**The Five Hindrances**

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There are many factors that interfere with progress toward feeling less stressed, and the pursuit of greater peace, ease, and clarity in each moment of our lives.  Of course, external challenges and conditions are always at play as long as we are in our bodies and living in this life.  And, in most cases, although wishing to feel less stressed and more at ease, there is little we can do to control others or the larger events and conditions of the world around us.  We do what we can, of course, but so many other factors are present in others’ decisions and in the events of the world, that our ability to change them all is limited.

Where we do have some influence, and considerable power, is changing our own reactions and choices regarding outer events, and the experiences flowing through our inner life.  This is the heart of the work of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, of course.  By cultivating mindfulness in each moment, our own reactions to any expression of life’s unfolding experience– in the form of thoughts, mental states, moods, and bodily sensations–become vividly apparent, and more available for understanding and transformation.

In the midst of this changing flow of inner life conditions, there are a particular set of distorting energies that arise–whether you are practicing meditation or not– that are so common, that so impact our relationships with others and the world around us, and interfere so greatly with growing mindful insight and awareness that they are worthy of specific consideration and careful attention.  Teachers and students of mindfulness have long referred to these energies as “*the five hindrances.*”  The five hindrances are:  *sense desire*, *ill will*, *sloth (dullness of mind)* *and torpor(drowsiness*), *restlessness and worry,* and *doubt.*

It can be helpful to think of each of the five as a kind of filter capable of distorting perceptions, driving reactions, activating certain thoughts, memories, moods, and even bodily sensations, and thereby clouding awareness, taking your attention away from the present moment, and literally blocking or hindering your capacity to be aware and responsive.  This hijacking by the five hindrances can occur in moments of meditation or at any time in the activities of daily life.

In meditation, it can happen as you are mindfully watchful of the changing breath sensations and suddenly your attention leaves the breath and your mind fills with irritated thoughts about how bored you feel, or lustful romantic fantasies.  In the busy activity of daily living, as you have probably noticed, any of the five hindrances can also quickly arise and interfere– as when you lose the thread of another person’s comments because your attention has suddenly descended into sleepiness and dullness.

In either case, recognizing the presence of a hindrance and knowing how to work mindfully and wisely with it is critical if you wish to live with less stress and more happiness.

Much has been said and written about the five hindrances, and there are many excellent resources discussing the five hindrances, but, perhaps the greatest understanding comes out of one’s own direct, mindful observation of each one.  Here is a brief description of each.

## **Sense Desire**

Have you ever been meditating and noticed suddenly that you were lost in a fantasy about eating a favorite dessert, or being with someone you were madly in love with?  Sense desire refers to the craving for pleasant sense experiences, and the longing for this and future moments of enjoyment.  Desire takes the attention away from the focus of meditation, and transports you someplace else. Sense desire, or more precisely, being lost in sense desire, keeps the mind captivated at superficial levels of attention, and constricts attention within the mind’s unfolding world of fantasies and imaginary pleasures.

The pleasant feelings associated with memories and fantasies about satisfying sense desires are powerful conditioning factors, and, are also at the heart of addictive behaviors.  Becoming mindful of the moment of contact, the pleasant feeling, and the tendencies of the mind to become lost in craving and lustful thoughts and images can help free one of the unconscious power of sense desire.

Other recommended practices to cool the  power of sense desire to distort your life include contemplating the fact that no pleasant experience lasts, or can be held onto.  It is the nature of our human bodies is to grow old, grow ill, and to die.  Do you really want to spend your life ignoring everything else in order to rush from one pleasant experience to another (and fleeing from any unpleasant ones) when you know none of these experiences are lasting?

When you really pay attention, have you also noticed that too much of a good thing becomes unpleasant, too?  Perhaps the first four bites of chocolate cherry cheesecake are wonderful, but what about the fourteenth bite?  Or the fourteenth cheesecake?

Reflections like these can help you enjoy pleasant experiences when they come to you, and also to be wise enough to let them go.  Mindful and wise about sense desire, you are protected from greediness and addiction to feeling good, and more open and available to the deeper possibilities inherent in being human.

## **Ill Will**

Ill will includes all negative judgments and aversion and rejection of others and situations.   Ill will can take many forms.  Common expressions of ill will are anger, boredom, irritation, resentment, hatred, condescension, fear, or anxiety.

It can help to recall that ill will is a response to, and essentially a rejection of, what is here in this moment, importantly including what is present in one’s own inner awareness–conditions such as painful bodily sensations, upsetting thoughts, or uncomfortable moods.  For example, most people are familiar with the intense, rejecting energy of anger.  The impulse to angrily reject can be directed at a person for their behavior, or at a situation because of seeming injustice.  In that anger is the aversion or dislike for what is present, and the rejection or denial of it.

Ill will can take less obvious forms.  It is interesting to note that the feeling of boredom is considered to be a form of ill will.  This makes sense when we reflect upon what is happening when we tell ourselves “this is so boring!”  Hasn’t a part of us passed judgment on what is happening or being said, found it wanting in some way, and now rejected that part of this moment by withdrawing attention with an attitude of irritation?

