

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation: The Five Hindrances

In meditation, the Five Hindrances can be seen as the major forces in the mind that hinder our ability to see clearly or become concentrated. They are universal, we all experience them.

The five hindrances are: 1) sensual desire or greed 2) ill-will or aversion 3) sloth and torpor 4) restlessness & anxiety or worry and 5) doubt.

The primary instruction in working with the Hindrances is to turn them into your Meditation Object. It doesn't matter if a hindrance is present or not, but it does matter if you're not aware of it.

Any moment the hindrances are suspended, one feels happy and calm. It's important to have a friendly relationship with the hindrances, not an adversarial one.

Investigating the Hindrances

The RAIN Formula: When a hindrance is present it helps to investigate it:

R: Recognize it.

A: Accept it.

I: Investigate it, be curious. What is it like?

- Physically (*How does it feel in the body? Is it pleasant? Unpleasant? Does it change?*)
- Emotionally
- Energetically (*such as feelings of rushing, sinking or lifting*)
- Cognitively (*What beliefs or stories do we tell ourselves?*)
- Motivationally (*is there an urge to act or cling?*)

N: Non-identification. This is just a passing process that comes and goes, not who we are.

It's helpful to first explore the hindrance and investigate it. Often just recognizing a hindrance is enough for it to fall away. But at other times, it's helpful to use "remedies" to counterbalance the hindrance.

Remedies or Counterbalances for the Five Hindrances

Desire or Greed

Desire becomes a hindrance when we want something and grasp for it, cling to it. It could be either harmful to us or inappropriate or not useful at this time. Wanting to eat is a healthy desire, but not useful while meditating. Whereas a desire for a cigarette might be a desire for something harmful.

No matter how weak or strong Desire is, mindful attention is always appropriate. You can work with it using the RAIN formula above (Recognize, Accept, Investigate, Non-identification).

- If there is excessive preoccupation with **lust**, one can focus on the body's non-attractive parts, such as urine, saliva, pus, feces, phlegm, sweat, body hair, teeth, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, spleen, intestines, undigested food, blood, fat....
- If desiring something that is **harmful** to us, we can focus on the consequences of getting what we want. Maybe you are craving potato chips and it gives you high blood pressure. Reflect on the possible effects of high blood pressure.

- If we desire something that might be appropriate, but we are clinging to that desire, we feel we just have to have it, we can focus on the **impermanent** nature of what we want. How long will the satisfaction last if the desire is fulfilled? This desire will fade. It may come back, but it's not permanent.
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AVERSION and ILL-WILL

Aversion is wanting things to not be the way they are and pushing them away. Ill-will is an escalation of that into wishing harm to someone or something that is in the way of us getting what we want. It can range from a very subtle pushing something away to intense hatred and anger or ill-will.

No matter how weak or strong an aversion is, mindful attention is always appropriate. You can work with it using the RAIN formula (Recognize, Accept, Investigate, Non-identification).

With the less intense forms of aversion, just noticing them is often enough to dispel them. Sometimes aversion to something can be so deeply ingrained, it's like the air that we breath; like a fish swimming in water doesn't notice the water... Low self-esteem can be that way; a chronic voice that says "I shouldn't be this way."

Remedies

At times, applying a "remedy" or **counterbalancing** aversion might be useful:

- **Narrow your focus:** increase your concentration, such as **counting your breaths**
- **Broaden your focus:** listen to all sounds, or experience the body globally
- **Change your focus:** Aversion is often **due to "one-sided attention,"** when the irritating, unpleasant or repulsive feature of something receives undue attention. If someone seems very annoying and we dislike them, we can pay attention to their positive qualities. (This applies to ourselves as well.)
 - **In a difficult situation we could ask:** "What might I learn from this situation?"
- **Lovingkindness:** if you are being harsh with yourself or someone else, you can give wishes of goodwill to yourself.
 - If Anger is a significant issue in your life, the regular practice of Lovingkindness can be very helpful.
- **Pain:** It's helpful to notice the difference between the sensations of pain, and our aversion and emotional reaction to it.
- **Reflect on our own good deeds:** reflect on things you have done that have helped yourself or others....

Fear is having aversion of something that hasn't yet happened. (Something **imagined**, even if likely will still never be just like you imagined...)

