

CHAPTER 1

Clearing the Path: Overcoming the Five Hindrances

Whatever states there are that are wholesome, partaking of the wholesome, pertaining to the wholesome, they are all rooted in careful attention, converge upon careful attention, and careful attention is declared to be the chief among them.

—SAMYUTTA NIKĀYA¹⁰

YOU ARE CLEARING A PATH for concentration and wisdom. Like a trail that provides a clear path through the wilderness, your mindful training opens a pathway to an inner goal that is unhindered by habitual tendencies and the obstruction of desire. It may feel at times that a powerful effort is needed to meditate, like the force of a bulldozer that clears away rubble after a hurricane. At other moments the endeavor may consist in just a light inclination of intention, that abandons doubt as gently as flicking away recently settled dust with a feather duster. Whether it seems as though the sea has parted effortlessly before you, or that you are doggedly carving out a jungle trail, the moment that craving ceases, an unobstructed path opens up.

➔ MEDITATION INSTRUCTION 1.1

Mindfulness with Breathing plus Counting

This is the initial instruction. Begin the development of concentration by using the breath as the meditation object. The breath is a

simple and versatile object with which to learn to establish concentration. You are breathing now. Direct your attention to feel the breath as it enters and exits the nostrils. Focus your attention at the area between the nostrils and upper lip to find the breath. In this meditation you will give your attention exclusively to the knowing of the breath at this location. You do not need to feel the expansion and contraction of the body breathing or observe movement; your object is the breath itself. Every other experience, such as a sound in the room, the hardness of the seat, a memory of the novel read last night, a plan for a conversation you hope to have tomorrow, an emotion of excitement, sadness, frustration, or delight, the scent of flowers wafting in from an open window—all experiences other than the simple knowing of the breath are ignored. Let every experience fall into the background as the breath takes center stage. A traditional analogy suggests that the meditator observes the breath as it enters and exits the nostrils, without concern for any other phenomena, just the way a gatekeeper posted at the city gate observes all that enters and exits through that gate but does not leave his post to follow visitors into the marketplace or to travel out with caravans to the next village.¹¹ Give your attention exclusively and completely to the steady awareness of the whole breath just at the nostril area.

This can be a very challenging exercise at first. You may find that the mind wanders into thought. If it does, simply redirect your attention back to the breath, again and again. You can add a mental count to each breath to help maintain the focus. Breathe in knowing the inhalation, breathe out knowing the exhalation, and count “one.” Breathe in knowing the inhalation, breath out knowing the exhalation, and count “two.” Continue to know the in-breath and the out-breath, counting up to eight or ten. Then reverse the count. Breathe in knowing the inhalation, breathe out knowing the exhalation, and add the number. When you return to the count of one, progress forward to the count of eight or ten and then backward to the count of one for several cycles. Then observe the breath without adding any numbers. Use the counting method to help direct your

attention to the breath, and drop the counting when you no longer need it.¹² Practice mindfulness with breathing like this daily for forty minutes, sixty minutes, or longer as desired. This basic practice of focusing on the breath is the first meditation subject that we shall use to establish concentration and explore *jhāna*. ←

ONE PRIMARY OBSTACLE

You don't need to struggle to overcome a multitude of diverse hindrances or employ an arsenal of antidotes to tackle each specific problem. To develop concentration you can address one primary obstacle—unwise attention. As the Buddha said, "Whatever an enemy might do to an enemy or a hater to those he hates, a wrongly directed mind can do even greater harm than that."¹³ A deliberate and wise application of attention is the root skill that every meditator cultivates.

One of the first lessons dogs must learn in canine obedience class is to pay attention to their owners. There are many distracting sights and smells, as well as other dogs around, and the urge to go sniffing every provocative scent is powerfully ingrained. This first lesson—to pay attention—is paramount. Just as dogs need to inhibit natural impulses in order to be guided by the commands of their owners, you must gain control over your mind and thereby protect yourself, and others, from the tendencies that dwell within. The Buddha said:

Controlled while walking,
 Controlled while standing,
 Controlled while sitting,
 Controlled while reclining,
 Controlled in bending and stretching his limbs—
 Above, across and below,
 As far as the world extends.
 A bhikkhu observes how things occur,
 The arising and passing of the aggregates.
 Living thus ardently,
 Of calm and quiet conduct,

Ever mindful, he trains in the course
Of calm tranquility of mind.
Such a bhikkhu is said to be
One who is ever resolute.¹⁴

Nearly every obstruction to concentration can be traced to a root error in how you are applying your attention. So consider, what is your attention occupied by during daily activities and during a meditation session? If your attention is applied carefully it will augment skillful states, and if it strays unwisely it may breed unprofitable ones.

