The Five Hindrances

The five hindrances concept can be understood as an attempt to “psychologize” conditions that interfere with the ability to clearly investigate a person’s self-creating process and effectively regulate the subsequent actions of the mind and body.

Here is a quote from the Satipatthana Sutta (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah soo-tah) regarding the 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 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.**

In order to effectively resolve the impact of the hindrances, it is important to be intentionally aware of the distinction between an initial stimulation and subsequent mental/emotional response, recognized as a transitory cognitive phenomenon, not an enduring/autonomous self, termed anatta (ah-nah-tah) in Pali. The hindrances interfere with the ability to cultivate liberating realization regarding anatta.

Here are the hindrances and some thoughts about recognizing them and drain them of their energy and staying power:

**SENSE DESIRE**

The Pali word for sense desire is *kamacchanda*. 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 mental 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 intention to act is distorted by ignorance regarding the nature of craving and clinging. The mind becomes enchanted by the mental construct that desires physical pleasure, wants more and is disturbed when the pleasure goes away. This hindrance is seductive, disregarding any potentially unwholesome consequences. The subjective experience draws attention toward the mental object through the action of *tanha,* craving, and the operation of *moha,* ignorance of the nature of the stimulus as impermanent and not self.

The Buddha considered attachment to sensual pleasure as indebtedness. The object of desire “owns” my attention and devotion. Another image 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 access to pleasant stimuli, we still can be trapped by easily affordable items and experiences. Our culture is overwhelmed with addictive temptation—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? It is afflicted and confused because of the influence of desire. Desire is an unrelenting hunger that can persist even after pleasurable stimulation ceases. 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 brain. It seems that desire is activated there, like opening a “desire valve”. If the nucleus accumbens is routinely overstimulated, it gets “stuck in the on position”, meaning that it is highly sensitive to any input. 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, through ignorance, so that sense desire subjectively seems to have no negative consequences. What could be wrong about pleasant feelings?

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.

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 focused on the pleasure producing object. When the pleasure begins, the wanting continues, *particularly when we live in a culture that places such a high value on sense gratification.* Of course, when the senses are gratified, there’s a mistaken belief that the pleasure should be unending, which is impossible, and there’s a preoccupation with protecting the pleasing object so the pleasure won’t go away.

There are several recommended antidotes for sense desire:

**DOPAMINE**

**DISSATISFACTION**

**DOPAMINE**

**TOO MUCH STRESS**

* Concentrating the mind by focusing on a neutral object, such as the breath.
* Contemplating the undesirable aspects of the pleasurable object.
* 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,* 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,* 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*, is often mentioned as synonymous with dosa; its meaning is “to strike against”.

Subjectively, I experience aversion as a contraction, rejection or blocking of an unpleasant feeling; I experience ill-will as a hostile, aggressive attitude in reaction to an unpleasant feeling. To understand this process, it’s important to be aware that whatever external stimulation occurs, the interpretation of it is constructed in the context of my internal mental functions. A person’s behavior doesn’t cause aversion—the mind constructs it. 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.

The Buddha suggested that experiencing aversion and ill-will to be similar to being on fire, or how boiling hot water prevents one from seeing clearly what is deep in the pond.

This doesn’t mean that we should become inert in a threatening situation--what the mind creates isn’t made toxic by unwholesome mental constructs. We can learn to respond in adverse situations rather than just react. Easier said than done.

To use neurological terms, a part of the brain called the amygdala is constantly processing incoming data to sort out “friend or foe, food or poison?”, as the result of neural activity in the hippocampus, 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 the data. *Fear is a more primally impulsive and demanding feeling than any other.* Because of this we can jump to conclusions quite rapidly.

This is particularly important when considering how important 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.

As related to unpleasant self-states that aren’t associated with relationships, like illness, injury, hunger or other stressors, it is important to be aware of the tension in the body that arises with the negative self-talk and let go. I find that intentionally relaxing and mentally letting go during a long sequence of out-breaths is effective. Letting go of the angry or fearful storyline is more potent when intentionally scanning through body sensations in stressful situations. I was taught in graduate school psych courses that we can interrupt negative thoughts by what is called “progressive relaxation exercises”—I recall reading about that I the textbook and immediately associating that intervention with my Buddhist training. Other recommended antidotes for aversion and ill-will include using vipassana practice to notice the impermanent and impersonal characteristics of the unpleasantness, or practicing metta, focused on countering the accumulation of resentment or fear. I have also benefited from mindful weed pulling to redirect anger and aggression to a more productive outcome.

These 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 is *avijja* (ah-vee-jah), which is translated as *not seeing* or *not knowing*. Not seeing doesn’t mean not visually observable—rather, it is ignorance, the absence of clear awareness. Not knowing means not being aware of what arises as regards impermanence, the dissatisfaction of craving and clinging, and misperceiving what arises as a self as somehow 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* (me-dah), translated as “unwieldiness of mind conditioners, sluggishness”.

"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 body as an interactive cluster of energy utilization systems, meaning that the energy received from food and air travels through the blood distribution and nervous systems, with the product being the functions of the body and 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 lowers 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 balanced flow of excitation and relaxation, of attention and flexibility. Research suggests these functions are optimized through the practice of mindfulness meditation.

Our culture often devalues exercise, adequate rest or healthy dietary habits, which increase to likelihood of suffering the consequences of a “couch potato” mind. In this way, it is often co-operating with skeptical doubt, another hindrance.

The hindrance of thinha-middha occurs as the consequence of various 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 is the lack of training for what is called *critical thinking.* Critical thinking is a sophisticated analysis of what we’re exposed too. We live in a culture that thrives on indoctrination—*lazy thinking*, much of which 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).

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.

Some recommended antidotes for sloth and torpor include: Increasing efforts to notice the sensation of breathing, opening the eyes, standing up, slow or normal walking meditation, or splashing cold water on the face. Other lifestyle choices include eating less food, becoming more physically fit or 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.” The restlessness results from too little energy regulation, 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.

Restlessness 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.

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 doors”. 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 dysfunction 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 hypervigilance 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.

A metaphor that is common in Buddhism is that restlessness is like dropping water on a very hot surface; it doesn’t conform to the surface, but instead pops and sizzles, therefore there can’t be a clear awareness of what the surface is like.

The recommended antidotes for restlessness and remorse include: increasing efforts to maintain awareness of the sensation of breathing , noticing the areas of contracted muscles and tension in the body and releasing, as often as is necessary, reducing the amount of external stimulation, such as music, agitating tv shows, etc., being more mindful and disciplined in the practice of Right Speech, Action, and Livelihood, and reducing or eliminating caffeine and other stimulating foods.

**SKEPTICAL DOUBT**

The Pali term for this hindrance is *vicikiccha* (vih-see-kih-chah) translated as “doubt, uncertainty, an unsettled mind.”

Being skeptical enough to not take 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. This is critical thinking—analyzing what arises in awareness regarding wholesomeness or unwholesomeness in an unbiased way.

The hindrance of skeptical doubt as a subjective, conditioned mental 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 that interferes with decision making.

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 an 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, or whether the teacher can be trusted.

Part of what complicates resolving this hindrance 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 self-organization.

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 consideration 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 adverse 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.