dhamma (Dharma in Sanskrit), which has a significant history in that part of the world. The Buddha was exposed to the Vedic understanding of Dharma, which described how a person was to live in accordance with the gods. His alternative rendering described the ultimate order of the universe in an ethical way, either developing the mental qualities conducive to Awakening or of an ongoing experience of dukkha, distress and confusion.

--nupassana is a derivative of *vipassana* (vih-pah-sah-nah), which can be understood as *direct, subjective insight into the process of self-creation*. In this context, dhammanupassana is the practice of directly observing that which is being processed in the mind. The other categories, mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, and mindfulness of the mind, are investigated as constituent elements of self-creation.

There are several categories of mental phenomena contained within the Fourth Foundation: The Five Hindrances, the Five Aggregates of Clinging, the Six Sense Bases, the Seven Awakening Factors and Four Noble Truths. They are to be contemplated in terms of what initiates their function along with how the functions manifest. The focus of this talk is on the Five Hindrances, and the others will be reviewed in future talks.

Here is the relevant extract focusing on 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 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 future non-arising of abandoned doubt.”

PRACTICE NOTES FOR OVERCOMING THE FIVE HINDRANCES

My intention in writing these notes is to help clarify my experiences and readings about the five hindrances to cultivating a stable and peaceful mind, preparatory to practicing vipassana. One of the seeming paradoxes of Buddhist practice is the importance of setting aside the mental preoccupations that are called hindrances in order to settle the mind preparatory to practicing noting the arising and passing away of mental phenomena. The Pali word translated as “hindrance” is *nivarana*, “an obstacle, hindrance, only as it applies to obstacles in an ethical sense” (Pali Text Society Dictionary).

One of the innovations that the Buddha developed was emphasizing the importance of ethics for salvation. In the already existing Vedic tradition of his youth, the ethical constraints were in honor of the Gods of the Vedic pantheon. In this sense, salvation depends more on conforming to the will of the gods than an individual’s own morality. The Buddha made a clear distinction: salvation is organized around personal ethical integrity. Integrity means how well the personality is organized, given a primary value of *ahimsa*, non-violence, and the cultivation of *metta*, benevolent intention. The hindrances disrupt mental integrity in distinctive ways, as manifestations of what are called the “three poisons”: *lobha* (low-bah) *desire*, *dosa* (doh-sah) *aversion*, and *moha* (moh-hah) *ignorance* or *delusion*.

An effective way I relate to this paradox is an image brought to us by the revered Thai master Achaan Chah. He said that calming the mind through mindfulness of breathing practice is like sitting quietly beside a still forest pool (in fact, that’s the title of a book about his teachings that I read many years ago). When the mind is still, “then many strange creatures will come and drink there…” The many “strange creatures” are the various mind states, wholesome or unwholesome, that arise. The paradox is the value of first “setting aside” the hindrances *before* examining their capacity to disturb the integrity of the mind. The setting aside allows the mind to settle into *samadhi* (sah-mah-dee), *unification of wholesome elements of the mind*, and *passadhi* (pah-sah-dee), *tranquility regarding these elements*. This initial process cultivates the stillness of the forest pool, and at the same time, the practice of setting aside any distracting mind states builds the capacity to notice and disregard any potentially arising unwholesome mind states during the vipassana phase of the practice.

Progress on the path toward Awakening is also compared to weeding a garden: the initial setting aside of the hindrances is like cutting the weeds—the roots remain and regrow. Vipassana practice is like discovering the roots and extracting them, so the weeds don’t grow any more.

The still forest pool is a great image: perfectly still, and perfectly reflecting. This is what samadhi/passadhi provides. The vipassana practice modifies the discipline of keeping the mind still; instead, the focus is on the ripples that are created by (mental) phenomena as they strike the smooth surface. The quieter the mind is, the more distinct any disturbances are. The sooner the emergence of a hindering mind condition is noted and disregarded, the less potential there is for the hindrance to fully develop.

