

The Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness: dhammas

The word dhamma in Pali is usually written in lowercase to distinguish it from the body of the Buddha's teachings, also called Dhamma (Dharma in Sanskrit). Dhamma also means the ultimate reality of things as they are. Lower-case dhamma is typically written as the plural dhammas and has been translated in several ways. "Mental objects" and "phenomena" are two of the most common translations. Anālayo says this is not a great translation, since we've already been looking at mental objects in the previous tetrads. For now, though, as we read the sutta, we can notice that there is a fundamental difference between the fourth foundation and the previous three. While the other three Satipaṭṭhāna indicate 'things' to be mindful of, the fourth, as listed in the usual Pali translations, is a set of lists: *the hindrances, the aggregates, the sense spheres, the seven awakening factors, and the four noble truths.*

Anālayo suggests that these lists in the fourth foundation are like lenses we use to view the phenomena of our experience. His comparative investigations of other texts revealed that most Chinese versions of this sutta and several later Sanskrit versions do not contain all the lists but instead include only two: the Five Hindrances and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment.

This makes sense considering how we practiced the previous foundations and allows the fourth foundation to function as a natural progression from the third. In the third foundation, we looked at the mind, particularly identifying the presence of unwholesome or unskillful mind states and contrasting that to knowing when wholesome or skillful mind states were present.

The instructions for the fourth foundation instruct us to abandon the unwholesome states, as defined by the hindrances, and to encourage and support the wholesome states, as defined by the seven factors of enlightenment. This quote from Anālayo's translation of the sutta illustrates that contemplating 'dhammas' in this context means more than merely noting the presence or absence of a mental state; it's about getting to know them.

The instructions for contemplating the hindrances are as follows:

If sensual desire is present in him, he knows "there is sensual desire in me."; If sensual desire is not present in him, he knows "there is no sensual desire in me"; and he knows how unarisen sensual desire can arise, how arisen sensual desire can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed sensual desire can be prevented. If aversion is present in him, he knows....If sloth-and-torpor is present in him, he knows....If restlessness-and-worry is present in him, he knows.... If doubt is present in him, he knows "there is doubt in me"; if doubt is not present in him, he knows "there is no doubt in me"; and he knows how unarisen doubt can arise, how arisen doubt can be removed, and how a future arising of the removed doubt can be prevented.

In other words, it's not just recognizing that a state like aversion is present or absent. The instructions ask us to investigate all aspects of that state, understanding how it can arise, how it can be removed, and how a future arising of the state can be prevented.

Why start with the hindrances?

Without recognizing them, the hindrances cloud the mind, block wise discernment, stunt concentration, and obscure the realization of the Four Noble Truths. To make progress, a traveler must first understand what is blocking the path.

The Pool of Water Simile (Obscured Perception)

In ancient times, a bowl of water was used as a mirror. This simile likens the different hindrances to various conditions that disturb the water and prevent it from clearly reflecting things as they are.

Sense Desire: Like clear water suffused with a colored dye (colors and distorts perceptions).

Aversion: Like boiling water (causes turbulence; impossible to see through).

Sloth and Torpor: Like a pool overgrown with algae (stagnant and murky).

Restlessness and Worry: Like water whipped up by the wind (agitated and tossed around).

Doubt: Like muddy water (obscures the bottom completely).

Another famous simile likens the hindrances to a certain human condition, for example, being in financial debt, being ill, being in prison, being in slavery, and being lost in the desert; while being free from a hindrance is like having a debt paid off, recovering from illness, being released from prison, being freed from slavery, and arriving at a safe destination.

Practices

Become familiar with the five steps (see below) of working with a hindrance.

- Work on the first steps, knowing whether a hindrance is present or absent. We sometimes take the absence for granted, so take a moment to notice what it feels like to “feel out of debt” after the hindrance has passed.
- Integrate the five-step practice with what we have done before, when working with the mindfulness foundation three, mindfulness of mind. Knowing, for example, the mind that has lust or anger, and one that is free from lust or anger.
- Continue your daily sitting. Practice with the hindrances both on the cushion and in daily life.
- Enjoy your practice

Working with the Hindrances

As stated in the sutta, there are five steps to working with each hindrance. Here is an example, based on Joseph Goldstein's book, Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening. Working with the hindrance of desire:

