

# **Hindrances, Faculties, and Meditation**

**Bhikkhu Mahinda**

## Hindrances, Faculties, and Meditation

Bhikkhu Mahinda <sup>1</sup>

This article aims to briefly explain ways of dealing with hindrances that surface during meditation and explore the role of faculties in countering them. Understanding the hindrances and the faculties will assist us in understanding the malaise and the antidote.

Nowadays, it's clear to most people, including the community of psychologists and psychiatrists, that meditation can help deal with various impurities of the mind, such as anxiety, depression, anger, hatred, jealousy, envy, etc. Meditation can be used as a cleaning and soothing tool to remove these impurities slowly but surely. Now, there are three types of meditations:

- Calming or Samatha Meditation (Breathing, Dhyana/Jhana, Samadhi)
- Insight or Vipassana Meditation (Seeing things as they are)
- Divine Abodes or Brahma Viharas Meditation (Friendship, Compassion, Altruistic Joy, and Equanimity)

Once we engage in these meditations, we observe that the deep-seated impurities or hindrances of the mind now become prominent and come to the forefront. They, the hindrances, were always there but were not so prominent and not so easy to observe. With the mind quiet and focused inward, it becomes easier to observe them.

There are five Hindrances or Enemies of Meditation. The five hindrances that obstruct our progress in meditation are Sensual Desire, Ill-will, Sloth and torpor, Restlessness and remorse, and Skeptical Doubt.

Five Faculties or Friends help us subdue the five hindrances! We should develop these faculties to strengthen our meditation and counter the hindrances so that our meditation doesn't get derailed. The five faculties that help us overcome the hindrances are Confidence, Energy, Mindfulness, Concentration, and Wisdom.

**Hindrance of Sensual Desire (kāmacchanda):** This hindrance is comparable to a bowl of water mixed with a color like red or blue. With such a water bowl, seeing our true reflection is impossible. This hindrance arises because we pay attention to the mark or sign of attractiveness, be it a person, an object of desire, or a thought. The antidote to this is to pay attention to the mark of unattractiveness by considering the fact that all things are impermanent and suffering. And the faculty most relevant to handle this hindrance is Mindfulness. When you mindfully observe the thoughts of sensual desire without flowing with them, you can see the impermanence and suffering in the objects of sensual desire.

**Hindrance of Ill-will (byāpāda):** Ill-will, aversion, or hatred arises because we look at things with a mind of repulsiveness - whether they are repulsive, ugly, have hurt us in the past, or make us fearful, whatever the cause. This makes the mind boil and bubble, just like a water pot being boiled over a fire. Again, it's impossible to see our true reflection in a pot bubbling and boiling. To overcome this hindrance, to calm down the seething and roiling mind, we have to generate a sense of Friendship for all beings. When you have Friendship for all beings, then there will be no cause for fear or aversion. And again, the faculty most relevant to handle this hindrance is Mindfulness. When you mindfully observe the thoughts of hatred, you can see the impermanence and suffering in the objects generating ill-will or hatred.

**Hindrance of Sloth & Torpor (thina-middha):** When you are overcome with this hindrance, you end up with bodily tiredness and mental dullness. You want to sleep, lie down, take a break, do anything and everything other than meditate! In the same way, mental dullness causes you to lose the capacity to focus your attention on meditation, observe the thoughts as they arise and pass, etc. In short, your mind becomes dull and inattentive.

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<sup>1</sup> This and other books and articles by Bhikkhu Mahinda are available at <https://LearnBuddhism.org>. To access over 60,000 Buddhist Teachings, please download the "Learn Buddhism" App (download links at <https://LearnBuddhism.org>). The app is completely free and available on Apple, Google, and Web platforms.

This is like a water bowl covered with algae and water plants so seeing your true reflection is nigh impossible. In such a case, one may get up for a few minutes, sprinkle some water on their eyes, wash their face, do walking meditation, and other such activities to drive away the sloth and torpor. To handle the mental dullness, you can temporarily change your breathing pattern by intentionally taking a few long breaths, deep breaths, short breaths, quick breaths, and so on – this will allow you to break the monotony. Another tool that can be used is to focus your attention on light with your eyes closed. It's good to have a meditation teacher to resolve some of these issues. As the above discussion points out, the faculty most helpful in dealing with this hindrance is that of Energy.

**Hindrance of Restlessness and Remorse (uddhacca-kukkucca):** This is a very serious hindrance that is caused by the memory of one's actions from the past and it makes the mind very restless. It's like a bowl of water stirred by the wind, churning and creating wavelets, so again you can't see your true reflection in it. How to overcome it? If you have past actions that generate remorse, you should acknowledge such actions to a teacher or an elder, ask for forgiveness, and take restraint to never do such actions again. For the hindrance of restlessness, one should focus on pacifying the mind using Breathing Meditation and mindfully observing the causes of the arising of restlessness. When you observe these causes mindfully, they start dissolving and disappearing. Thus, the faculty to cultivate in such cases is that of Concentration.

