

The 5 Hindrances in Meditation and Daily Life

by *Aggacitta Bhikkhu*

An edited transcript

The topic of today's talk is "The 5 Hindrances in Meditation and in Daily Life". First let's list the 5 Hindrances in the usual order they are cited: sensual desire; ill will; sloth and torpor; restlessness and worry; doubt.

Many of you associate the 5 Hindrances with the obstacles you encounter in the course of meditation. However, the 5 Hindrances have also to be dealt with in one's daily life and this was not disregarded by the Buddha.

There is in fact at least one sutta in which the Buddha talked about the importance of being able to overcome the 5 Hindrances for worldly success.

Āvaraṇa Sutta (AN 5.51)

In the Āvaraṇa Sutta (Aṅguttara Book of Fives, Sutta No. 51) the Buddha talked about the 5 Hindrances as "weakeners of wisdom". Here is what the Buddha said:

"Bhikkhus, without having abandoned these five obstructions, hindrances, encumbrances of the mind, states that weakened wisdom, it is impossible that a bhikkhu with his powerless and feeble wisdom might know his own good, the good of others or the good of both, or realize the superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones."

The last part of the sentence ("realize the superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones") refers to the practice of meditation. However, the earlier part ("know his own good, the good of others or the good of both") could apply to both worldly as well as spiritual good. Since today's talk is on the 5 Hindrances in meditation and in daily life, I will start with meditation before moving on to how the 5 Hindrances have also to be overcome in daily life.

How to Nourish & Denourish the Hindrances

Āhāra Sutta (SN 46.51)

In the Āhāra Sutta of Saṃyutta Nikaya, the Buddha talked about how to nourish and denourish the hindrances. Let's start by understanding what the hindrances are.

Sensual Desire

Sensual desire in the context of meditation refers to any sort of desire that is connected with the body and the pleasures of the senses. It could be longing for a certain type of food. It could be something visual (e.g. you miss your favourite YouTube video) or something auditory (e.g. you long to hear your favourite song) etc. It could also mean yearning for physical comfort; for example, when you're on retreat in a retreat centre, you may have poor quality of sleep in a dormitory where some people snore, others move noisily in their beds or get up to go to the toilet in the middle of the night. You can't get continuous good sleep as you are woken up several times. Of course, your meditation the next day will be affected by bouts of sloth and torpor. And you may yearn to have the comfort of sleeping in your own bed at home. All these are examples of sensual desire.

Ill Will

Ill will is bad thoughts towards others, towards yourself, or towards the situation. This could sometimes be self-inflicted in the sense that you are angry with yourself for not performing according to your expectations. For example, you may feel upset when people talk around you during a retreat when they're supposed to maintain noble silence. And then you may be upset with yourself for having unwholesome thoughts or ill will towards them. A lot of these things go on in our minds in the course of our meditation. So ill will can be directed towards yourself, towards other people, towards the situation, even towards the teaching.

Sloth and Torpor

Sloth and torpor refer to drowsiness as well as to laziness. For example, sometimes the mind becomes sluggish and doesn't want to work or doesn't want to be mindful of things that are happening. Sloth and torpor is actually a mental state but it can also be manifested in the body in terms of physical discomfort and weakness or lack of energy.

Restlessness and Worry

The 4th Hindrance is restlessness and worry. Restlessness can mean the mind just wandering here, there and everywhere, without any theme in particular, just jumping around from one object to another, one subject to another. Worry can mean feeling remorseful, for example for what you did and shouldn't have done or what you should have done but didn't do. In the course of meditation, when your mind quiets down you might have to deal with a lot of remorse when you recall that you have not been impeccable in observing your precepts. This is why trying to keep the precepts is important, not only when you are on retreat, but even in your daily life, because it will affect the quality of your meditation in a retreat. If you have not kept the precepts, some of these deeds will surface when your mind has quietened down during meditation. And since vipassanā, or the practice of insight, is

for liberation from saṃsāra, oftentimes you will have to pay in terms of mental suffering or even physical suffering, in various forms, as you meditate.

Doubt

Finally, there is doubt. There could be doubt about the teacher, doubt about the method, doubt about your own capability. Doubt can be about anything and everything in relation to the practice and can even extend to doubts about the teaching of the Buddha. Doubt is something which can be very daunting. Once you feel doubtful or daunted, there will be unwillingness to continue because of all the doubts.

Now that we have discussed in brief what the five Hindrances are, let's see how they are nourished.

How the 5 Hindrances Are Nourished

Sensual Desire

First, sensual desire can be nourished by beauty. Beauty here does not refer only to something physical or visible, although we usually use the word in that sense. Beauty in our context includes anything that is desirable and pleasant to the senses such that the sign or idea or even memory of it can nourish sensual desire. You may yearn for the desirable pleasant experience that you had experienced in the past, which will then stoke sensual desire and make it even more intense.

Ill Will

Second, for ill will the sign is resistance. Ill will arises when you are not contented with what is; whether it's your own performance, your environment, the people around you, or their behaviour, because all of them are not up to your standards! These are all signs of resistance. You are resisting reality—resisting what is happening, expecting the situation to be other than what it is, expecting others to behave according to your expectations. When there is resistance, it will of course stoke ill will, making it worse and more intense.