- being in the body is very important for working with fear
 - if you have the luxury of time for dealing with the fear, as you might during formal meditation, or on retreat, a great deal can be learned
 - **Change your Focus:** if fear is not manageable, sometimes it's appropriate to counterbalance with a change in focus.
 - eg: Public Speaking – focus on what the audience needs to know instead of your desire for the talk to be successful
 - If you are hiking on a scary path, and you have no choice, narrow your focus to what's right in front of you, not the drop 1,000 feet down.
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Sloth & Torpor

We want to develop a mind that is both **Tranquil and Alert**. Too much tranquility without alertness and we're in dreamland. We sometimes call it "sinking mind", it tends to be dreamy and pleasant. It's relaxing, but it's not conducive to awareness, to mindfulness.

The first thing to do is to recognize it when it happens. Then to consciously intend to put a little more effort into staying mindful. How is the posture? The breathing? Sometimes it helps to start the sitting with a clear intention that we want to stay present with each breath. Pay particular attention to this balance in the coming week.

- We want to develop a mind that is both **Tranquil and Alert**. Too much tranquility without alertness and we're in dreamland. Too much alertness and no tranquility, and we can be tense or quickly either planning or worrying about the future, or regretting the past...
- Learning to notice and understand both Sloth/Torpor & Restlessness and Anxiety are essential to developing a mind that is both Tranquil and Alert.
- Sloth and torpor refers to **heaviness of body and dullness of mind respectively. This includes** drowsiness, sluggishness, low energy, sleepiness, lethargy. Nothing is clear. The mind feels heavy and dull or dreamy.
 - **Sloth refers to the physical aspects: it feels difficult holding oneself up.**
 - Torpor is more **mental**, it feels difficult to pay attention.
 - Sloth & Torpor can be both pleasant or unpleasant. When it's pleasant (dreamy comfy...) it's more seductive.
 - When it's comfortable and pleasant...it's sometimes called "**sinking mind**." It can be a form of "procrastination" – we know we're not being mindful, but it's nice here...kind of like staying in bed in the morning and sleeping in...we can be mindful later...
 - It's important to differentiate between sloth and torpor and the need for sleep! You can test this by using a favorite fantasy or memory, if the sleepiness goes away or weakens, it was sloth & torpor.
- Sloth and torpor is a habit of mind which inhibits the application of energy, of being engaged, of being involved. When sloth and torpor is really strong, we can sink into it and get lost in it. The mind can feel like mud, like glue. It's very difficult to make effort, mental or physical.
 - Energy is often available but it's hindered or kept back or not tapped into or utilized. For some people who feel "lazy" a lot, it's a habitual way of using the mind. Sloth and torpor is usually preceded by a certain "pattern" of thoughts...

Remedies

- **Lack of direction** - In daily life as in meditation, a lack of direction causes a lack of energy: energy has to be directed. There needs to be a goal. Energy arises when one has a clear-cut direction.
 - Committing to a goal gives the mind direction, such as committing to being mindful for the next 10 breaths
- **Lack of stimulation** – the mind likes to have something to do, when it doesn't it's in the habit of getting drowsy.
 - **Broaden the focus:** give the mind more to be mindful of.
 - Pay attention to details more closely
- **Remember the "urgency of change."** Change can only happen "Now", right at this moment.
- Notice **RESISTANCE**. Often we don't want to pay attention, we don't want to be here.
 - It can be resistance to unpleasant states

- It can be a protective mechanism, of a deep memory or feeling.
- **Notice Complacency:** Sloth and torpor can set in out of complacency. It's nice here. Sometimes meditation is a challenge or a struggle. It's quite pleasant now...even though I'm dreamy... It can lull you into not making any more effort.
- **Our thoughts can increase our energy or decrease it.** Some thoughts can drain us, such as worrying, planning, regretting...
 - Thoughts of **Discouragement/Failure**. Focusing on failures or feared failures drains our energy.
 - Thinking "there's 20 minutes left" can be discouraging. Being mindful for the next breath is bite size.
- Sometimes there is the mistaken idea that a meditative state should be **passive** instead of **receptive**.
 - Being "relaxed" and calm is sometimes being overemphasized. Diligence, energy, ardency, vigorous active engagement are all necessary.

"Calm is very important. Equanimity is very important. Tranquility is important... but not at the expense of being energized."

