

# The Five Mental Hindrances and Their Conquest

## Introduction

Unshakable deliverance of the mind is the highest goal in the Buddha's doctrine. Here, deliverance means: the freeing of the mind from all limitations, fetters, and bonds that tie it to the Wheel of Suffering, to the Circle of Rebirth. It means: the cleansing of the mind of all defilements that mar its purity; the removing of all obstacles that bar its progress from the mundane (*lokiya*) to the supramundane consciousness (*lokuttara-citta*), that is, to Arahantship.

Many are the obstacles which block the road to spiritual progress, but there are five in particular which, under the name of hindrances (*nivarana*), are often mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures:

1. Sensual desire (*kamacchanda*),
2. Ill-will (*byapada*),
3. Sloth and torpor (*thina-middha*),
4. Restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca-kukkucca*),
5. Sceptical doubt (*vicikiccha*).

They are called "hindrances" because they hinder and envelop the mind in many ways, obstructing its development (*bhavana*). According to the Buddhist teachings, spiritual development is twofold: through tranquillity (*samatha-bhavana*) and through insight (*vipassana-bhavana*). Tranquillity is gained by complete concentration of the mind during the meditative absorptions (*jhana*). For achieving these absorptions, the overcoming of the five hindrances, at least temporarily, is a preliminary condition. It is especially in the context of achieving the absorptions that the Buddha often mentions the five hindrances in his discourses.

There are five mental constituents which are chiefly representative of the first meditative absorption, and are therefore called the factors of absorption (*jhananga*). For each of these there is, according to Buddhist commentarial tradition, one of the five hindrances that is specifically harmful for it and excludes its higher development and refinement to the degree required for jhana; and on the other hand, the cultivation of these five factors beyond their average level will be an antidote against the hindrances, preparing the road to jhana.

The relationship between these two groups of five is indicated in this anthology, under the heading of the respective hindrance.

Not only the meditative absorptions but also lesser degrees of mental concentration are impeded by these five hindrances. So is the "neighborhood" (or "access") concentration (*upacarasamadhi*), being the preliminary stage for the fully absorbed concentration (*appana*) reached in jhana. Likewise excluded by the presence of the hindrances is the momentary concentration (*khanikasamadhi*) which has the strength of neighborhood concentration and is required for mature insight (*vipassana*). But apart from these higher stages of mental development, any earnest attempt at clear thinking and pure living will be seriously affected by the presence of these five hindrances.

This widespread harmful influence of the five hindrances shows the urgent necessity of breaking down their power by constant effort. One should not believe it sufficient to turn one's attention to the hindrances only at the moment when one sits down for meditation. Such last-minute effort in suppressing the hindrances will rarely be successful unless helped by previous endeavor during one's ordinary life.

One who earnestly aspires to the unshakable deliverance of the mind should, therefore, select a definite "working-ground" of a direct and practical import: a kammattana[1] in its widest sense, on which the structure of his entire life should be based. Holding fast to that "working-ground," never losing sight of it for long, even this alone will be a considerable and encouraging progress in the control and development of the mind, because in that way the directive and purposive energies of mind will be strengthened considerably. One who has chosen the conquest of the five hindrances for a "working-ground" should examine which of the five are strongest in one's personal case. Then one should carefully observe how, and on which occasions, they usually appear. One should further know the positive forces within one's own mind by which each of these hindrances can best be countered and, finally, conquered; and one should also examine one's life for any opportunity of developing these qualities which, in the following pages, have been indicated under the headings of the spiritual faculties (*indriya*), the factors of absorption (*jhananga*), and the factors of enlightenment (*bojjhanga*). In some cases, subjects of meditation have been added which will be helpful in overcoming the respective hindrances.

By the "worldling" (*puthujjana*), [2] however, only a temporary suspension and partial weakening of the hindrances can be attained. Their final and complete eradication takes place on the stages of sanctity (*ariyamagga*):

- Doubt is eliminated on the first stage, the path of stream-entry (*sotapatti-magga*).
- Sensual desire, ill will and remorse are eliminated on the third stage, the path of non-returner (*anagami-magga*)
- Sloth and torpor and restlessness are eradicated on the path of Arahantship (*arahatta-magga*).

Hence the reward of the fight against the hindrances is not only the limited one of making possible a shorter or longer spell of meditation, but every step in weakening these hindrances takes us nearer to the stages of sanctity where deliverance from these hindrances is unshakable.

Though most of the following texts, translated from the Discourses of the Buddha and the commentaries, are addressed to monks, they are likewise valid for those living the worldly life. As the Old Masters say: "The monk (*bhikkhu*) is mentioned here as an example of those dedicated to the practice of the Teaching. Whosoever undertakes that practice is here included in the term 'monk.' "

### **The Five Hindrances: General Texts**

There are five impediments and hindrances, overgrowths of the mind that stultify insight. What five?