Sloth and Torpor

Third, the nourishment for sloth and torpor is discontent or boredom. In your normal life, you get a lot of stimulation through the senses; going on outings, watching videos, advertisements, having intellectual stimulation through debates and discussion; all kinds of stimulation through all the six senses. But when you are on retreat, you're supposed to be restrained; you're confined in space, you can't talk to people or even read. When you're starved of stimulation, you get bored. And you become discontented with the situation. You may even regret signing up for the retreat as you feel that you are wasting your time not doing anything useful. When you lose interest and become bored, this will lead to sloth and torpor. Instead of obeying instructions to anchor your mind in the 5 senses, you indulge in thoughts

and memories that fuel discontent. And that saps a lot of energy. The mind can sap more energy than the body. When you think too much and when you are constantly fighting with your own thoughts, the mind becomes tired and lethargic. When the mind is tired it will also manifest in lethargy of the body.

Restlessness and Worry

Fourth, restlessness and worry arise from the sense of unsettledness. Usually in the first few days of a retreat, there will be a lot of baggage from the past. There are probably many things you have not or could not settle before you checked in. All those things that you have left half-finished or undone, not properly settled, will arise in your mind causing restlessness. And because of this, you will of course also worry, thinking of all the things that you should have done but did not do. This is the unsettledness of the mind. If your mind is unsettled, there will be a lot of restlessness and worry.

Doubt

Finally, we come to the nourishment for doubt. Doubt can arise, and be further nourished, by all kinds of sources. You may doubt yourself, your capability or your commitment. Doubts may also arise about the suitability of the teacher, the method he is teaching, the place the retreat is being conducted, and even why you came in the first place. Doubt can arise about anything and almost everything.

How to Denourish the Hindrances

After discussing how the 5 Hindrances are nourished, the next question is how to denourish them.

Sensual Desire

For the sign of beauty, it is the sign of non-beauty. If you see something visually beautiful that evokes desire in you, then the classic approach is to try to practise asubha or non-beauty. This means reflecting on the loathsomeness of the body, your own as well as that of others. Sometimes this is done by dissecting the human body into 31 or 32 parts, then looking at them in terms of their loathsome nature. Sometimes it is done by recollecting what you had seen in a live autopsy, in the charnel ground, in the cemetery or some gruesome accident in the middle of the road. So you try to recollect all these things to give you a sense of loathsomeness in regard to the body. That's from the visual point of view. But you have to apply that also to the other senses. Instead of looking at the desirable and pleasant aspects of sense objects, you try to switch your perspective to the non-desirable and non-pleasant aspects.

Ill Will

The antidote for ill will is mettā, or loving kindness. It's not easy to extend loving kindness to someone you dislike or who stirs unwholesome thoughts. But if you

have been practising loving kindness meditation before, it can help to rewire your brain.

Sloth and Torpor

For sloth and torpor, I suggest you put in more effort on the strategies I teach such as Point and Shoot, Hit and Run which can be especially effective when you are sleepy. Rotating among the 5 senses and moving from one object to another in quick succession helps in combating sloth and torpor.

Restlessness and Worry

The denourishment of restlessness and worry comes with having peace of mind. In my teachings on open mindfulness, I suggest the formula of ADA Anchor. This means having the right attitude of accepting whatever happens without following what you like, rejecting what you dislike, or ignoring whatever you neither like nor dislike. Instead of trying to fight with the things disturbing you and getting more restless, you accept and let them come and go. Then they will eventually fade away. Fighting with them will aggravate the situation and cause even more restlessness.

Doubts

As for doubts, you need to pay frequent attention to wholesomeness. This requires you to understand what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. Wholesome means anything that is related to, or motivated by, non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. A good understanding of what is wholesome will help you focus on wholesomeness when doubts arise.

The instructions given by the Buddha in Āhāra Sutta are very brief. It just gives us the main points without elaboration. There are many other ways of denourishing the hindrances that we can find in other texts from which we can get more inspiration on how we can deal with the 5 Hindrances.

How to Prevent the Hindrances from Arising According to the Commentary

Let us first look at the commentary to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta because in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, there is one particular section in Dhammānupassanā which is about contemplation, or repeated observation, of the dhammas.

Dhammānupassanā is the fourth establishment of mindfulness, the first exercise of which is to observe and understand the 5 Hindrances. To do this, you must understand how the 5 Hindrances arise and how to abandon them when they have arisen. Then, having abandoned them, you must try to prevent them from arising again.

Sensual Desire

The commentary to Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta gives a whole list of conditions for the prevention of sensual desire.

1. Learn asubha meditation.

As mentioned above, you can learn asubha in terms of the 31 or 32 parts of the body. Or you can learn it in terms of the charnel ground contemplations, recollecting the sight of corpses in various stages of decay. If you have not personally witnessed corpses in such states, then you can use your imagination or perhaps recollect having watched videos of decaying bodies. Learning asubha meditation can help you to prevent sensual desire from arising. When you become adept at asubha meditation you will be adept in preventing sensual desire from resurfacing.

2. Practise asubha meditation.

It seems there is a commentarial story about a monk who was practising asubha meditation and his primary object was bones or a skeleton. One day he was going on alms round when, while walking along the road, he met a woman who ran past him. Soon after, a man came running from behind. The man asked the monk whether he had seen a woman running past. In reply, the monk said, "Woman or not, I don't know, I only saw a pack of bones, a skeleton running." Obviously, this monk had practised asubha meditation to such an extent that he was able to replace what the eyes can normally see with what the mind has created. The mind had created this perception that the human body is actually a skeleton made up of bones only. And so instead of allowing the eyes to form the picture, his mental perception was stronger than what the eye could perceive. So the mind can override what the eye perceives with the perception that the mind has developed.

3. Guard the sense doors

Another way of preventing sensual desire is to guard the sense doors. For example, if you know that you are prone to sensual desire, then you should try to avoid getting into contact with nude photos, blue films, and advertisements that make you sexually or sensually aroused.