Another important point to remember is that practicing overcoming the hindrances isn’t just to nurture a quiet, peaceful mind for meditation. The practice enables non-attachment and renunciation--the noting and setting aside of the hindrances *develops the ability to consistently redirect the energy of attention away from lobha, dosa and moha!* As this occurs during formal practice, several benefits are realized: First, I can practice noting and letting go in the controlled setting of the meditation, which nurtures the ability to do so during the other times of the day. Second, as the mind is less and less burdened by the hindrances, there’s more energy freed up for investigating the true nature of the mind during the meditation, that is, the relentless arising and passing away of mind moments. Of course, this also becomes possible during the other times of day as well. *The true purpose of Buddhist practice is not just to develop meditative peacefulness; it is also to nurture a more peaceful way of being in the world.*

Another point of clarification: In Buddhist psychology, there are six “sense bases”, reviewed in another section of the Fourth Foundation—the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, internal body sensations, and the mind that processes input from the other five. It is suggested in Buddhist practice to “guard the sense bases” against unwholesome mind states. Whatever arises through the first five sense bases is perceived and conditioned through the mind base, which makes the *mind base the guardian.* Stated differently, whatever is sensed through the eyes, ears, and so on can only be consciously known through conditions that arise in the mind, either wholesome or unwholesome in their functioning. The function of mindfulness, an essential function of the mind base, is to monitor the incoming data and rally the resources of other wholesome functions to deny any unwholesome emerging self-state to develop.

All mind states originate as a *nimitta* (nih-mih-tah), translated as a “seed” stimulus. The Pali Glossary located in the Access to Insight website uses this definition--nimitta: Mental sign, image, or vision that may arise in meditation. *Uggaha nimitta* refers to any image that arises spontaneously in the course of meditation. *Paṭibhaga nimitta* refers to an image that has been subjected to mental manipulation. Usually, the nimitta is associated with the onset of a jhana process.

When considering mental phenomena in the practice of dhammanupassana, however, a nimitta is a mental sign that arises during the process through which the data input is first perceived. When mindfulness and renunciation aren’t operating, this initial, fleeting impressions very quickly develops into a full-blown internal narrative, with the flow of experience determined by the strength of feeling associated with the hindrance and the degree to which a person identifies a “self” through the internal narrative. This rapid, transformative process is called *papanca* (pah-pahn-chah)*,* translated as *conceptual proliferation*. It represents how the conditioning capacity of the storehouse of memory imposes a conceptual structure on the raw, undifferentiated data input. This conceptual structure fundamentally fabricates the false perception of a separate, enduring self, moha. This misperception imposes an assumption that the thought or expectation or craving that accompanies it therefore requires belief and action to either take in or reject the thought or expectation.

The transformation of the nimitta into a hindrance occurs due to *ayoniso manasikara* (ah-yoh-nee-soh mah-nah-see-kah-rah)*,* usually translated as “*unwise attention*”. This means that mindfulness, investigation and Right Effort are not associated with the function of attention at that critical moment. The longer unwise attention continues, the firmer the grip of the narrative and felt sense of urgency becomes. The primary antidote is *yoniso manasikara,* “*wise attention*”. Wise attention is the combination of the awakening factors of Mindfulness, Investigation, and Right Effort. These three of the Seven Awakening Factors are what comprise that quality of attention called *vipassana*, and will be reviewed in a future talk regarding the Fourth Foundation.

THE FIVE HINDRANCES

**SENSE DESIRE**

The Pali word for sense desire is *kamacchanda* (kahm-ah-chahn-dah). The dictionary I consult gives this definition: *kama* refers to: ”enjoyment, pleasure on occasion of sense”. *Chanda* is translated: “A psychological faculty that motivates action. Depending on its object, chanda can be good, bad, or neutral”. In this context, it means a passionate attachment to pleasurable experience. It’s not the pleasurable nature of the sensual stimulus that is a hindrance, but rather the conditioned way that the mind perceives the stimulus, misperceiving the experience as “my pleasure”, when the pleasure is only the result of the sensory stimulus. The mind becomes enchanted by the pleasure, wants more and is disturbed when the pleasure goes away. This hindrance can be understood as a seductive enchantment. The subjective experience draws attention into the mental object through the interaction between *tanha* (tahn-hah)*,* *craving*, literally an *unquenchable thirst*, and the operation of *moha,* ignorance of the essential nature of the stimulus as impermanent and not self.

