

Using the Hindrances

by Rebecca Dixon

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Behold: I bring you lemons. A big basket full of them, different sizes and shades, but all an appealing yellow, like sunshine. They call to you, they smell great, but they're sour, almost bitter – sour like suffering. Even the hungry, thieving critters of the night won't eat more than a first nibble. But these lemons can be used to make delightful beverages, desserts, or to enhance the flavor of countless meals. You just need to know how to use them.

In the same spirit of generosity and hope for your well-being, I bring you the Five Hindrances. Aside from their name, which even sounds annoying, they are beguiling. They seduce us in a heartbeat over and over, and breaking free can take forever. But they too can be used. If you know their nature and how to use them, you can free yourself from these obstacles in disguise, and from all their annoyances.

So this talk is called, "Using the Hindrances." In a talk called the Avarana Sutta, the Buddha began by saying, "**Monks!**" Really, he said it with that *exclamation point*, not just the usual comma. It's not common for the Big Guy use an exclamation point, so he meant to wake those monks up! He declared that there are five obstacles that "overwhelm awareness and weaken discernment." Then he demanded, "Which five?" The answer to that pop quiz was the Hindrances: desire, aversion, restlessness, sloth (or spaciness), and doubt.

The Hindrances warp the mind. They distract it, cloud it, confuse it, entangle the mind. I can remember when I was a youngster, pre-teen, and I got my first crush on someone. Couldn't stop thinking about them. Played out imaginary scenarios in class, on the bus, at the dinner table. With that much bandwidth devoted to desire, how was I going to absorb my school lessons, play the social games on the bus, or really hear the triumphs and defeats my family had faced that day?

In the Ahara Sutta, Buddha asked His Sangha: what feeds sensual desire, dislike, spaciness, restlessness, and uncertainty? He answered that it's "*inappropriate attention*" that snares us on our path. And it causes these mind-states to keep growing once they've arisen. That was certainly true for me with my pre-teen crush. My mind had gone off into delusions that had a momentarily pleasant feeling, keeping me hooked. I had abandoned control of my attention and was just barely in this world. It wasn't until I found this practice that I could bring this form of insanity under control in my life.

All of the Hindrances bog us down in basically the same way. In the Sangaravo Sutta, a brahman asked why he couldn't understand teachings he'd pored over repeatedly. Buddha explained that this student was hindered by one or more of these five states of mind. Being under the sway of any of them, Buddha said, is to "dwell with your heart possessed and [your mind] overwhelmed." It's as if our very senses are distorted, our feelings corrupted and our minds confused by them. Buddha went on to say that in this condition, we "cannot know, or see, as it really is, what is to our own profit, nor ... to the profit of others, or of both ourselves and others. Then even sacred words long studied are not clear, not to mention those *not* studied."

During an interview at another sangha, a student told me how her husband had betrayed her. Her emotions were ferocious, almost every kind of aversion: grief, disgust, and lots of anger. I kept suggesting ways for her to *practice*, to use metta, or tonglen, or walking meditation, or consider some basic teachings, but it was as if her ears weren't working. She couldn't stop talking about what had *happened* and literally could not hear the dharma and practice I was offering.

Also, as you can probably imagine, she was in no shape to find a course of action that would reduce her suffering, or that of anyone else.

It's interesting to note that this phrase about not being able to see, realistically, what's in our own benefit, or others', is almost identical in several suttas. In the Avarana Sutta, the one with the exclamation point to wake the monks up, Buddha compared a mind free of Hindrances to a river that had no channels cut into it, diverting its water and diminishing it. Without these channels, like the distractions of the Hindrances, the mind would be, "undispersed, undiffused, and undissipated; it would go far, its current swift, carrying everything with it."

Our minds just get *messed up* by desire, aversion, sloth, restlessness and uncertainty. And it takes some time and effort to clean up the mess, untangle the distortions. But we can do this. Without the Hindrances, the mind is clear, powerful, and able to know the truth of the moment, and the wisest way to deal with it.

When we are snagged by desire, or anger, or drowsiness or restlessness or doubt, there is a way to use those states of mind to do something very much like making lemonade. How? The answer lies in understanding what constitutes the *inappropriate attention* that creates and feeds these hindered states of mind. What can render attention inappropriate?

