

The Five Hindrances

Several common difficulties exist in practising meditation. These are often referred to as the Five Hindrances – and are the characteristics that make it difficult to keep a regular practice. They are hindrances because they divert, as well as sap our strength and ability to work in an optimal way.

Two Analogies: (1) The hindrances can be likened to a powerful river whose flow is gradually weakened by too many tributaries or streams draining off the water. (2) Until impure gold is purified to remove base metal and other impurities, it is too brittle and cannot be fashioned effectively by the goldsmith. Our minds can have the strength and speed of a great river, and the radiance, purity, and flexibility of the purest gold, if we work steadfastly to vanquish the hindrances.

Hindrance	Analogy	Description	Two Strategies	A Reflection	Classical Antidote	Outside of Meditation Time
Desire for sense experience (<i>kāmacchanda</i>)	Trying to clearly see one's reflection in a bowl of water into which various rich-hued pigments have been tipped.	One begins to meditate and finds it difficult to concentrate. Anything else seems more interesting.	(1) Acknowledge distraction, and gently come back to the breath. (2) Determine to return to the breath.	Reflect or contemplate on the nature of the desire that has arisen.	Consideration of the repulsive aspects of sense objects.	Consider simplifying your relationship to sense objects – i.e. guarding the sense doors.
Ill will (<i>vyāpāda</i>)	Trying to clearly see one's reflection in a bowl filled with bubbling, boiling water.	One becomes conscious of irritation and anger – directed at people or things.	(1) Acknowledge that ill-will, irritation, or anger exists. (2) Investigate the nature of the ill-will.	Reflect that ill-will is a part of life and is impermanent – can it now be let go?	Consideration of loving-kindness – the practice of <i>mettā bhāvanā</i>	Look at your relationship with yourself and others.
Sloth and torpor (<i>thina-middha</i>)	Trying to clearly see one's reflection in a bowl of water when the surface is covered with algae and slime.	<i>Sloth</i> is laziness and indolence. <i>Torpor</i> is numbness, sluggishness, dullness, and apathy – a dull and sleepy state of consciousness.	(1) Acknowledge that sloth and torpor are present. (2) Ensure that the physical conditions for meditation are optimised.	Reflect on your motivation. Bring energy to your sessions and they will be more productive.	Consideration of effort, exertion, and striving.	Avoid passivity. Engage in energetic and positive activities. Study the Dhamma for inspiration.
Restlessness and worry (<i>uddhacca-kukkucca</i>)	Trying to clearly see one's reflection in a bowl of water when the surface is ruffled by high winds and heavily rippled.	<i>Restlessness</i> is a sense of excitement or agitation. <i>Worry</i> is the guilty feeling that arises in the mind caused by past unskillful action.	(1) Acknowledge that restlessness or worry has arisen. (2) If mentally restless, is there something that can be done physically to resolve this?	Reflect that restlessness and worry are impermanent and that they do not have any enduring essence.	Consideration of tranquillity of mind. Be determined to practice the <i>samatha</i> techniques.	Pay particular attention to regular practice. Give attention to ethics in daily life. Take life more slowly.
Sceptical doubt (<i>vicikicchā</i>)	Trying to clearly see one's reflection in a bowl of water that is muddy, stirred-up, and in the dark.	Sceptical doubt is uncertainty about the validity of the teachings; the efficacy of the training; and the merits of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.	(1) Acknowledge that doubt or scepticism has arisen. (2) With gentle determination, return to the meditation object.	Realize when new to this practice, doubts and concerns may arise. However, others have benefited from this form of meditation.	Consideration of the real qualities of things. Gradually introduce <i>vipassana</i> techniques.	Gain inspiration from the texts of this tradition. If possible, engage with like-minded people or others pursuing this Path.

Source: Alexander Peck Personal summary table based on an online meditation course taken entitled *Vipassana Fellowship Meditation Course*, which provides practical instruction in mindfulness meditation as found in the tranquillity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*) traditions of early Buddhism (Theravada tradition) and has been hosted since 1997. The course is led by Andrew Quernmore. Further details may be found at <http://www.vipassana.com/course/>.