That's why in the old days it was easier for monks to practise because they stayed in the forest, away from people. But, the latent tendency, if not yet uprooted, may still be there within them. They might get a lot of serenity while in the forest but when they come out for piṇḍapāta, or alms round in the morning, and scantily dressed pretty girls or women give them alms, that could arouse their sensual desire.

Guarding the doors of the senses is now more difficult because of exposure to social media and even newspapers, carrying videos or photos that are inappropriate for monks. So it is not surprising that since the introduction of smartphones and the

availability of the internet in traditional Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma, many monks have disrobed because they could not contain the sensual desire due to exposure to all this social media.

4. Practise moderation in eating

The fourth condition is to practise moderation in eating. If you eat a lot, you tend to get sleepy and you may fall asleep while meditating, which is giving way to sensual desire. And if you sleep a lot, that may also tend to make your sensual desires more acute.

5. Good spiritual friendship

The fifth is good spiritual friendship or associating with kalyāna mittas, people who talk to us about sense restraint, moderation in eating, and generally what is connected to Dhamma practice. As we know, we are products of our environment. If we are powerful enough, we influence others. If we are not so powerful, others will influence us. So, it is important to keep good company. That's why in the Maṅgala Sutta, the first two blessings are to avoid association with fools and to associate with wise people. Wise people here refers to people who are on the path.

6. Suitable conversation

Finally, the sixth is the importance of suitable conversation which you will get by associating with kalyāna mittas. Suitable conversation will keep us away from stimulating sensual desires, or prevent them from arising, and help to keep us on the path.

Bear in mind, as we continue our discussion, that the fifth and sixth are common conditions for the prevention of each of the 5 Hindrances.

Ill Will

1-2. Learn and practise mettā

For ill-will, the first condition is to learn mettā. The second is to actually practise mettā. Somebody who is by nature bad-tempered or hot-tempered has the tendency to look at the defects or the bad side of things. But with mettā, it will be different. Mettā is when you try to look at the positive or good side of things, of how people can be well and happy. The practice of metta will help rewire your mind, subdue or reduce your innate tendency to be hot-tempered, tone you down to become more mellow. More metta practice will reduce or prevent frequent arising of anger towards yourself, towards others or towards situations. It may still arise, but you can reduce the frequency and perhaps also the intensity of these outbursts.

3. Reflect on kammic ownership

The third condition is to reflect on kammic ownership. For example, if you have a

disagreement with somebody and it causes a lot of upset within yourself, you can reflect on kammic ownership. Whatever that person has done, that person will reap the consequences if you perceive him to be in the wrong. Or, you could look at it in terms of your kammic connections with the person. Maybe you had wronged or upset him or her in the past and now it's time for you to repay that without creating more bad kamma for the future.

4. Wise consideration or yoniso manasikāra

To take one step further is to look at it with wise consideration or yoniso manasikāra. You could consider this person in terms of cause, condition and effect; that this person is a product of his upbringing, of his past conditioning, which may have resulted in his not developing the ability to control himself. Or perhaps it's the other way round; it is you yourself who is not mature enough to be able to respond positively to this person's assault, mentally, emotionally or otherwise.

5 & 6.

Finally, we have the fifth and sixth conditions of good spiritual friendship and suitable conversation common to prevention of all 5 hindrances.

How to Remove Ill Will (AN 5.161)

Whereas the previous set came from the Commentary, the following comes from Aṅguttara Nikāya (Book of Fives, Sutta No. 161) which talks about how to remove ill will.

1. Develop mettā

The standard recommended practice is to develop mettā for that person. But this can only happen if you have already got a good foundation of mettā. The traditional sequence of cultivating mettā is to start with yourself, then to somebody whom you respect and are grateful to, then to someone whom you love, then to a mediocre person or someone in the middle, and only go on finally to an enemy. Obviously if you have not developed mettā properly or sufficiently strongly, it's very difficult to extend metta to somebody who has offended or angered you.

2. Develop compassion

Instead of mettā, you could try to develop compassion for that person. You can feel compassion by considering that his reaction is because he hasn't enough control over his mind, he is a product of his past conditioning and he will have to reap the kammic consequences of his actions in the future.

3. Develop equanimity

You can also develop equanimity by thinking I don't have to react, whatever he does is his business, the effects from his past conditioning. Equanimity can come with the

formula of ADA Anchor - accept all things, whatever comes, good, bad, or neutral, as products of causes and conditions.

4. Don't think about that person

Fourthly, you can change the subject. Don't think about it, forget that person, go and do something that you are interested in so that this person doesn't come into your mind. Sometimes when you're so angered and incensed by a person's behaviour, the mind may keep on nagging, nagging, nagging and clinging on to the idea that this person has done you wrong and how you can get back at him. It may be strange but that's how clinging works. People think that you only cling to pleasant objects. But strangely, we can cling as strongly to unpleasant objects. If the aversion is so strong that it becomes obsessive, then you need to try to forget the person by doing something which interests you. Usually, it's something physical that you enjoy, for example hiking, gardening, swimming, or a gym workout; something that will move your attention away from that person.

5. Reflect on kammic ownership

Finally, you can reflect on kammic ownership—he has to reap the kamma that he has sowed or you have to repay your kammic debt, as discussed earlier. That's how you can remove ill will.

How to Prevent the Hindrances from Arising According to the Commentary

Sloth and Torpor

1. Awareness of sign of overeating

The first condition for prevention of sloth and torpor is awareness of the sign of overeating, particularly when you are on a retreat. Being used to the normal routine of eating three or four times a day, it is very different when you can only eat breakfast in the morning and lunch at mid-day, after which there are no more meals. Sometimes, especially in the first few days, there will be inaccuracies or difficulties in estimating how much you can or should eat. If you take too much, you may be sleepy. If you take too little, you may feel fresh and alert after the meal, but towards the end of the day or early the following day, you will feel sapped of energy. So, it will take some time for you to adjust your eating habits during a retreat.

