

Getting the Benefit of the Hindrances

by Rebecca Dixon
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A hindrance is something that interferes, holds you back. But the 5 Hindrances can also help us move great distances forward, and that's what I want to talk about tonight.

Here's the best metaphor that's occurred to me: a sheet of aluminum foil. Imagine a vast expanse of one, perfectly smooth, almost like a mirror that clearly reflects whatever comes into its reach.

But then something comes by and it appeals to us, so strongly that we can't resist reaching for it and trying to grab hold of it. What happens to that wide open field of clear reflection? It pinches up, twisting and warping the area around it.

That's what the hindrance of desire does to our consciousness. The objects that would be reflected in an unobstructed field of awareness are still there, but now we can't see them without serious distortion caused by our cravings.

The sheet of foil is also distorted when we attack or try to get rid of things we don't like. And when we're restless and rattle that sheet, or when we're sluggish and our attention gets fuzzy, it twists and clouds the way we see things.

After a while, that once clear expanse of aluminum foil is a mess and our vision of the world around us can get so warped that we doubt the meaning or value of what we experience.

The hindrances make a mess of how we perceive and interpret our experiences. They trap us in patterns of thought and emotion that cause us suffering, dukkha. So why would I say up front that they can benefit us?

It all has to do with how we deal with our hindrances, all those wrinkles and bumps we've put into our field of vision of the world. When I was a teenager creating a new vocabulary for the world – as each generation loves to do – we called these wrinkles and bumps our hang-ups.

The standard advice then and now was to just get over them. That hasn't worked so well. These days we say let it go. Again, not so effective. If we glance across the broad field of our awareness, the only thing clear is that it's riddled with hang-ups.

If we need to get on with things and just want to let go temporarily of some desire or other hindrance like aversion, restlessness, sluggishness or doubt, then you can use an antidote. Like for desire, you can think about all that's wrong with what you want.

For example, you're overcome with desire for a puppy that your partner doesn't want. Don't think about how sweet puppy breath can be, or how soft its tummy is, or what fun it is to watch it play. Think about cleaning up after it, or how sharp its little teeth are.

At another time you may be sluggish, even drowsy. To get more energy, turn up the lights, go for a walk. To calm down, do the opposite. And for doubt, consider your deepest desires and intentions. There are also other antidotes that suit each hindrance in various situations.

But the big payoff comes not from using antidotes but from *studying* the hindrance itself. Sitting with it. Getting to know it from inside the experience of it and letting its reason for being in your life reveal itself.

There's a particular way of doing this, which I've talked about before and can't repeat too often. This method is repeated *very* often in the Satipatthana Sutta, the great pillar of Insight Meditation: the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Let me pause here to point out the difference between concentration and mindfulness. They are two different "folds" of the Eightfold Path, and they operate very differently. It can be confusing because it takes a basic amount of concentration to establish mindfulness.

After a while (maybe 20 minutes) of repeatedly bringing attention back to the breath, the roar of thinking quiets down to a few fragments floating through the mind, and the body and mind become stable and calm.

After that, the mind is able to do something almost miraculous. It can observe itself. If we continue trying to hold attention exclusively on breathing, that's called one-pointed concentration, and we can't observe anything else but the breath. That's simple logic.

With mindfulness meditation, we get to that point of calm focus, and then we observe and learn about what else enters our awareness. As we observe, we remain aware that's what we're doing.

It's best to stay in touch with physical sensations, like the breath. Regularly bring the attention back and notice sensations of breathing while we're watching states of mind arise. That "split screen" of attention lets us observe the mind's activity without getting lost in thought.

It's like holding on to a pole in a wind storm so we don't get swept away. Then we can watch what's going on.

The Satipatthana Sutta tells us how to watch. It tells us this over and over. And over. It's called the "refrain" that tells us to remain focused on the body (and mental phenomena) "in and of itself – ardent, alert, and mindful."

This emphasis on experiencing things *from inside the body* may seem odd until you do it. The ability to experience phenomena from inside the body starts with not just counting breaths but with *feeling* them.

