Setting Aside The Five Hindrances Part One

Kamacchanda

These notes are a review of the first section of *Dhammanupassana* (dah-mah-new-pah-sah-nah), the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. First, let’s review what Dhammas are as presented by Analayo’s book “Satipatthana-The Direct Path To Realization”, 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 *Satipatthana* however, this rendering appears strange. If the term *dhammas* were to refer to “objects of the mind”, then the other three *Satipatthanas* should also be included here, since they too can become objects of the mind…

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.

Personally, I prefer to refer to the *dhammas* contemplated in the Fourth Foundation as *mental phenomena*. Every moment of subjective experience, including the sense bases, are manifested in the mind as phenomena, fabricated mental events, the reality of which is that they are the direct experience of human cognition, not necessarily an accurate rendering of whatever external object is providing the stimulation. Here is the rendering of the section referring to the Five Hindrances, from Analayo’s book:

[HINDRANCES]

“And how, monks, does he in regard to *dhammas* abide contemplating *dhammas*? Here in regard to *dhammas* he abides contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the five hindrances. And how does he in regard to *dhammas* abide

contemplating *dhammas* in terms of the five hindrances?

“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.

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

and how a future arising of the removed aversion can be prevented.

“If sloth-and-torpor is present in him, he knows ‘there is sloth-and torpor in me’; if sloth-and-torpor is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no sloth-and-torpor in me’; and he knows how unarisen sloth-and-torpor can arise, how arisen sloth-and-torpor can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed sloth-and-torpor can be prevented.

“If restlessness-and-worry is present in him, he knows ‘there is restlessness-and-worry in me’; if restlessness-and-worry is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no restlessness-and-worry in me’; and he knows how unarisen

restlessness-and-worry can arise, how arisen restlessness-and-worry can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed restlessness-and-worry can be prevented.

“If doubt is present in him, he knows ‘there is doubt in me’; if doubt is not present in him, he knows ‘there is no doubt in me’; and he knows how unarisen doubt can arise, how arisen doubt can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed doubt can be prevented.

[REFRAIN]

“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.

The Five Hindrances are presumed by many commentators to be first on the list of contemplations because setting them aside creates the mental conditions best suited for realizing the other sections of the Fourth Foundation. Literally, they hinder the stability of the constituent elements of the mind and obscure clear awareness of the impermanent and impersonal nature of life experience, which is transitory and lacking a self that is singular and separate. I would add that the thematic element of the passage involves noting *the conditions that initiate the phenomenon, the ability to know the characteristics of the phenomenon as it is manifested*, and *how to deal effectively with the phenomenon are skills that are essential for the effective practice of vipassana*. Effectively dealing with the hindrances means setting them aside, dealing with the sense bases and five aggregates involve realizing their impermanent and non-self aspects, and developing the Seven Awakening Factors and the Four Noble Truths to their highest potential. The Buddha compared fabricated self-state organizations to weeds; we can use concentration to set aside the hindrances, like cutting down the weeds, but they will regrow until the roots are dissolved. Dissolving the roots is the work of vipassana—what feeds the roots is craving and clinging to the fabrications, misconstruing them as an enduring/autonomous self.

I am also relying on the commentary about the Five Hindrances on a book by Gil Fronsdal entitled “Unhindered—A Mindful Path Through the Five Hindrances” as a resource.

SENSE DESIRE

These notes will focus on the first of the five, *Kamacchanda* (kah-mah-chahn-dah), *Sense Desire*; *kama* refers to a *passionate response to pleasure*, and *chanda* is *desire*. It is important to understand conceptually and, most importantly, through direct, dispassionate observation how sense desire is triggered, how to recognize its manifestation, how to interrupt its progression and then deconstruct it, and finally, how to reduce the likelihood it will regain traction in the mind in the future, both during a meditation and in one’s life. As mentioned above, even though the hindrance is sensual in nature, what we want to understand and work through is how the mind transforms a pleasant feeling into a self that, to refer to one of the Buddha’s metaphors, is indebted to the misperception that the self “owes” allegiance to those pleasant sensations that are inherently impermanent. Another description attributed to the Buddha compares sense desire to putting a pleasantly colored dye in a clear pond, obscuring the ability to clearly observe what is in the depths of the water. Cultivating a stable attention that can set aside craving and clinging sets the conditions that maximize the insights that can be realized regarding the fabricated nature of the hindrance.

One of the most difficult aspects of sense desire is the pleasurable tone and the impulsive urgency that accompanies the mind’s unskillful response. How can something pleasant be a problem? Of course, millions of addicted humans certainly are significantly hindered in the functionality of their lives by sense desire. Even if that is not the case, the urgent felt demands of wanting something pleasurable is uncomfortable, and, when it is experienced, doesn’t remain permanently pleasurable, and the fear of losing the pleasurable experience is also uncomfortable. The Buddha said that sense desire is the most difficult of the hindrances to be released from for those reasons. He also said that the only beneficial desire is to be liberated from dukkha, first producing the moments of life that are unhindered, but perhaps eventually the full liberation of Awakening.