2. Change postures

The second way to prevent sloth and torpor is to change postures. If you get drowsy after sitting for some time, then try standing. If you stand and still feel

drowsy, then try walking. If you're still drowsy even while walking, then speed up the walking. And if you're still drowsy even when walking faster, go take a nap.

3. Pay attention to perception of light

Thirdly is to pay attention to the perception of light. Usually, you find it difficult to go to sleep at night if the lights are on. Bright lights tend to keep you awake. Similarly, if you have a tendency to be sleepy, don't sit in a dark place. Sit in a place where there's light and better still, keep your eyes open.

4. Go outdoors

Going outdoors is another way to prevent sloth and torpor. If you stay in an aircon room or you sit under a mosquito net, the air becomes very stuffy and the oxygen level also decreases, making you even more sleepy. If you stay outdoors, there's always fresh air, especially under the shade.

5 & 6.

Finally, the fifth and sixth conditions, common to prevention of all 5 hindrances, are good spiritual friendship and suitable conversation.

How to overcome Drowsiness (AN 7.61)

This is an interesting sutta that was given by the Buddha to Āyasmā Moggallāna. As you know, Āyasmā Moggallāna was foremost among the Buddha's disciples in terms of psychic abilities.

He became a sotāpanna by listening to a short verse that was uttered by Āyasmā Sāriputta, his good friend. But after that, he had to go on intensive meditation for about one week before he became an arahant. It seems that during that one week, he was nodding away at his place of meditation. At that time, the Buddha was somewhere else, but the Buddha could perceive with his psychic powers that Moggallāna was in trouble. So, the Buddha appeared in front of Moggallāna and gave him some advice. The advice was to change the object. Whatever object you were focusing on before you became drowsy, then don't continue with it. Change to something else.

In my teaching of open mindfulness, the default method is to open your eyes and maintain a defocused gaze. But if you are sleepy, you can't afford to maintain a defocused gaze. You should focus instead on certain objects, but don't stay on one object. The best way would be to change quickly from one object to another, and preferably from one sense to another.

Another way is to ponder, examine and mentally inspect the Dhamma that you have learned. As this is intellectual stimulation, it is particularly useful for the intellectually inclined who can become very wakeful when they start to think about things. There are some people who find it boring to watch the rising and falling, or

the breath, because it's a single object. But if you ask them to do open mindfulness, keep their eyes open to keep track of things going around in the 5 senses, or keep track of what's happening to the mind, they become really alert. So which method works better depends on the temperament of the person.

If you are the sort of person who doesn't like to stay put on one single object, then you could try to ponder, examine and mentally inspect the Dhamma. This is not open mindfulness. It is actually recalling or recollecting the Dhamma that you have learned and trying to ponder, examine and mentally understand this Dhamma in terms of how it can be put into practice. After all, we learn the Dhamma not to pass examinations or get certificates, but in order to find various ways of practising that are suitable for us. As you know, the Buddha tailored his talks to his audience and so if a particular sutta is not relevant for you, some other suttas may be better for you. Therefore, if you read widely, then you may come upon a sutta that suits you particularly well. So, when you are meditating and get sleepy, this is what you can do, mentally recall the Dhamma most suitable for you.

Alternatively, you can recite the Dhamma. In the past there were no books so everyone had to memorize and recite the Dhamma. Reciting the Dhamma can be one way of getting composed, getting samadhi. You recite the Dhamma either mentally or verbally, depending on your situation. If that doesn't work, then pull your ears, rub your limbs to circulate your blood. And if that doesn't work, get up, wash your eyes, look around, look up in the sky at the stars and constellations at night or at the moon.

This is the method of attending to the perception of light that we have dealt with earlier. But, if you cannot actually go to a lighted area, even if you're in darkness, you can try to imagine the light within yourself, in your mind's eye, and then expand the light to brighten up your mind. If all of this doesn't work, get up and walk back and forth, looking ahead, with your eyes open so you can see where you are going. But keep the mind restrained, don't let it get caught up with thoughts about what you see.

Finally, if all of these don't work, then go take a nap but with an intention to get up when it's enough. Actually, the body is very intelligent. You can actually program the body. You're so sleepy, you've tried all these methods, they don't work, then you can tell the body, okay, you need a rest. So, lie down on your right side placing one foot on top of the other, and then tell your mind: "Okay, take a nap. when you've had enough, then get up". It could be a power nap, maybe just 10 or 20 minutes. But when you get up, you're very refreshed. It's better than nodding away for half an hour and failing to get out of the drowsiness state.

How to Prevent the Hindrances from Arising According to the Commentary

Restlessness and worry

What does the Commentary have to say about prevention of restlessness and worry?

1. Being learned

First, it's the condition of being learned or knowledgeable. What this refers to, whether you're a monk or layperson, is knowledge or learning in respect of the precepts and in respect of the Dhamma. If you are wondering whether you are seeing things correctly or not, whether you're practising the right way or not, whether you've broken your precepts or not; all these things can give rise to restlessness and worry if you are not learned or knowledgeable. Sometimes it's our misperceptions and misunderstandings of how things should be that give rise to restlessness and worry.

2. Clarification through questioning

But if you're not learned or knowledgeable, then you should clarify by asking your teacher or a senior practitioner who has more experience than you.