The Buddha considered attachment to sensual pleasure as a form of indebtedness. The object of desire “owns” my interest and devotion. Another simile used in Buddhism is that of a container filled with water. When the water is clear and still, I can see clearly whatever object is in the water. When sense desire has trapped my attention, it’s like the water is colored with attractive dye—I notice the color but can’t see the true nature of the object.

We live in a culture that literally profits from sense desire. As well-trained consumers, we are bombarded with tempting sights, sounds, odors, flavors and physical pleasures. Even if we haven’t maxed out our credit cards (indebtedness) to buy or rent the access to pleasant stimuli, we still can be trapped by easily affordable items and experiences. Our culture is overwhelmed with addiction—not just to substances, but also what is called “process addiction”, such as television, the internet, gambling, sports, reading, spending, eating and so on, and is in such denial about it that it hardly seems it could be true. Ann Wilson Schaeff wrote “When Society Is An Addict”, which makes a strong case for this dilemma.

The Buddhist teachings say that the proximal cause of sense desire is *ayoniso manasikara,* “unwise attention”. How is the attention unwise? Desire is an unrelenting hunger. Even if satisfied, desire will either re-attach to the same pleasurable object or find something else to obsess about. Our brains are hard-wired around desire—for food, for sex, for pleasant sounds, sights, and so on. In fact, one of the ways that desire is motivated is as a distraction away from stress; this is one of the causative factors regarding addictive behaviors.

There are neurological pathways in the brain associated with attention to and acting on desire. There’s been a lot of research on craving that associates desire with the nucleus accumbens, a cluster of neurons in the mid-brain. It seems that desire is activated there, like opening a “desire valve”. If the nucleus accumbens is repeatedly and routinely activated, it gets “stuck in the on position”, meaning that it is highly sensitive to even subtle stimuli. A researcher discovered that if a rat had an electrode implanted in the nucleus accumbens and could stimulate it by pushing a lever, *it would continue to push the lever until it no longer had the strength to continue!*  It activates outside of our awareness, so that sense desire subjectively seems to have no negative consequences. What could be wrong about pleasant feelings? Putting the issue of addiction aside, the Buddhist position on sense desire is that pleasurable gratification is inherently unstable. We are subtly tormented by a preoccupation with an anticipated pleasant self-state if we get the pleasure producing object. When the pleasure begins, the wanting continues, *particularly when we live in a culture that places such a high value of sensual gratification.* Of course, when the senses are gratified, there’s a mistaken belief that the pleasure should be unending, which is impossible, so there’s a preoccupation with protecting the pleasing object so the pleasure won’t go away.

The neurotransmitter that activates the nucleus accumbens is dopamine. For the sake of this exploration, I want to suggest dopamine represents craving. When we are deprived of food, we experience hunger. Dopamine activates the body/mind to seek gratification—food. As food is taken in, another neurotransmitter, serotonin, is activated to balance the dopamine. The serotonin inhibits the activity of the dopamine. We can call this dynamic interaction “satisfaction”, that is, the body has enough food to keep going until the next meal. Hunger is stress—stress of any kind is hunger, but the food might be distraction, substitution, numbing, and so on. Because of our culture’s relentless drive toward sense gratification, the serotonin supply diminishes, so that no matter how long or strongly the dopamine system is activated, there’s no real sense of satisfaction. This is the net effect of sense desire—satisfaction is never achieved, and we live in a zone of perpetual wanting. This is the delicious and dangerous seduction of sense desire.