To try to eliminate situations that are pleasant in order to avoid sense desire can be useful to an extent—an alcoholic is wise to avoid going to bars; however, it is impossible to avoid all pleasurable experiences and not even totally necessary. The point is not to avoid pleasurable experience, but rather to have enough stability of attention (but not too rigid) and clarity of insight to understand the difference between the enjoyment of pleasant feeling as just a feeling (referring back to the Second Foundation, Mindfulness of Feelings), without craving and clinging conditioning the experience. As mentioned during the talk about feelings, physical pleasure promotes mental pleasure; however, it is equally the case that mental pleasure is reflected in pleasurable physical responses.

We live in a culture that literally profits from pleasurable indulgence. For most of those reading these notes, your consumeristic lifestyle is, unless you are afflicted with painful circumstances, the most comfortable in human history. We have been indoctrinated since our earliest life experiences to want, and many of those wants are conditioned in such a way that our desires are not necessary, but fabricated, to profit others. The most obvious examples of this sort of conditioning can be found in the media, through commercial ads and scripted presentations that are designed to create pleasure and to make us want more. The conditioning is very well-researched in order to reliably elicit the desires as strongly as possible for the greatest numbers of viewers. How can we use mindfulness practices to effectively deal with this situation?

How does sense desire actually operate in humans? Contemporary psychological jargon uses a different term for sense desire—*affect approach*—which focuses more on the behavioral nature of desire. *Affect* is *a felt sense of impulsive urgency*, and *approach* describes *the inclination of an organism to seek out the cause of the pleasant stimulation*. Affect approach is a fundamental drive within any organism—even a single-celled amoeba will orient towards a nurturing stimulus and approach it. With humans, these drives are exponentially more sophisticated and complicated. Earlier in these notes the addictive process was mentioned, and this represents the most provocative and potentially destructive application of affect approach. In previous talks I have reviewed the process of activation in the amygdala, hippocampus and nucleus accumbens, clusters of neurons in the mid-brain region; the function of these areas is to assess the degree of potential reward or threat regarding a stimulus and prompt other areas of the brain/body process to either approach or avoid the stimulus (avoidance will be described when reviewing the hindrance of aversion/ill-will). These neural processes, when unregulated, are the equivalent of craving and clinging in the Buddhist conceptual view as the cause of dukkha. Another part of the brain, the preorbital cortex, located in the forehead, provides an executive and regulatory function regarding the affective responses of the mid-brain, and this is equivalent to the Buddhist concepts of mindfulness and renunciation (when dealing with craving and clinging) or authorization and application (when involving the actions of the Seven Awakening Factors and associated wholesome mind conditioners).

HOW TO SET ASIDE SENSE DESIRE

Here are some recommendations for successfully setting aside sense desire:

* Reflect upon the characteristics of your life as a person immersed in social settings that provide highly sophisticated and easily accessed opportunities to be vulnerable to sense desire. One of the most effective steps to be taken is to simplify your lifestyle. Perhaps it is useful to reduce the number of hours spent with media—tv, the internet, etc.—they are designed to be enticing. It is not necessary to become totally avoidant, but the more exposed we are, the more strongly tempted and conditioned we become to “creature comforts”.
* Learn how to recognize the experience of sense desires. It is very likely that being “enchanted” by sense desire will happen regularly; however, contemplating how it happens afterwards can lead to the ability to quickly identify and redirect attention away from the onset of desire. Train your mind to be persistently attentive to the beginning of the in-breath and out-breath—this will increase the neural strength of those parts of the brain that function to alert you to novelty. *The sooner you can successfully note the emergence of any self-state organizing process, the better able you will be in either identifying and setting aside unwholesome self-state organizations or supporting the fulfillment of wholesome self-state organizations, especially the Seven Awakening Factors.*
* To support the just described process, it is very beneficial to mindfully and intentionally practice cultivating detached awareness of emerging self-state processes and returning attention back to tracking sensations of breathing, which are neither pleasant nor unpleasant—this is renunciation, and is essential for overcoming any hindrance, especially sense desire, as the mind is so conditioned to succumb to the seduction of pleasure.
* What consequences occur because of acting out a sense desire? Consequences might involve spending too much time or money— “not getting a good return on investment”. Perhaps there is some aftereffect that is uncomfortable or costly—for example, a hangover from too much alcohol or gaining unhealthy amounts of weight. One of the primary difficulties in dealing with this sort of issue is the “forgetfulness” that occurs as you give in to the desire, ignoring or minimizing the negative consequences.
* Acting out a sense desire can often be a maladaptive attempt to distract from or numb unpleasant feelings regarding an underlying painful issue, either physical or psychological. In the field of addictions research, it is understood that what causes a person to repeatedly relapse after detoxification from a drug is what is called a “co-occurring disorder”, such as anxiety or depression. Mindful insight into your mood and life circumstances at the time that objects of sense desire are accessible can inform you about the co-occurring disorder.