3. Skilfulness in the Vinaya

Then there is skilfulness in the Vinaya which refers particularly to monks. For lay people, this refers to understanding the factors that are responsible for breaking any of the precepts. There are specific factors involved that we can analyse accurately so that we can be sure whether we've broken a precept or not.

4. Associating with (exemplary) elders

And, of course, there is the condition of associating with the right seniors; not any senior but someone who is more experienced and well practised so that person's vibes can have a positive influence on you. People who are well developed spiritually, when you are near them, even though they don't say anything, you can feel the vibes. You can feel the calmness surrounding them, you can feel their loving kindness, their compassion and that will definitely influence your mindset and your attitude too.

5 & 6.

The last two, common to all the hindrances, are good spiritual friendship and suitable conversation.

Doubts

Finally, as is the case for restlessness and worry, a lot of doubts come about because of misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the Dhamma and the Vinaya. Again, this can be resolved by referring to your teacher or somebody who is more experienced.

1-3.

The first three conditions for prevention of doubt are actually the same as for restlessness and worry.

4. *Faith and confidence*

The fourth is to have more faith and confidence. If you're an intellectual and a sceptic, there are many things for you to be sceptical about because there are many things that cannot be proven in Buddhism, in the Buddhist Dhamma. How can you prove whether there is a past life? How can you prove whether every intention will give rise to a kammic result? There's no way you can prove these things.

You need to have more faith which can be based on inference. Maybe you have seen some YouTube videos about children or people who could spontaneously recall their past lives and this could be verified. There are also examples of people who come back from past life regression or hypnosis to tell their stories. And there are cases of children who could spontaneously remember their past lives and their accounts of experiences could be verified by going to the scene of their past life. So, you can infer that all this could apply to you and to anyone else, although it may not necessarily be so for everyone.

Faith and confidence are important because when we talk about the five spiritual faculties, the first one is faith. If you don't have enough faith, then you will not be able to embark on the spiritual path.

Once you have faith, you can verify that faith through experiential practice. It's just like how scientists work. Scientists also need to have a preliminary hypothesis and they will then conduct a series of experiments to test whether that hypothesis is true or not. And when they find their hypothesis is proven, they will come out with a theory. In the same way, we accept on faith some things and then we can verify them in our practice. I've talked about the law of cause and effect in the worldly and spiritual sense and what can be verified and what cannot be verified before in some of my other talks.

5 & 6.

Finally, the fifth and sixth conditions of good spiritual friendship and suitable conversation also apply for this hindrance.

How to Abandon the Hindrances According to Nīvaraṇa Sutta (AN 9.64)

Let us now take a look at what the Nīvaraṇa Sutta says about how to abandon the hindrances.

If all the suggestions given in the commentaries are rather complicated for you, you just have to practise the four establishments of mindfulness. As I mentioned earlier, in the fourth establishment of mindfulness which is repeated observation of Dhammas, the first exercise is to observe how the 5 Hindrances arise, the causes for their arising, how to abandon them, how to prevent them from arising again in the future. But that's only in the fourth establishment of mindfulness, which is just the first exercise in one of the four establishments of mindfulness.

The Nīvaraṇa Sutta says that to abandon the hindrances you should practise all the four establishments of mindfulness. In other words, it's not limited only to the fourth establishment of mindfulness. You can practise all of them. For example, to abandon the hindrance of sensual desire, you could repeatedly observe the body in terms of the elements. If you close your eyes and you try to be mindful of what the body can be conscious of, what is there? There are only sensations, right? Sensations and sounds and so forth, and all these will combine to give you a concept of a person sitting down there. Even the act of sitting itself is a concept that is made up by the mind.

In the sense of ultimate reality, there are only sensations. Sensations in various proportions, in various combinations, in various positions that tell you that you are sitting instead of lying down or standing or walking. So, you could have repeated observation of the body, feelings, mental states or the dhammas according to the situation to abandon the hindrances.

The 5 Hindrances in Daily Life

Worthy Deeds (AN 4.61)

Let's now consider the hindrances in daily life. There is a sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya called the Pattakamma Sutta (Aṅguttara Nikāya Book of Fours, Sutta No. 61) on "Worthy Deeds". I've given a talk on this many years ago which is now available in one of my playlists in SoundCloud.

4 Things Desired but Rarely Gained

In this sutta, the Buddha was telling Anāthapiṇḍika that there are four things that are wished for, desired, agreeable and rarely gained in the world. Everybody is looking for or desires these four things; so what are they? The first is to have righteous wealth. Everybody wants to be wealthy. Secondly, everybody wants to have fame. Thirdly, everybody wants to have long-life. Of course, not a long-life

bedridden like a vegetable, but quality long-life. And finally, rebirth in a good destination.

These are the things that the majority of people in the world wish for. You can even say they are common to all sentient beings. Maybe animals don't look for fame but they still want dominion, e.g. monkeys fight for dominance over a particular territory because they want to ensure food for themselves. So, they fight for supremacy over territories just like humans.

4 Things Required to Realise What Is Desired

The Buddha says in the sutta that in order for these four wishes to be realised there are four things that can be done. What are these four things? First, you must have faith in the Buddha's awakening. Having faith in the Buddha's awakening also implies faith in the Buddha's teachings. And, of course, also in the Saṅgha who are the ones who have practised, preserved and transmitted the teachings from the Buddha's time until now. Faith in the Buddha's awakening means faith in the Buddha's Dhamma and the Buddha's Saṅgha. And faith in the Dhamma means following the Dhamma's teaching on morality and precepts; *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, and *bhāvanā* for developing the mind.