Gil Fronsdal

Sometimes Sloth & Torpor is a reaction to the constant chronic habit of tension and anxiety, or being chronically excited. With years of that kind of stress, when people finally just sit completely still they feel the exhaustion of this chronic tension. For some people sloth and torpor is a transition they have to go through, like coffee withdrawal...

- **Don't overeat before meditation, it tends to make us tired and sleepy.**

REMEDIES:

Physical Remedies:

- Sit up straight.
 - This works during the day also—your posture will affect you!
 - If this is a recurring hindrance, sit without back support.
- Take a few deep breaths (can count breaths).
- Open your eyes.
- Look at a LIGHT: the effect of light wakens the system, look at a light, a lightbulb, the moonlight...
 - OR imagine a white light in the forehead area.
 - In general, focusing on head increases energy, focusing on belly calms...
- Pull earlobes, rub face.
- Change posture – stand (standing meditation), brisk walk.
- Go outside.
- Wash face with cold water.
- If you're doing walking meditation, you can walk backwards.

Mental Remedies:

Energy is always available but you need to know how to turn on the switch. Setting a goal, a reasonable goal, is a wise and effective way to generate energy, as is deliberately developing interest in the task at hand.

- Counting breaths: Just pay attention to **5 more breaths**. (small goal)
- A lack of direction causes a lack of energy, a goal can be helpful. Energy arises when one has a clear-cut direction. The goal of being mindful can be brought to mind with "just this one breath, just this one step..."
- Effort often begets effort. When we apply ourselves there might be resistance initially, but after a while after you keep making the effort and doing it, something happens and it begin to feel effortless. Like pedaling a bicycle hard, and then coasting.

- When something is new it can be exciting. We often get a lot of energy when we meet someone new or go somewhere we haven't been to before – novelty energizes us. But if we can look at our life, or our meditation, with a 'beginner's mind' we can see our ordinary lives newly each moment, we can see new angles and fresh possibilities which arouse energy.
- We can develop delight in whatever we are doing by training our perception to see the beautiful and interesting in the ordinary, thereby generating interest
- TO AROUSE ENERGY, DO MORE:
 - You can be more fully engaged with the breath by counting or making the counting more complex.
 - You can add touch points: during the space between the exhale and the inhale, you can notice your sit bones, or the palms of your hands...
 - You can increase the details and frequency of noting.
- Contemplate on our desire for awakening, on something or someone who inspires us.
 - Remind yourself why you meditate, what are your highest goals?
 - For some, thinking about death can be helpful: life is uncertain, death is certain, right now is the best opportunity for meditation. This works if it arouses you, and doesn't depress you, it's not for everyone...
 - The Buddha also recommended to his monks to contemplate on 5 "threatening dangers". The dangers of illness, age, lack of food, war, lack of support by good friends... That now is a good time to practice, our conditions for practice might not be available later
- Keep coming back to a **good posture**
- **If this is a recurrent issue**, doing things that inspire you **before** sitting is helpful, such as reading a passage from a book before sitting
- **if nothing works, take a nap**, but don't do it every time it arises, it creates a habit! Try to always investigate the sloth & torpor before napping – even if it's for only one minute.

Restlessness and Anxiety or Worry

Restlessness is a feeling of agitation or over-excitement, it agitates the mind, so it doesn't have the time to see fully. Restlessness is unpleasant, so there is a tendency of the mind to push it away, to not want it there. The mind is restless, and restlessness is further enhanced by struggling against it.

Worry is fear of what may happen in the future. **Anxiety** is a non-specific fear of what will happen in the future.

Restlessness of the mind tends to show itself in restlessness in the body; in meditation, by wanting to shift positions, by tightness and tension.

Restlessness can take different forms: worry, planning, physical restlessness, self-judgment, regret of the past, nervousness, remorse, anxiety. But what these different forms have in common is that we are either **regretting or judging the past or worrying about the future**. Peace and happiness can only occur in the present moment.

We can get lost in regret of the past and self-judgment. Regretting the past comes from actions we've either committed or omitted, and is a major source of restlessness in meditation and daily life. When we pay attention to how much of the disquiet of the mind comes as a result of past actions, the imperative to live a life of integrity becomes more and more compelling.

Planning is useful at the right time, but it can easily become worry, when one becomes concerned if the plan will materialize. We often find ourselves planning and re-planning a coming event, a conversation, often in the same useless loop.