**DOPAMINE**

**DISSATISFACTION**

**DOPAMINE**

**TOO MUCH STRESS**

“And what is the food for the arising of unarisen *sensual desire,* or for the growth & increase of sensual desire once it has arisen? There is the theme of beauty. To foster inappropriate attention to it: This is the food for the arising of unarisen sensual desire, or for the growth & increase of sensual desire once it has arisen.” *Starving the Hindrances*, Ahara Sutta SN 46.51

There are several recommended antidotes for sense desire:

* Concentrating the mind by focusing on a neutral object, such as the breath.
* Contemplating any undesirable consequences of the experience.
* Carefully noting and interrupting any preoccupation with potentially desirable objects (guarding the sense doors)
* Getting support from trusted friends

**AVERSION AND ILL-WILL**

The Pali term for aversion and ill-will is *vyapada* (vyah-pah-dah)*,* which is translated as *making bad, doing harm ; desire to injure, malevolence, ill-will* and is almost synonymous with *dosa*, translated as *anger, ill-will, evil intention, wickedness, corruption, malice, hatred*. There’s another Pali word, *domanassa*  (doh-mah-nah-sah)*,* which is relevant. Its translation is *mental pain, distress, dejectedness, melancholy, grief*. Aversion and ill-will are typically attributed to the action of a “not-self” force, that is, a person, a situation, or an unpleasant sensation such as pain, nausea, fear, etc. Finally, the word *patigha* ([pah-tee-gah) is often mentioned as synonymous with vyapada; its meaning is *to strike against*. The similes relevant to vyapada compares the experience to being ill with a fever, or the way that boiling water interferes with seeing clearly into the depths of a container.

Subjectively, I experience aversion as a contraction, rejection or blocking of an unpleasant feeling; I experience ill-will as a hostile, aggressive attitude and reaction to an unpleasant feeling. To understand this process, it’s important to be aware that whenever an external stimulation occurs, the interpretation of it is constructed in the context of my internal mental functions. If a person says or does something that I don’t like, what that means is that my internal representation of their behavior is unpleasant; the aversion is the mental rejection and physical tension that arises, while the ill-will is the reaction of hostility that arises from the internal representation.

To use neurological terms, a part of the brain called the *amygdala* (ah-mig-dah-lah), located in the outer edge of the mid-brain, is constantly processing incoming data to sort out “friend or foe, food or poison?” The data is the result of neural activity in the *hippocampus* (hip-oh-cahm-puss), which is sited next to the amygdala; the two functions are constantly feeding each other with neural stimulation. Our nervous systems operate with a bias towards survival, which means that potential danger “jumps to the head of the line” of possible meanings for a stimulus. *Fear is a more primal and demanding feeling than any other.* Because of this bias, vyapada can arise quite rapidly. This is particularly important when considering how vital interpersonal security is to humans—we have the longest developmental process of all creatures, and are utterly dependent on caregivers to survive, so the experience of a loving, dependable bond is core to our sense of well-being—we desire it and are attached to those who are important to us, either in childhood or adulthood. When this primary bond is threatened, love can turn to hate quickly, and trust can become distrust that endures. This insecurity is a major feature of primary relationships. It is also important to be aware of the tension in the body that arises with the negative self-talk.

"And what is the food for the arising of unarisen *ill will,* or for the growth & increase of ill will once it has arisen? There is the theme of resistance. To foster inappropriate attention to it: This is the food for the arising of unarisen ill will, or for the growth & increase of ill will once it has arisen.” *Starving the Hindrances*, Ahara Sutta SN 46.51

The recommended antidotes for aversion and ill-will:

* Use vipassana practice to notice the impermanence of the unpleasantness
* Use vipassana to consider the impersonal aspects of the unpleasantness
* Practice metta, focused on countering the accumulation of resentment or fear
* Seek the soothing support of a friend

The first two hindrances, sense desire and aversion/ill-will, represent two of the three “root defilements” of the mind: greed (sense desire) and hatred (aversion/ill-will). The third defilement, synonymous with moha, is *avijja* (ah-vee-jah), which is translated as *not seeing* or *not knowing*. Not seeing doesn’t mean not visually observable—rather, it means a lack of clear awareness. Not knowing means not being aware of what arises as impermanent, the dissatisfaction of craving and clinging, and misperceiving what arises as a self which is independent of conditions. In Buddhist doctrine, each moment of dissatisfaction has ignorance as a conditioning factor. That is, greed and ignorance (accompanied by other unwholesome factors), hatred and ignorance (accompanied by other unwholesome factors), or just ignorance (accompanied by other unwholesome factors).

The final three hindrances discussed below are manifestations of ignorance, which may or may not be accompanied by greed or desire.