When you have faith in the Buddha and the Dhamma, then you try to observe the precepts because the Buddha also talks about good kamma and bad kamma. Your morality, or your virtuous conduct, will determine the realm of existence where you will be reborn. If you have good conduct, the chances of being reborn in a good realm of existence, as a human being or among the devas is higher. If your conduct is not virtuous, then the chances of going down to the woeful realms, joining the hungry ghosts, becoming an animal, or going down to hell itself are higher. Therefore, in order not to fall into the woeful realms, you have to be virtuous in your conduct.

Most of us are not perfect; we have both virtuous conduct and vices. We are likely to have broken the precepts when we were younger and before we came into contact with Buddhism. And even after we have come into contact with Buddhism, we still sometimes break the precepts. We have done both good and bad and these will lead to different results accordingly. If you have done more good deeds, more virtuous deeds in terms of the *sīla*, then this will increase your chances of getting rebirth in a good realm.

Your virtuous conduct will also help you to be successful in this life. For example, if you do not take life, then that may mean that you will have a longer life. If you tend to harm other beings, then your life will be full of suffering, perhaps a lot of illnesses or aches and pains. On the other hand, if you are a very compassionate person, very kind to animals and other beings, then your life will be free from sufferings, illnesses, pains and aches, etc. Generosity, on the other hand, can determine the quality of your life after you are reborn. For example, you don't have virtuous conduct but you are very generous. There are some very wealthy people

who got rich because of illegal means, doing all sorts of unwholesome deeds to get rich, e.g. drug trafficking, human trafficking, etc. But they are Buddhists, believing in the law of kamma, so they donate generously; they sponsor kathina, build and donate pagodas and monasteries; and give to the Saṅgha. They are generous but their sīla is not pure. Because of their misconduct, they could be reborn as an animal. But because of their generosity, they may be reborn as a millionaire's pet dog or a millionaire's pet cat and they may live a luxurious life, more luxurious than the poor people in Africa or India.

What is Accomplishment in Wisdom?

Finally, there is wisdom, the last of the four things to obtain the four wishes. First of all, we must understand that if one dwells with a heart overcome by inappropriate greed, then you would do many of the things that you should avoid or you would neglect your duty and that would affect your success in life.

Inappropriate greed is the worldly form of sensual desire which is a hindrance in meditation. Sensual desire as the hindrance in meditation refers to any sort of desire related to pleasures of the five senses. But sensual desire as the hindrance in daily life means inappropriate greed. What is inappropriate greed? As a layperson, you are of course driven by greed or desire; e.g. you want to buy new clothes, cosmetics, nice ornaments for yourself or for your spouse, you want to eat tasty food, etc. All these things are due to greed, but they are not inappropriate as long as you don't break your precepts by pursuing them and you don't hurt yourself or others. You don't harm yourself by consuming things which are bad for your own health or harmful to other people's health. And you don't deplete your family's finances which need to be channelled to other more important things.

This also applies to ill will and all the other hindrances. If you are hampered by the hindrances, this will definitely affect your efficiency at work; e.g. if you have doubt about the nature of your work, about your job description, about how things should be done; if you are restless and cannot focus on your job or your project; if you are lazy and a sloth, you cannot do your work properly; if you have ill will, it will result in bad relationships with your colleagues and with your boss, etc. Not only will your efficiency suffer, so will your salary or earnings, your wealth, your health and ultimately all this will be detrimental to having a good quality long life.

So, if the 5 Hindrances overwhelm a person who is not meditating but just trying to live a good life, they will obstruct that person from gaining the four things that everybody wants; i.e. wealth, fame, long life and rebirth in a good realm of existence.

In other words, if you are overcome by the 5 Hindrances in your daily life, this will jeopardise your chances of a good, successful life as a layperson. Therefore, we must abandon the hindrances, or restrain them, if we want the 4 wishes of righteous wealth, fame, good quality long life and rebirth in a good destination.

I will end the talk here. If you need any clarifications, please feel free to ask.

Questions & Answers

Q: Sending mettā to the opposite sex

Bhante, I read somewhere that we should not send mettā to the opposite sex. Is this correct?

A: This is according to the Visuddhimagga and relates to focusing on a particular person to radiate mettā in order to get the absorption jhāna.

I would say that there's some truth in this because our brains are wired in such a way that we tend to be attracted by the opposite sex. Especially if you are young and your hormones are still very active, then if you focus your attention on a particular person of the opposite sex, that could be a condition for arousing lust, which is the opposite of mettā.

But this danger may not arise if you are sending metta to your parent of the opposite sex who has passed away or who is in a critical health condition. In such a situation, you can send mettā to him or her with less fear of arousing sensual or sexual desire.

On the other hand, you don't have to just focus on one particular person for a long time in order to evoke the feeling of mettā, as suggested in the Visuddhimagga. Instead, you can move around different persons, members of the same sex as well as of the opposite sex. That will lessen the chances of arousing lust.

Q: Hindrances due to external factors

Bhante, may I ask how to overcome the challenge when the hindrances arise not from within, but are due to external factors, e.g. political instability, rise of cost of living, natural disasters.

A: Yes, these are all external factors that may disturb us. But bear in mind that the hindrances don't happen outside, the hindrances happen inside. It is your reaction to these things that is the hindrance. The issue is not what is happening outside in the world but how to cope with your reaction to them. Most of the time, most of the things happening outside are beyond our control. So instead of entertaining all these unwholesome reactions towards them, you could accept that these are also products of causes and conditions. You may not be able to figure out how to solve the problems of the world, but you can reflect on your reaction and consider how you can deal with your reactions in a wholesome way.

Q: OCD and meditation

Bhante, is it recommended for someone with OCD to practise meditation?