Lack of exercise can cause a physical restlessness we often don't recognize, especially among those of us who are mostly sedentary. If we pay attention to our bodies, we'll get up and stretch or take a walk, if we don't the body itself becomes restless. Too much coffee or other stimulants can also cause a physical restlessness. For many of us, it's probably not a good idea to sit and meditate after a couple of cups of coffee.

Suppressed Emotions can also be a source of restlessness. When we don't pay attention to our emotions when they arise, we tend to either act them out or suppress them. Suppressed emotions can often simmer underneath unnoticed, except for a pervasive feeling of restlessness.

The mind likes stimulation, when stimulation is low, it can be experienced as slightly unpleasant. We tend to call that "**boredom**". When we notice we are bored, it's because we don't like this state of low stimulation and want it to go away, so the mind becomes restless, increasing stimulation.

Working with Restlessness

The most direct way to work with restlessness or any of the hindrances is to be mindful of them, to transform them into the object of meditation. You can use the **RAIN** formula (*see above*): Recognize it, Accept it, Investigate it, Not identify with it.

Restlessness can be unpleasant; try to stay with it and experience it without getting caught up in the content of its story, don't push it away. Don't resist it. Don't be in a rush to get rid of it.

Remedies:

- **Concentration:** When restlessness seems too strong to simply observe, try counting your breaths, until the mind comes back to balance. Concentration cultivates calm and tranquility.
- **Metta or Lovingkindness Practice:** A happy mind is not restless. Lovingkindness practice is often taught using 4 phrases we repeat silently. Common phrases are: "May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be well. May I be safe." Focusing on lovingkindness towards oneself helps with restlessness in two ways: it's a form of concentration practice, which calms the mind; and it also inclines the mind to kindness and acceptance.
- **Smiling:** A practice sometimes used for the cultivation of happiness is **smiling**, it has a direct effect on calming the mind.
- **Broaden the Focus:** One can shift the attention from using the breath as an anchor to **Listening to sounds** or a global sense of the body. By expanding the focus outward, the mind can feel less constricted.
- **Sitting still:** just by sitting still and not moving, the mind itself begins to quiet. It's like taking a glass of dirty water and shaking it. At first the water is murky, but after a while, the particles settle at the bottom.
- **Bargaining:** When restlessness is overpowering, sometimes skillful "**bargaining**" can be useful. "I'll just pay close attention to the next 5 breaths."

DOUBT

It is said that Doubt, as one of the hindrances, is the most dangerous of the hindrances, as it is the one that can cause a person to give up their practice. We can have doubt in our ability to practice or doubt of the

practice or the teachings. It's a state of indecision, of vacillation, that doesn't allow us to fully apply ourselves, causes us to hold back, to get lost in discursive thinking.

Doubt interrupts the gathering of data with premature questions; it interferes with the process of seeing.

Doubt can question one's own ability "*Can I do this?*", or question the method "*Is this the right way?*" Even, "*How am I doing?*" Such questions are obstacles to meditation because they are asked at the wrong time and thus become an obstacle, obscuring one's clarity.

Doubt is not productive or useful, it drains us or disconnects us. It keeps us unwilling to apply ourselves.

"To have doubt about mindfulness, of the value and importance of just being mindful, borders on having doubt about the value of being present for life in general, because mindfulness and being present for life is the same thing." ~ Gil Fronsdal

Remedies

No matter how weak or strong doubt is, mindful attention is always appropriate. You can work with it using the RAIN formula above (Recognize, Accept, Investigate, Non-identification).

The most important thing about working with Doubt is to learn to recognize it when it arises, and to put it aside while we meditate. If Doubt is persistent, we can work with this hindrance by gathering clear instructions, talking with those we respect who practice and being willing to suspend our doubt until we have tested the practice and seen for ourselves. We can study more, understand what we're doing, maybe there's a good reason why we have doubt, maybe we haven't really understood the basic premise, the ideas, the teachings well enough to really want to apply oneself.

Maybe we haven't understood the instructions for practice well enough and so have reasons to have doubt. "*How should I practice? What should I do? When should I do it?*" So sometimes doubt is resolved by reflecting on what questions we have, and learning more or coming and talking to a teacher and exploring it with them.

If one really understands the value of one moment of mindfulness perhaps one will not be plagued by Doubt.