**SLOTH AND TORPOR**

The Pali term for sloth is *thina* (tee-nah), which can be translated *unwieldiness of mind states, dullness*. The Pali term for torpor is *middha* (mee-dah)*,* translated as *unwieldiness of mind conditioners, sluggish*ness.

"And what is the food for the arising of unarisen *sloth & drowsiness,* or for the growth & increase of sloth & drowsiness once it has arisen? There are boredom, weariness, yawning, drowsiness after a meal, & sluggishness of awareness. To foster inappropriate attention to them: This is the food for the arising of unarisen sloth & drowsiness, or for the growth & increase of sloth & drowsiness once it has arisen.” *Starving the Hindrances*, Ahara Sutta SN 46.51

Sloth and torpor can be compared to a pond, the surface of which is covered with algae and weeds, preventing a clear view of what lies within. Another simile is that of being imprisoned, with very little opportunity to exercise.

This hindrance and the next one, restlessness and remorse, are primarily about energy regulation. Many modern neuroscientists perceive the human nervous system as energy utilization systems, meaning that the energy received from food and air travels through the nervous system, with the product being the functions of the mind. Before talking about this hindrance in particular, let me describe the way the nervous system operates from a Western psychological view, then from a Buddhist psychological view.

The *sympathetic nervous system* activates attention, emotion and behavior through the action of norepinephrine, also called noradrenaline. It activates what is called “the fight or flight response”. When overactive, it manifests as agitation; when associated with thoughts, it manifests as recurring thought rehearsals-- “fretting”. This characterizes the hindrance of restlessness and remorse.

The *parasympathetic nervous system* provides a counterbalancing function, decreasing attention, soothing emotions and relaxing the body and metabolic functions. The neurotransmitter most often associated with the parasympathetic function in the brain is acetylcholine. It functions to lower blood pressure, sends blood to the digestive tract after a meal, and is associated with a relaxed body/mind process.

These two systems are dynamically complementary, which is to say that they are always present and acting in the body/mind. When they are functioning well, there is the appropriate balancing of excitation and relaxation, of attention and flexibility. These functions are optimized through the practice of vipassana meditation.

From the perspective of Buddhist psychology, the sympathetic function is represented by the mental conditioning factors of *viriya (veer-yah)*, *energy* or *effort* and *vicaya* (vee-chay-yah)*,* i*nvestigation*. The parasympathetic function is represented by *samadhi/passadhi* (sah-mah-dee/pah-sah-dee)*, unification/tranquility*, and *saddha* (sah-dah)*,* *faith* or *confidence*. These functions are also referred to as elements called *bala,* powers. Here is a chart representing *panca bala,* the five powers (including mindfulness). Please consider that the term *panna* (pahn-yah)*, wisdom*, is equivalent to wise attention in this context:

Too much Viriya- energy

agitation and mental excitability/worry

(sympathetic system)

Upekkha-equanimity

The resulting dynamic interaction between the complementary functions

Sati-mindfulness

Monitors and balances the complementary functions

Saddha-faith/confidence

Too much creates mental rigidity and dullness

(parasympathetic system)

Vicara-investigation

Too much creates doubt

and confusion

(sympathetic system)

Samadhi-tranquility

Too much creates mental dullness and lethargy

(parasympathetic system)

The hindrance of thinha/middha is the consequence of different circumstances. One of them is too much food and too little physical fitness. In reflecting on the lifestyle of the Buddha, and most forest monks today, they ate one meal a day, and walked to get the food and to carry it back to where they were staying. This moderation in appetite and regular exercise fostered an effective balancing of the nervous system’s function. Another circumstance would be the overstimulation and sleep dysregulation of our culture. We are bombarded with exciting music, visual imagery and vivid stimulation. We consume caffeine and sugar excessively. Therefore, when the body becomes still in the absence of stimulation, it’s conditioned to go to sleep!

Another contributing factor that affects investigation is the lack of training for what is called *critical thinking.* Critical thinking involves a sophisticated analysis of what we’re exposed too and conditioned by. We live in a culture that thrives on indoctrination. Most of it is in the form of marketing. For example, for nearly all my life, I’ve seen advertisements for “New! Improved!...”. There can’t possibly be that much room for improvement over the 6 plus decades of my life in toothpaste! So, the mind becomes lazy, unquestioning (or too skeptical, which is the case with the hindrance of skeptical doubt). Lately, the pervasiveness of internet media creates much confusion about what to believe.