When we're mindful during daily life and pick up a hot cup of tea, we're conscious of its warmth and weight. In many suttas, the Buddha reminded students that mindfulness grounded in the body was so important that, "all the dharma can be found in this fathom long body."

We are also told to contemplate mental fabrications from the inside and the outside. That can be another head-scratcher. But remember that one form of mindfulness meditation is contemplation, and the Satipatthana Sutta repeatedly talks about *contemplating* our experiences.

Contemplation is a small step further away from concentration. We anchor attention in the body while lightly examining the thoughts and emotions that arise. Using bits of the dharma that come to mind we're asking, "what is this? How does it come to be and pass away? How does it impact me?"

The answers to these questions are primarily in the body. So, if the mind and body are settled with the breathing steady, and a thought about some conflict arises, we can feel the body react. For me it's a tightening of muscles and a burning that radiates from my gut to the rest of the body. It's suffering, the sensations of dukkha.

That's not the best time to ask questions. At that moment it's best to hold the attention on the sensations for as long as they're present. This is such a beneficial exercise. It's healing on a level the intellect can not reach.

But the body clearly feels the relief when the sensations have peaked and then faded away. If we stay with those feelings through this process, we can then ask simple, basic questions.

I would ask, what about this conflict mattered so much that it caused all that dukkha? Then the story tries to repeat itself in my mind and I have to bring my attention back to the body. I know what happened, I don't need a recap.

With my attention stable on the body, what comes to mind is my pride, my fear of losing something. And I just sit with that, feeling it physically and knowing this is pride, this is fear of loss, until those feelings also subside and pass away.

And so forth. Seeing each state of mind just as it is, in and of itself. This requires determination and practice. It is the practice. It brings us many benefits. The most prominent is healing.

Back to that sheet of foil. By contemplating the hindrances the way the Satipatthana Sutta says – in the body, internally and externally – we're smoothing out the bumps and wrinkles in our awareness. We see more clearly as we reduce each tendency to crave or hate, to be restless or sluggish, or to doubt our purpose.

In our contemplation of each hang-up, we've gained insight into what's caused it and how it causes us to suffer. We have more ease and serenity around the issues we've examined. We know what we're clinging to and understand how to avoid falling victim to it in the future.

One of my earliest memories is from when I was four years old. I was standing at the end of a puddle, a gorgeous puddle, not too much mud, just deep enough for my short legs to splash through it. But I just stood there, because I knew my mother didn't want me to play in that puddle.

My heart ached. As I stood there feeling that heavy, burning sensation, I wondered at the cruelty of desires that caused suffering. I can remember praying to be free from wanting things I couldn't have or that would bring me trouble.

As I grew up, it was aversions that caused more dukkha for me than cravings. If I can see that something has bad consequences, I tend not to want it. That insight and intention set at age four had a powerful influence on my life.

What's good about the hindrances? They give us obvious places to start unpacking our hang-ups. The Dharma gives us instructions for doing this. They may seem strange, counter-intuitive or puzzling at first. But just try the instructions step by step all the way through.

First, get familiar with physical sensations from *inside* your body, starting with the places where you can feel the body breathe: diaphragm, ribs, and the air brushing places where it enters the body.

Get to know the sensations that accompany emotions like wanting or fearing things, and what it feels like to be sluggish or restless. Look for that ninja hindrance of doubt as it undermines your confidence and determination, and learn what feelings come with it.

Practice contemplation. Watch how your body reacts when you're angry, for instance. Avoid the story of what triggered the feelings and get into those sensations. Stay with them until they fade away. Then ask simple questions like what felt threatening to you, and what other feelings lie under the anger.

Besides the story of what happened, also stay away from rational thinking. Just ask questions about what you have *felt* and watch what other feelings come up. Stay with them as sympathetically as if you've asked a child where it hurts.

Don't look for the solution until you're sure you've felt all your body has to tell you about the problem. Then just wait in case the solution pops into your mind in the form of insight over the next few days. If you try to puzzle it out intellectually that could interfere with the more accurate insight arising.

Hindrances offer such a good chance to see into the mind because they contain information that helps us change for the better. They show us the causes of our dukkha and give us a chance to heal what lies under our troublesome mental patterns.

Thank you