Sometimes I manage to observe the intrusive thoughts and can let them pass.

Sometimes the thoughts can get so overwhelming that I avoid them as I am afraid that I will create more bad kamma due to the thoughts.

A: Of course, it is good to practise meditation, but not necessarily focused

mindfulness meditation. If you have OCD, and you practise focused mindfulness meditation that will aggravate the situation. So, it's best to practise open mindfulness meditation. When the obsessive thought arises, then practise ADA Anchor, Free and Easy, Touch and Go; try to come back to the senses instead of indulging in the obsessive thoughts. ADA Anchor is actually all about not following what you like, not rejecting what you don't like, or trying to ignore them. Just be mindful or aware, acknowledge that it's there, and then come back to your senses.

Q: Defocused gaze without indulging in imagination

Bhante, can you please clarify how, during open mindfulness meditation, one can gaze beyond the wall without indulging in imagination.

A: You mean that it is beyond the wall and yet you are aware of colours in front of you? If that's the case, just be aware of the colours, and then ask yourself what else can the mind be aware of? Then the mind will move on to maybe sounds or sensations in the body. Let the mind move among the senses. Then if it is still mindful of the colours, and recognition spontaneously arises, or memory arises, or a thought arises, also be mindful of that. Then practise ADA Anchor—don't reject, don't follow, don't ignore, come back to the senses.

Q: Difference between rejection and acceptance of thoughts

Can we put in more effort to stop and not indulge the proliferating mind before we sleep? When we say that we accept all things and don't reject and don't follow, the problem is that before we sleep, usually at night, there will be lots of thoughts coming in, especially my worries. If we let these thoughts stay in our mind, then we will have a sleepless night. So, can we put in the effort to stop ourselves from indulging in this thought? Does this mean we are rejecting or not accepting whatever comes to us?

A: Yes, if you are forcing or pushing them away, that is rejecting. And if you indulge in them, that's following. And if you ignore them, that's ignorance. What you can do is to be mindful of them, you know that they are there, you acknowledge that they are there, but then you come back to your senses. Be aware of your sleeping posture, feel your pyjamas touching your skin and your back lying on the bed. Be aware of the sounds around you. You can be aware of all these things. And most importantly, be relaxed. What is the difference between rejection and acceptance? Acceptance doesn't mean that you are indulging in them. Acceptance means you accept that there is a reason they are there. If you reject them, then you try to push them away. You don't do that. You just acknowledge that they are there. And then you change the object to something else, a sound or sensation in the body.

Q: Change of meditation objects for a beginner

Bhante is it advisable to change meditation objects for a beginner?

A: Well, you have to start somewhere. I would usually advise people to start off

with open mindfulness meditation. And then when they are established in that practice, if they want to, they can move on to focused mindfulness meditation. Because if you start off with a focused mindfulness practice, it is very difficult to switch to open mindfulness. You tend to get stuck there for a long time because of attachment to the peace and calm of staying with one single object.

Q: How to cultivate faith in Buddha, Dhamma & Saṅgha

Bhante how can we cultivate faith in Buddha, Dhamma & Saṅgha?

A: The best way is to have experientially verified faith. For example, when you practise the Dhamma, and you see that you can actually experience yourself in terms of cause, condition and effect in respect of the subject. The subject here means your mind that is responding or reacting to the environment around you, which is all six senses, not just five, as there is the mind responding to the five senses, as well as to itself. When memories arise, when thoughts arise, how is the mind responding? Can we see our responses and reactions as products of causes and conditions? If your mind is composed enough, especially when the thoughts are spaced apart, you will be able to see that there are certain causes and conditions behind the thoughts that arise, or the responses or reactions, etc. If you understand them in terms of cause, condition and effect, this is experiential verification that will deepen your faith in the Buddha's teachings. That is the best way. Otherwise, you can read a lot, read the suttas or read the accounts of people who have had experiences that corroborate the Buddha's teachings. And this can also give you faith.

Q: What is open mindfulness meditation?

May I ask what open mind-minded meditation is?

A: I have never heard of open-minded meditation. Open mindfulness meditation, yes, but not open-minded meditation. That's a new word for me. I guess you mean open mindfulness meditation.

Well, 'open mindfulness' is opening up your mindfulness to whatever is happening in your senses. Initially, the five senses, and then later, all the six senses; as opposed to 'focused mindfulness', which is just focusing on one single object, like the breath, the nostrils or the rising and falling at the abdomen. Or even doing mettā, as doing mettā is also a focused mindfulness practice.

Q: Negative feelings between spiritual friends

Is it a suitable conversation between spiritual friends for someone to express negative feelings towards me?

A: Well, it depends. It is the other person's perception and the other person has a right to perceive things the way he or she does. But instead of being defensive, you could ask why? Why do you say that I'm like that? And try to understand how your behaviour has given rise to such a perception. Then you can see whether it's

appropriate to rectify your behaviour. The purpose is not to please other people but to reflect on whether changing your behaviour is necessary so that people don't have unwholesome perceptions about you.

Q: Open mindfulness meditation in noisy places

Can open mindfulness meditation be practised in open and noisy places?

A: Certainly! Such places are ideal to practise open mindfulness, because they will keep you in the present, provided you don't get caught up in the noise. If you are in a place where you don't understand what people are saying, that's pretty easy. It's just noise. But if you understand the language, then there's a tendency for you to get drawn into listening to the conversation. But still, since it doesn't really directly involve you, you can just observe and let it go. Just be aware. Be mindful of whatever is happening around you, then move on. Actually, in an open place, where there are lots of people, it's also very interesting to practise. If you practise focused open mindfulness, meaning you focus on different objects, there's a tendency for you to start to proliferate on certain people. You see the character of the person and you have impressions and comments in your mind on the person or on how people are conversing and so forth. On the other hand, if you practise defocused open mindfulness, then these are all just blur blur images of what is happening. They just come and go. And you can just see your mind's reaction to them. Sometimes you're interested, then you may want to focus; sometimes you're not interested and you just move on.