Sensual desire is an impediment and hindrance, an overgrowth of the mind that stultifies insight. Ill-will... Sloth and torpor... Restlessness and remorse... Sceptical doubt are impediments and hindrances, overgrowths of the mind that stultify insight.

Without having overcome these five, it is impossible for a monk whose insight thus lacks strength and power, to know his own true good, the good of others, and the good of both; nor will he be capable of realizing that superhuman state of distinctive achievement, the knowledge and vision enabling the attainment of sanctity.

But if a monk has overcome these five impediments and hindrances, these overgrowths of the mind that stultify insight, then it is possible that, with his strong insight, he can know his own true good, the good of others, and the good of both; and he will be capable of realizing that superhuman state of distinctive achievement, the knowledge and vision enabling the attainment of sanctity. — AN 5:51

One whose heart is overwhelmed by unrestrained covetousness will do what he should not do and neglect what he ought to do. And through that, his good name and his happiness will come to ruin.

One whose heart is overwhelmed by ill-will... by sloth and torpor... by restlessness and remorse... by sceptical doubt will do what he should not do and neglect what he ought to do. And through that, his good name and his happiness will come to ruin.

But if a noble disciple has seen these five as defilements of the mind, he will give them up. And doing so, he is regarded as one of great wisdom, of abundant wisdom, clear-visioned, well endowed with wisdom. This is called "endowment with wisdom."

— AN 4:61

There are five impurities of gold impaired by which it is not pliant and wieldy, lacks radiance, is brittle and cannot be wrought well. What are these five impurities? Iron, copper, tin, lead and silver.

But if the gold has been freed from these five impurities, then it will be pliant and wieldy, radiant and firm, and can be wrought well. Whatever ornaments one wishes to make from it, be it a diadem, earrings, a necklace or a golden chain, it will serve that purpose.

Similarly, there are five impurities of the mind impaired by which the mind is not pliant and wieldy, lacks radiant lucidity and firmness, and cannot concentrate well upon the eradication of the taints (*asava*). What are these five impurities? They are: sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and sceptical doubt.

But if the mind is freed of these five impurities, it will be pliant and wieldy, will have radiant lucidity and firmness, and will concentrate well upon the eradication of the taints. Whatever state realizable by the higher mental faculties one may direct the mind to, one will in each case acquire the capacity of realization, if the (other) conditions are fulfilled.

— AN 5:23

How does a monk practice mind-object contemplation on the mental objects of the five hindrances?

Herein, monks, when sensual desire is present in him the monk knows, "There is sensual desire in me," or when sensual desire is absent he knows, "There is no sensual desire in me."

He knows how the arising of non-arisen sensual desire comes to be; he knows how the rejection of the arisen sensual desire comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the rejected sensual desire comes to be.

When ill-will is present in him, the monk knows, "There is ill-will in me," or when ill-will is absent he knows, "There is no ill-will in me." He knows how the arising of non-arisen ill-will comes to be; he knows how the rejection of the arisen ill-will comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the rejected ill-will comes to be.

When sloth and torpor are present in him, the monk knows, "There is sloth and torpor in me," or when sloth and torpor are absent he knows, "There is no sloth and torpor in me." He knows how the arising of non-arisen sloth and torpor comes to be; he knows how the rejection of the arisen sloth and torpor comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the rejected sloth and torpor comes to be.

When restlessness and remorse are present in him, the monk knows, "There are restlessness and remorse in me," or when agitation and remorse are absent he knows, "There are no restlessness and remorse in me." He knows how the arising of non-arisen restlessness and remorse comes to be; he knows how the rejection of the arisen restlessness and remorse comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the rejected restlessness and remorse comes to be.

When sceptical doubt is present in him, the monk knows, "There is sceptical doubt in me," or when sceptical doubt is absent he knows, "There is no sceptical doubt in me." He knows how the arising of non-arisen sceptical doubt comes to be; he knows how the rejection of the arisen sceptical doubt comes to be; and he knows how the non-arising in the future of the rejected sceptical doubt comes to be.

— MN 10 (Satipatthana Sutta)

To note mindfully, and immediately, the arising of one of the hindrances, as recommended in the preceding text, is a simple but very effective method of countering these and any other defilements of the mind. By doing so, a brake is applied against the uninhibited continuance of unwholesome thoughts, and the watchfulness of mind against their recurrence is strengthened. This method is based on a simple psychological fact which is expressed by the commentators as follows: "A good and an evil thought cannot occur in combination. Therefore, at the time of knowing the sense desire (that arose in the preceding moment), that sense desire no longer exists (but only the act of knowing)."

## Notes

1. I.e., subject of meditation: literally "working-ground."
2. A "worldling," or puthujjana, who may be a monk or layman, is one who has not yet attained to the first stage of sanctity, the Path of stream-entry (*sotapatti-magga*).

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