The Ahara Sutta lays out some good answers. It says that focusing attention on beauty – on the appeal of some sense object – will lead to desire and then make desire keep increasing. Aversion is fed by focusing on some truth we're resisting, like that woman whose husband had acted so badly. Mental fogginess is fed when we let attention rest on our boredom, weariness, or drowsiness, or just drift away. Restlessness is fed by allowing our attention to jump around without control, or our bodies to physically fidget. Finally, uncertainty comes when we perceive things and events as undercutting our goals, and that doubt grows when we keep telling ourselves that story about futility. In sum, we are hindered when we let our attention linger on counter-productive thoughts.

There's an apparently shorter answer to what constitutes inappropriate attention, and how to make lemonade out of it, in the Nivarana Sutta. The sutta is shorter, though, only because it refers us to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. These are set out in what is the pillar of Insight Meditation, the Satipatthana Sutta. This great teaching instructs us how to pay attention to the body, to our feelings of liking, disliking or neutrality, to the broader states of the mind, and to the dharma. As it teaches us this, the Satthipathanha Sutta repeats *extremely often* how we should focus our attention on these objects. We should, "remain focused on the body (and each of the Foundations), *in and of itself — ardent, alert, and mindful — putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.*" So, we should focus attention like a laser beam, right on our body, mind and feelings, so we can see them just as they are in and of themselves – untainted by other thoughts or mindstates. This requires practice, and determination.

This is wisdom, the day to day way to improve the quality of life on this earth. To use a common AA saying, we need to get out of the problem and into the solution. Or as I often say in here, get out of the story and into the body to understand how we feel and why, so we can clear away what obscures our judgment and act to the benefit of all beings.

So, how do we use the Hindrances to our benefit? First, we have to recognize them. For example, planning. This is common: people sit, relax, focus, and the next thing they know they're going over their to-do list, repeatedly. Gil Fronsdal says to ask, "What would I be feeling if I weren't thinking about this?" Ask yourself that question, then watch the breath, or the places where you usually feel emotion, and the answer might come to you. For most people, the answer is that they're worried about something. When they make this effort to see beyond their compulsive planning, this insight into their aversion – or worry — often blossoms in their minds without the emotional power that has kept them from seeing how to deal with the situation.

Ask the same question with sloth and torpor: “What would I be feeling if I weren’t nodding off?” With doubt: if you feel adrift and conflicted, try to recall your intention in practicing, or whatever it is you’re doing, and *feel* that motivation. These investigations set up the conditions for, and invite, insight to arise. It might arise, or maybe not. At any rate, you’ll be present, instead of allowing your attention to be stuck in the Hindrances.

Let me clarify that there are two approaches to the Hindrances. I’ve set out the approach that actually uses them to confront, and often reduce, the power of the mental tendencies we all have, that snag us and hold us back. The other, more short-term approach is the antidotes, which are helpful if you’re so overwhelmed you just can’t focus at all. There isn’t time tonight to review the antidotes, so let me point you to a list I created for a daylong on concentration, where your goal is simply to get focused, not to reduce the power of Hindrances in the long run. Go to Alameda Sangha’s website and use its search engine at the top right. Type in “Concentration Outline,” and look at the second page of the pdf. Or search for Hindrances and antidotes. These are simple, kind of common-sense steps to pull free, at least momentarily.

But it’s important to recognize that if a Hindrance is reducing the quality of your life, just applying an antidote isn’t a cure. To conquer this mental habit, you need to examine it the way the Satipatthana Sutta instructs: focus on it, “in and of itself — ardent, alert, and mindful — putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” Investigate how thoughts arise about your desire, aversion, restlessness, spaciness or uncertainty. *Feel* the body’s response. And don’t take this personally. It’s just a Hindrance. It’s a tendency we all have, but it’s not part of your deepest nature.

You can overcome the Hindrances. You can use them to make lemonade. Focus your attention, use it to your own profit, to the profit of others, and to the profit of both yourself and others.

Thank you. And please, help yourself to the lemons.