**Hindrance of Skeptical Doubt (vicikicchā):** This is an extremely serious hindrance that is comparable to a desert, a wilderness. When this hindrance arises, you start doubting everything. You doubt the technique of meditation and think this is not the right way. Or you doubt the teacher that he doesn't look like an accomplished teacher or one who fits your definition of what a teacher should be like. Maybe you start doubting whether the Original Teacher, the Buddha, his teachings, the Dhamma, and his disciples, the Sangha, are not the correct path for you to follow. Ultimately, even if everything looks good but you can't concentrate and focus on meditation, you start thinking everything's good and fine, but I am not good enough to practice! The faculty to cultivate in case of doubt is that of Confidence. We can overcome doubt by generating confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, Teacher, Technique, and ourselves. One can recollect the 9 qualities of the Buddha, 6 qualities of the Dhamma, and 9 qualities of the Sangha, as well as recollect one's Virtue, Generosity, and Wisdom in following this path to free oneself from suffering and impurities. <sup>2</sup>

You may ask: what about the faculty of Wisdom? Where does it fit in, and how does it help? The faculty of wisdom helps us identify what is it that needs to be done to counter a particular hindrance and lets us deploy that measure. Thus, Wisdom lets us understand the malaise and the antidote we need to apply. Wisdom is also needed to balance the faculty of Confidence, because they go together in terms of balancing the development.

And here is a final word of advice from the Teacher, the Buddha, himself:

**NDB 5.56 Preceptor:**

Then a certain bhikkhu approached his own preceptor and said to him: "Bhante, my body now seems as if it has been drugged, I have become disoriented, and the teachings are no longer clear to me. Dullness and drowsiness obsess my mind. I live the spiritual life dissatisfied and have doubt about the teachings."

(Then that Bhikkhu and his Preceptor approach Lord Buddha who gives the following advice):

"Therefore, bhikkhu, you should train yourself thus: (1) 'I will be guarded in the doors of the sense faculties, (2) moderate in eating, (3) and intent on wakefulness; (4) I will have insight into wholesome qualities (5) and will dwell intent on the endeavor to develop the aids to enlightenment in the earlier and later phases of the night.' <sup>3</sup> It is in such a way, bhikkhu, that you should train yourself."

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the terms used here, such as "9 qualities of the Buddha, 6 qualities of the Dhamma, and 9 qualities of the Sangha" refer to a specific set of recollections but that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the terms used here, such as "Aids to Enlightenment" refer to a specific set of developments but that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

**Five Hindrances or Obstructions (pañca nīvaraṇā or pañca āvaraṇā):**

No.	Hindrance or Enemy	Cause of Arising	Simile for the Hindrance (NDB 5.193 Saṅgārava Sutta)	How to Abandon	Simile for freedom from the Hindrance (MLDB 39.14 Mahāassapura Sutta)	Practice	Faculty to Develop
1	Sensual Desire (kāmacchanda)	Mark of Attractive (NDB 1.11)	A bowl of water mixed with lac, turmeric, blue dye, or crimson dye	Mark of Unattractive (NDB 1.16)	Release from debt	Anicca	Mindfulness
2	Ill Will (byāpāda)	Mark of Repulsive (NDB 1.12)	A bowl of water being heated over a fire, bubbling and boiling	Friendship (NDB 1.17)	Recovery from Sickness	Friendship	Mindfulness
3	Dullness and Drowsiness (thina-middha)	Discontent, Lethargy, Lazy Stretching, Drowsiness after Meals, and Sluggishness of Mind (NDB 1.13)	A bowl of water covered over with algae and water plants	Element of Instigation, Persistence, Exertion (NDB 1.18)	Release from Prison	Arouse Energy by getting up, walking around, washing your face, doing walking meditation, changing the breathing pattern	Energy
4	Restlessness and Remorse (uddhacca-kukkucca)	Unsettled Mind (NDB 1.14)	A bowl of water stirred by the wind, rippling, swirling, churned into wavelets	Pacification of Mind (NDB 1.19)	Release from Slavery	Mindfulness, Friendship, concentrating on the breath	Concentration
5	Doubt (vicikicchā)	Careless Attention (NDB 1.15) Five Barrenness (Doubt about Teacher, Dhamma, Sangha, Training, and Irritation with Fellow Monks) (NDB 5.205)	A bowl of water that is cloudy, turbid, and muddy, placed in the dark	Careful Attention (NDB 1.20)	Crossing a Wilderness Safely	Remove doubt about self, teacher, technique, Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha	Confidence