Q: Difference between satisampajañña and vipassanā

Can I ask a question not on today's topic? If yes, I would like to ask what is the difference between satisampajañña and insight vipassanā practice?

A: No, you can't ask that question as the answer will be another lecture by itself. You can watch one of my videos on YouTube or listen to one of my talks on SoundCloud where I've explained the difference.

Q: Application of BARR Test and verification of causes and conditions in the 5 aggregates

Can the BARR Test and inclining the mind be used to verify the causes and conditions and five aggregates simultaneously? Seems like one is intellectual and the other is intuitive?

A: I've often said that if you really want to observe the five aggregates, you have to go to the third level of composure, attainable through open mindfulness practice.

The first level is when the mind is very restless, but yet you are not caught up in the restlessness. You don't try to push the restlessness away; you are not dragged by them; you are able to just sit back and observe them come and go objectively, in a composed manner. That is the first level of composure whereby you can actually verify the three characteristics. Everything is changing all the time, impermanent,

and it's suffering. You don't want restlessness, but it's happening all the same. And it's anatta, not self as you've got no control over it. You can see the three characteristics very clearly if your mind is composed. Most people are not in that state. Most people try to fight with restlessness and so they don't have the composure to verify the three characteristics. If you are able to practise ADA Anchor, you are able to step back, you can see restlessness as just another state of mind that is going on, you can attain the first level of composure.

The second level of composure is when you watch this restlessness and you are willing to accept the restless thoughts without trying to push them away, they will eventually peter out. They will eventually become less and less and less and there will be gaps in between those thoughts. That is the second level of composure and that's the time when you can see cause, condition and effect in respect to the thoughts. How did this thought arise? There are the present circumstances which are the causes and there are the past experiences which are the conditions for influencing this thought to arise which is an effect. That's how you see cause, condition and effect.

Then there is the third level of composure—when there are no more thoughts. You are just in a space of being conscious of things happening but there are no interpretations of what is happening at the senses, there are no memories, there are no comments, nothing but consciousness, mindfulness of what's happening. At that time, you can really watch the five aggregates in the ultimate sense. Form is just form. Just sensations or colours or sounds without naming those sounds, without recognising those sounds or those colours. Or you could recognize them but you don't proliferate on them. That's the first aggregate. The second aggregate is feelings. Feelings are either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Then there is saññā or perception from memory which enables spontaneous recognition of things. There can be spontaneous recognition of things but there is no proliferation of what is recognised. Then there is saṅkhāra which is the intention that goes on in the mind. The urge of wanting to direct your attention to see feelings, to be conscious of or be mindful of sounds, to be mindful of certain sensations and so forth. That intention, that urge of directing the mind; that is saṅkhāra. Finally, there's consciousness. Consciousness is just the state of being conscious. Although there is no more discursive thinking, there is still a sense of being conscious of what's happening. That is consciousness. When there is no more discursive thinking—that is the time when you can really see the five aggregates.

At that time, you don't apply the BARR test because the BARR test is conceptual. You apply the BARR test only in the second level of composure and especially in your daily life when you have to make decisions on whether to pursue a thought, feeling, or intention or to curtail it. However the spiritual aspect of the last R can be applied by inclining the mind to verify the three characteristics and cause-condition-effect in the five aggregates.

Q: Difference between open mindfulness meditation and mindfulness of breathing

Bhante I am not sure I understand your method of open mindfulness meditation. How is it different from watching the breath?

A: Have you ever attended any of my retreats?

No.

No wonder you can't understand. If you try one retreat first, then you will know what it's all about. As I said just now, watching the breath is focused mindfulness practice because you focus only on one object.

Okay. So open mindfulness means you focus on other objects. You mean like doing body scanning?

Well, you must come and participate in my retreat to practise and to understand. Did you join the guided meditation at the beginning of the talk?

Yeah, yeah.

That was a short session of open mindfulness practice.

Oh, I see. Thank you. Sādhu.

Q: Suitable and unsuitable conversation

How do we draw the line between suitable and unsuitable conversation?

A: That is relative depending on the individual's value system, depending also on context, situation and circumstances. You have to use your discretion to decide because you have to consider whether it's suitable for you, or for your family or the particular situation. It depends on what your role is in that particular situation: are you a mother, or a child or a teacher or a student or a businessman or a client, or a government officer, a public servant, etc. What is suitable will depend on the role and the situation you are in.

In the spiritual sense, suitable conversation means anything that is related to the spiritual path. Anything that is not related to the spiritual path is not suitable. But you are not a full-time yogi. As a layperson, you have to modify your behaviour according to the role you find yourself in. You cannot act like a yogi in your daily life. There's a different set of values in place when you are in the world where you have to interact with people and you have to decide what is suitable for you in terms of the role and the circumstances that you're in.

Q: "Defocused mindfulness" of youngsters nowadays

It seems youngsters these days are experts in practising defocused mindfulness when they ignore their parents, or choose when to listen or not to listen to their elders. Is this also a form of defocused mindfulness?

A: I don't think so. I think it's more likely just a deliberate act of defiance. They're just not interested. This has nothing to do with spiritual practice. It's just an attitude of theirs. What can you do when your parents nag at you? You can't answer back so you just ignore them if you don't want to listen to them.