Unfortunately, because of the above-mentioned reasons, the normal functioning of the mind is dull, unquestioning and lazy. This is doubly unfortunate in that it takes clear awareness, yoniso manasikara, to see the dullness and cloudiness of the mind and its functioning! One of the benefits of a one-week or longer retreat is that after the third or fourth day, the dullness and lethargy lift and the mind becomes remarkably alert, disciplined and responsive, which reveals the normal, non-retreat functioning that allows to go through our daily routines.

The recommended antidotes for sloth and torpor:

* Increasing efforts to notice the sensation of breathing.
* Pinching the earlobes.
* Opening the eyes.
* Standing up.
* Slow or normal walking meditation.
* Splashing cold water on the face.
* Eating less food.
* Becoming more physically fit.
* Avoiding overstimulating situations.

**RESTLESSNESS AND REMORSE**

The Pali terms for this hindrance are *uddhacca/kukkucca* (ooh-dah-kah/koo-koo-chah)*.* Uddhacca is translated as *over-balancing, agitation, excitement, distraction, flurry*. Kukkucca is translated as *bad doing, misconduct, bad character*. This restlessness results from inadequate energy regulation, too much norepinephrine, with the mind skipping and jumping from one object to another and lacking a clear knowing of the object. One of the assumptions underlying this agitation is not having a clear conscience, due to not adhering to the three virtues of the Eightfold Path: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. In addition to the issues of conscience, the complexities of contemporary society stimulate worrying, often about issues that are somewhat abstract, such as “deficit spending” or “wokeness”, or issues regarding one’s financial security or social status. Restless and remorse are compared to the surface of a pond that is being disturbed by the wind; the waves distort whatever might be seen under the water. Another simile is being enslaved, “owned” by restlessness, worry or a guilty conscience. Another simile that is common in Buddhism compares restlessness to dropping water on a very hot surface; it doesn’t conform to the surface, but instead pops and sizzles, unable to settle.

Restlessness, neurologically, is an inability to regulate the sympathetic nervous system. One of the functions of the sympathetic system is to be alert and responsive to any change in sensations arising through the “sense bases”. If this responsive sensitivity wasn’t there, the mind would be inert (sloth and torpor). When the nervous system is deluged with stimulation by our culture’s advertisements and media, it becomes normal for the mind to develop a short attention span. In fact, current research is exploring how much the multitasking so prevalent in our culture creates an ADHD-like function in young people. As a result, when sitting quietly during meditation, the mind is still churning, in a sense “addicted to overstimulation”. Additionally, when the mind is conditioned through dishonest, conflicted thought processes, a conditioned hypervigilence is nurtured; that is, there’s an uncertainty about what consequences of the last deception or mistaken decision might arise. This creates the conditioning that causes chronic worrying.

“And what is the food for the arising of unarisen restlessness & anxiety*,* or for the growth & increase of restlessness & anxiety once it has arisen? There is non-stillness of awareness. To foster inappropriate attention to that: This is the food for the arising of unarisen restlessness & anxiety, or for the growth & increase of restlessness & anxiety once it has arisen.” *Starving the Hindrances*, Ahara Sutta SN 46.51

The recommended antidotes for restlessness and remorse:

* Increasing efforts to maintain awareness of the sensation of breathing.
* Notice the areas of contracted muscles and tension in the body and release, as often as is necessary.
* Reduce the amount of external stimulation, such as music, agitating tv shows, etc.
* Be more mindful and disciplined in the practice of Right Speech, Action, and Livelihood.
* Reduce or eliminate caffeine and other stimulating foods.

**SKEPTICAL DOUBT**

The Pali term for this hindrance is *vicikicca* (vih-see-kee-chah)*,* translated as *doubt, uncertainty, unsettled mind*.