Becoming familiar with the different forms of ill will and the causes and conditions that nourish them can help you overcome feelings of anger and rejection, remain present, and touch the flow of life more deeply in each moment, even in those moments when conditions are not pleasant.

There are a variety of specific meditative practices recommended to cool the heat of ill will and slow its reactive arising in your life. Forgiveness practices are potent ways to end resentments for past wrongdoings, including our own, as well as the resentment we feel toward others who have treated us badly. Cultivating friendliness and well wishing for self, loved ones, enemies, and all living beings through practices of loving kindness and compassion are powerful aids.

Wise reflections on the nature of ill will and its related expression are also very helpful and healing.  For example, when you know that anger and irritation arise more easily when you are tired or hungry, you can be less vulnerable to those feelings, less sensitive to perceived slights from others, and wiser about noticing how you are angry, how tired or hungry you are, not taking it so personally, and being able to take better care of the causes of your irritation and anger.

Another way of wisely reflecting on ill will is to recall the many times you (or others) reap the consequences of their anger or ill will.  It is also helpful to have a good friend or teacher who models loving kindness and compassion, and reflect upon the consequences of their actions, as well as the impact of their presence.

## **Sloth and Torpor**

Sloth and torpor refer to very similar qualities of mind, qualities which interfere with mindfulness and clear seeing in any moment.  Sloth refers to cloudiness (as opposed to brightness and clarity) in the mind, and torpor is a feeling of heaviness or drowsiness.  One analogy is sloth and torpor are like algae overgrowing a pond and blocking your view to the bottom.  The dullness and sleepiness of sloth and torpor block your mindful view of what is present and happening in the present moment.

With close, mindful attention when this hindrance is present, you can actually notice the qualities of cloudiness and the heaviness.  Learning to recognize the presence of this hindrance can help you regain the clarity and focus of mindfulness in your practice.

Specific remedies for sloth and torpor include not overeating,  getting proper rest (including taking a short nap before formal meditation if necessary!), and practicing mindful walking, movement, or standing meditation when feeling sleepy.

It can also help to generate more energy by paying closer attention to the objects of meditation.  For example, practicing breath awareness, summon energy and attend more closely and precisely to the variety of changing sensations of the breath at a single place in your body.  You can also make the feeling of cloudiness or sleepiness the object of attention,  paying closer attention to the actual and exact feeling of drowsiness or cloudiness in your mind and body as you are experiencing the feelings.

## **Restlessness and Worry**

Restlessness is an agitated state of mind.  One metaphor is the restless mind like a wild, agitated horse.  Both need time and space to quiet, and resist being confined or controlled.  Worry is associated with restlessness because it is also a state of mental agitation.  The mind filled with restlessness and worry is agitated and not able to remain focused on the object of meditation (like the breath).  The more you resist or fight the restlessness, like the wild horse, the more agitated your restless mind becomes.  Restlessness and worry often arise from inner conditions of dwelling on thoughts that cause stress or anxiety, or repeating inner thought patterns and feelings of guilt and regrets about things we have done in the past, or not done.

If you wish to tame the wild horse, you must give it room to roam.  Turning it loose in a large pasture, observing it from a distance, and allowing it to run until it is quiet enough to approach  is a good strategy.  Mindfulness of restlessness and worry can be similar.  Look more closely and rely on the core attitudes of non-judging, patience, and trust.  Looking more closely, you may notice the feelings of agitation and arousal in the body.  You can simply keep watching these, without feeling the need to make them go away or change.  Just watch.  That is enough.  Notice how the mind can settle, and the body can calm as you watch mindfully, with patience and compassion for yourself.

As you look more closely at the experience of restlessness and worry, you will probably also notice the thought patterns and inner narrative that feeds this hindrance.  The key is not to get carried away in more thoughts or to create an inner dialogue defending or condemning ourselves or others.  Treat all thoughts like any other experience.  Let them be.  Let them go.  Just watch.  Give your mind, heart, and body room, and allow them to settle on their own.

## **Doubt**

Doubt has been described as the feeling you get upon arriving at a crossroads, and not knowing which direction to take.  It includes inner conditions of alarm and even fear, and thoughts characterized by skeptical questions.  Which way should I go?  What if I get lost, or pick the wrong direction?

Doubt can quickly erode any good intentions and motivations you have about mindfulness practice (or anything else!), so it is crucial that this hindrance be acknowledged and worked with immediately and skillfully.  One way is to name doubt as soon as you notice it, and to keep watching closely how the thoughts and feelings of alarm and doubt appear, change, and disappear in the body.

Another good way to work with doubt is to take information and inspiration from the meditative wisdom of others.  You could read, or seek the advice of other people and teachers with more meditation and mindfulness practice experience.  It can be especially useful to take the questions that have come up in your own practice to these others.

Recognize and remember, too, that any doubt you feel is not permanent nor, if it is filled with fear, that the fearful thoughts are very likely to not be real.  You can explore these aspects about the elements of doubt for yourself with mindful attention when doubt arises.  Experiment with naming the doubt, watching, and questioning it.  What does doubt feel like in your body?  What thoughts are the fuel for the feeling of doubt?  The more often you are able to recognize and watch doubt in your mind and body, the wiser you can become each time it arises, and the power of doubt to arouse fear and to paralyze you will diminish.