

The Five Hindrances

The hindrances are the difficulties of meditation. The meditations we typically label as “bad” are usually those where we’ve spent considerable time under the influence of one or more of these hindrances. It is important, however, to not get into this kind of judging of our meditations as either “good” or “bad”; this is just another manifestation of the second hindrance, aversion or ill-will. Instead, our task is to investigate them, to really understand them. To recognise when and how they arise, and how they pass away. From this we can see how to work with them in a more skilful way, to relate to them more equanimously, and to prevent their future arising—in a non-aversive way!

Sense Craving

Manifests as leaning in, pulling towards. Has an exciting, needy, energy like a telephone ringing.

Examples / Causes

Recurrent fantasies; holidays, sex, a big house in the country, a flash car, yacht, helicopter and private jet.
A burgeoning *vipassanā* romance.
Obsessive thinking about internal dramas or stories.
Planning things that just *have* to be done, like cleaning behind the fridge, or rearranging the contents of the loft.
Craving comfort; wishing this was a spa, not a retreat!

Working with

Mindfulness and curious investigation.
Contemplate the negative aspects of what is being craved, e.g. the unattractive qualities of the body, or imagining the suitor with no skin, or as a rotting corpse.
Not indulging the desire.
Guarding the senses so as not to stir the mind up into craving.

Aversion / Ill-will

Manifests as recoiling back or pushing away. Has a similar feeling to sense-craving, but negatively. It’s still an exciting, needy, energy like a telephone ringing *without answer*; the unanswered aspect is more prevalent.

Examples / Causes

Physical pain (internal groaning and moaning, “it’ll go soon”, “an energy blockage”).
Unpleasant thoughts.
The *vipassanā* vendetta!
Thinking about unpleasant situations (the retreat!)
Feeling grumpy or discontent.
“Not getting what we want”, “getting what we don’t want”.

Working with

Mindfulness and curious investigation.
Giving *mettā* to the object of aversion.
Wise reflection on the unskillfulness of ill-will.
Seeing what we’re clinging to, what we want to be different. Remember “suffering is wanting things to be other than they are”; seeing the suffering aspect of aversion.
If all else fails, turn away, think of something else.

Dullness & Lethargy

Manifests as sleepiness and/or a feeling of exhausted heaviness. The energy drags downward, the body slouches.

Examples / Causes

Feeling sleepy, dull or foggy; porridge mind.
Can’t think straight and wouldn’t want to anyway.
Feeling heavy in the body.
Bored ... bored ... bored!
Giving unwise attention to feelings of discontent, boredom, laziness and drowsiness.
Overeating.
Meditative imbalance of calm/tranquility vs. energy.

Working with

Mindfulness and curious investigation.
Changing posture; straightening the spine, lifting the head, opening the eyes, standing up, etc.
Reducing food intake.
Sharpening the mind, bringing intentional energy.
Turning away from things that make us sleepy—remember “whatever we think and do a lot of becomes the inclination of the mind.”

Restlessness & Worry

Manifests as an agitated, disturbed, energy, firing upwards. It's the kind of energy you might feel if you had been caught having done something wrong, or accused of some wrongdoing, justly or otherwise.

Examples / Causes

Feeling agitated and/or fidgety.
Thinking excessively, and ruminating on the same thing over and over again, without any sense of control.
Yogi mind: thoughts are out of proportion or connection to reality!
General anxiety, regret or worry.
Fidgetiness can get to ridiculous levels, including feeling like you're going to be thrown from the seat!

Working with

Mindfulness and curious investigation.
Relaxing, calming down. Bringing a sense of peace and ease, of reassurance, to the situation.
Remembering that all things will eventually pass.
When physical: refusing to move under any circumstances!
Using anxiety caused by regret as a learning opportunity; reflecting on the karmic consequences of our actions.
Turning away from things that agitate us.

Doubt / Vacillation

Manifests as an uncomfortable, worrisome energy, often in the chest. A feeling of wasting your time.

Examples / Causes

Thoughts such as "I am useless at this"; "The Buddha lived a long time ago, it can't possibly be relevant today"; "That other technique/teacher/meditation centre is better: I should go there!"; "Everyone else is sitting so beautifully and calmly and I'm not"; "Am I doing this right?"; "Meditation just isn't right for me", and so on.
Repetitive doubtful grumbling in the mind.
Constantly second-guessing the meditative technique, or your ability to do it.

Working with

Mindfulness and curious investigation.
Recognising and noting doubtful thoughts as "doubting doubting" and seeing them as *just thoughts* rather than believing them.
Making a commitment to stick with the technique for the retreat, and evaluate it *after*.
Appreciating the moments of release and relief.
Putting doubtful thoughts aside to consider later.
Talking doubts through with a good friend/teacher.
Allowing oneself to experiment, to play, rather than focusing on "getting it right".

Other Thoughts

The hindrances can arise in combination, or as a flow, one leading to the next—usually due to aversive interference with the hindrance.

If you have enough perspective to see, for example, thoughts as being full of doubt, then this is a moment of mindfulness. Then, just a tiny movement of perspective to go from "I'm feeling doubt" to "this is doubt" can mean the difference between being caught and being free.

There are no "right" objects of mindfulness, no preferential ones. Just objects. Therefore seeing sleepiness as an *object* is to be unhindered by the "hindrance" of dullness and lethargy.

Remember, the "hindrances" happen. To all of us. Our aversive reaction, our not wanting them, is the *stuff* of practice that delivers insight. An attitude of care, "honouring" the current state of mind, regardless of what it is, really helps.