"And what is the food for the arising of unarisen *uncertainty,* or for the growth and increase of uncertainty once it has arisen? There are signs and characteristics that act as a foothold for uncertainty. To foster inappropriate attention to them: This is the food for the arising of unarisen uncertainty, or for the growth and increase of uncertainty once it has arisen.” *Starving the Hindrances*, Ahara Sutta SN 46.51

Being skillful enough at critical thinking to not identify with beliefs without investigation is wholesome. The Buddha emphasized the value of cultivating highly skilled internal inquiry regarding beliefs, using Mindfulness and Investigation of Mental Phenomena, two of the Seven Awakening Factors, combined with the discipline provided by the third, Right Effort.

The hindrance of skeptical doubt as a subjective, conditioned phenomenon is primarily noted as disabling confusion and uncertainty, accompanied by the inability to commit to one of the mental pathways embedded in the confusion. The quality of mind with skeptical doubt is compared to a pond that is filled with muddy silt, so that there’s uncertainty about what is in the depths of the water. Another simile is that of someone lost in the desert who can’t decide which route to take at a fork in the road.

Skeptical doubt can occur when confronted by a consequential decision, such as whether to take a job, buy and expensive item, or other circumstances requiring a choice between two or more options. It can also occur regarding competency in completing some task or manifesting a skill, for example, whether one is proficient enough to play a musical instrument for a concert. Finally, it can represent uncertainty regarding whether an option is valid. This could involve doubt about whether meditation is worth practicing or not.

Part of what complicates resolving doubt is the false supposition that there is the “perfect option” or “perfect performance” that is guaranteed beforehand. The human condition is such that we are confronted with an imagined ideal self or outcome, which, when put in the context of what actually happens (imperfection), creates a lot of anticipatory anxiety and speculation about what the consequences will be. Another condition we must all understand and resolve is that, whatever decision we make, the world is much more complex than our ability to adequately handle all circumstances. Here are some useful suggestions for overcoming skeptical doubt:

* Be mindful of the fact that any outcome expectation is provisional, that is, subject to having sufficient information, adequate training, the presence of anticipated resources, and acknowledging that unexpected changes in the circumstances may have an impact on the outcome. For example, no matter how much thought we put into buying a car, there’s no certainty that it won’t be damaged, or that unforeseen situations could make it not possible to pay off the car loan.
* Cultivate the ability to keep in mind that all thoughts, plans, expectations and criticisms are fabrications of the mind-karmic formations, not a self.
* When insufficient information or lack of skill is part of the doubt, consult with someone who can provide useful information or more training regarding the required procedures.
* Turn humiliation into humility. When the outcome is in contrast to expectations, keep in mind that expectations are provisional, and that failure is part of the human condition. The clash between “the ideal outcome and what actually happens” is important to be mindful of and to counter with humility, which is the ability to acknowledge the limits to what one is capable of with compassion. This is quite valuable when one is vulnerable to being blamed or shamed: “You should have known better!” represents someone else’s clash between the ideal and what actually happens!
* When skeptical doubt is related to the cultivation of mindfulness and the other beneficial qualities of Buddhist practice, it’s important to seek the counsel and support of an experienced meditator, either in person, via electronic media or through reading a book. This conceptual feedback is valuable, but the most important thing to do is to keep practicing diligently. The competency of mindful awareness and the ability to let go of the hindrances “pull” on attention requires patient persistence.

If the only benefit one gets from developing enough mindfulness is to set aside the five hindrances, that is sufficient motivation as far as I’m concerned. When the energy of life is not bound up in the “energy dumps” of the hindrances, personal vitality, well-being and resilience is released and life is richer and more enjoyable without the compulsive pursuit of material pleasure or avoidance of discomfort. Should one decide to become thoroughly committed to taking mindfulness practice to a more spiritual level, then the discipline takes on a different focus and emphasis. I’ve characterized this difference in this way: When struggling with the hindrances, the practice involves “warding off the demons”; when the mind is primarily unburdened by the hindrances, the practice becomes more oriented around “feeding the angels”! The angels are clarity of awareness, kindness, generosity, patience, compassion, tolerance and resilience in the experience of adversity, and an increasingly cheerful interest in *all* the circumstances of life, whether they are advantageous and comfortable or not.