- **Step 1: Recognize Desire When It Is Present**
 - Acknowledging the "wanting mind" without judgment.
 - Can range from massive obsessive passions/addictions to small passing whims.
 - In meditation, it often shows up as the "**in-order-to**" mind (e.g., watching a pain *in order to* make it disappear).
- **Step 2: Know When Desire Is Absent**
 - Actively noticing the "luminous mind" when it is temporarily free of grasping.
 - Builds genuine confidence and faith in the practice because the relief of being "out of debt" is felt directly.
- **Step 3: Know the Conditions Underlying Its Presence**
 - *Lack of mindfulness at the sense doors*: Getting caught in sensory triggers (e.g., food in a retreat lunch line, or a "Vipassanā romance" when looking at an attractive person).
 - *Repetitive thought patterns*: As the Buddha stated, whatever the mind frequently ponders becomes its default inclination.
 - *The fundamental misperception*: The false belief that temporary things yield lasting happiness.
 - *The Modern Challenge*: Countering a commercial culture that screams at individuals to "increase your desire."
- **Step 4: Know the Conditions Underlying Its Removal**
 - *Clear recognition*: Using the psychological frame "*Desire, I see you*" strips the hindrance of its automated power.
 - *Wise reflection*: Deploying an "internal Dharma coach" to remember one's primary intention—to remain trapped or to be free.
- **Step 5: Avoid Future Arisings**
 - Proactive mental healthcare (e.g., contemplating the unattractive or aging nature of the body to counteract physical obsession).
 - Guarding the sense doors at the exact moment of initial sensory contact.
 - Practicing moderation in food and surrounding oneself with wise friends.

Here are two illustrations from Anālayo’s book, Satipatthana, The Direct Path to Realization, that illustrate the five steps, and suggestions from the commentaries on overcoming them.

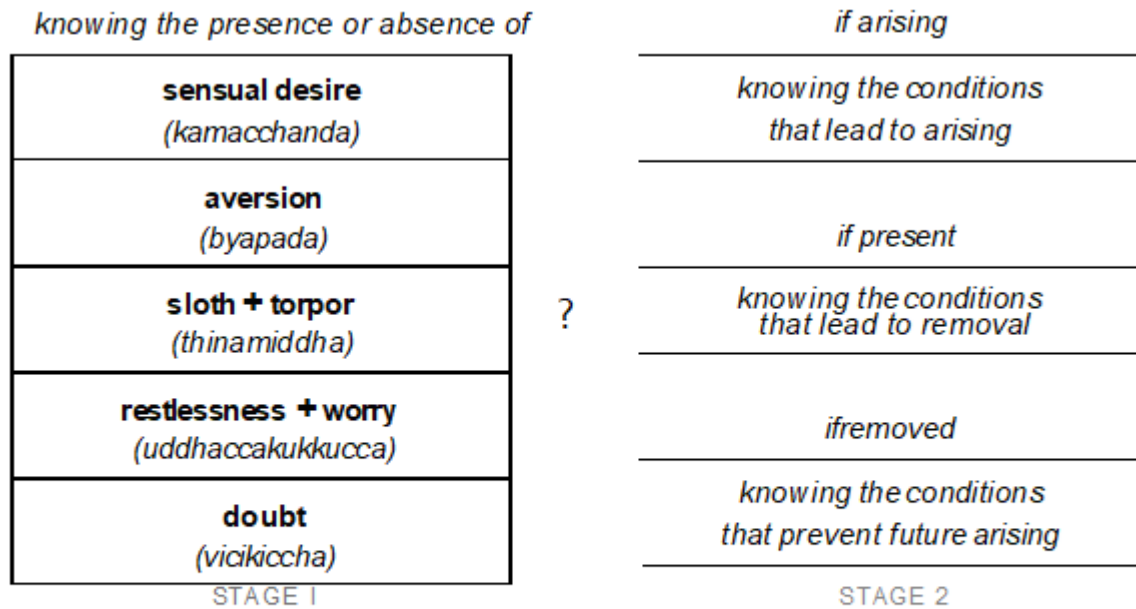


Fig. 9.2 Two stages in the contemplation of the five hindrances

sensual desire	general acquaintance with and formal meditation on the body's unattractiveness guarding the senses moderation in food good friends and suitable conversation
aversion	general acquaintance with and formal meditation on loving kindness reflecting on the karmic consequences of one's deeds repeated wise consideration good friends and suitable conversation
sloth + torpor	lessening food intake changing meditation postures mental clarity/ cognition of light staying outdoors good friends and suitable conversation
restlessness + worry	good knowledge of the discourses clarification of the discourses through questioning being well versed in ethical conduct visiting experienced elders good friends and suitable conversation
doubt	good knowledge of the discourses clarification of the discourses through questioning being well versed in ethical conduct strong commitment good friends and suitable conversation

Fig. 9.3 Commentarial survey of factors for overcoming or inhibiting the hindrances⁷⁶