THE CAUSE OF OUR PROBLEMS

Five classic obstacles confront meditators: (1) desire for sense pleasure; (2) aversion and ill will; (3) sloth, torpor, dullness, and boredom; (4) restlessness and worry; and (5) doubt or obstinate skepticism. These are the places where most people get stuck. As you develop meditative skills, you learn how the hindrances function; you investigate them as habitual forces without adopting them as your personal story. Just as a bird protects chicks in her nest by watching for dangers, you guard your mind with proper attention and do not become prey to these hindering forces.

When mindfulness is weak, it is easy to be swept away with desire, aversion, or speculation. Regarding such hindrances, the Buddha taught that we must know five things:¹⁵ (1) the presence of the hindrance, (2) the absence of the hindrance, (3) the cause for its arising, (4) the way of its abandoning, and (5) the way for the nonarising of it in the future. The cause for the arising of a hindrance is unwise attention, the way of its abandoning is wise attention, and the cultivation of concentration, mindfulness, and insight is the way for the nonarising of that hindrance in the future.

Mindfulness-based meditation practices may emphasize a repeated examination of hindrances, for instance, exploring sleepiness, staying with restlessness, or watching a desire arise and pass away. Such mindful

TABLE 1.1
Five Ways to Investigate Hindrances

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| Recognize when a hindrance is present. |
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| Recognize when a hindrance is absent. |
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| Understand the conditions that cause a hindrance to arise. |
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| Understand the conditions that cause a hindrance to cease. |
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| Explore how to prevent the hindrance from arising again in the future. |
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investigation of hindrances will produce valuable clarity regarding the qualities unique to each hindrance.

During concentration-based practices, however, attention is efficient, precise, and perhaps even curt. When practicing to establish *jhāna*, it is enough to see a hindrance, let it go quickly, and return to the meditation object without delay. In fact, it is essential to do so, because time spent examining hindrances weakens the single-pointed focus of concentration, postponing absorption. Approach the hindrance sufficiently to understand its rudimentary function and supports; study it just enough to untangle the mind from its grip. You don't deny the hindrance in concentration practice, but simply recognize it primarily as the result of unwise attention and quickly remedy the error. Later, when you discern mentality (chapter 13), you will apply the full strength of the unified mind to meticulously analyze nuances of all wholesome and unwholesome states. However, in order to efficiently lay the foundation for *jhāna* concentration, please bypass most of this investigation and diligently redirect attention to your meditation object as quickly as possible.

The state of *jhāna* lies beyond the range of hindrances. Therefore, every moment that you spend engaged with the hindrances diverts your attention, postponing unification with your meditation object. You may have planted a garden with tomatoes, daisies, basil, melons, and zucchini; but you may find that among the seedlings you planted, weeds have also sprouted. Although it is important to discern the difference between the weed and the melon and respond appropriately to each, a wise gardener would not spend all his or her time plucking up weeds—energy must also be given to nurturing the plantings. In meditation practice you must abandon the unwholesome states and also give attention to esteemed wholesome states, such as concentration, mindfulness, generosity, patience, and diligence. You learn what to cultivate and what to discard. You learn how to relate wisely to whatever arises in the mind, to consistently and efficiently abandon wrong attention and establish right attention by focusing on the meditation object.

DANGERS THAT ARE JUST ENOUGH

Just as an oyster transforms the irritating presence of a grain of sand into a pearl, meditators convert irritants into wisdom. If you know you are susceptible to certain hindrances, guard your mind; be heedful. Convert challenges into assets that will deepen your practice.

Soon after arriving at a forest monastery in Thailand, I discovered that several vipers lived in the hollow space below the floor of my *kuti*. Each time I descended the three steps that raised the bamboo hut above the jungle floor I had a flashlight in hand—I was alert to the danger. The Buddha listed several “dangers that are just enough”¹⁶—not causing panic, disability, or paralysis, but just enough to inspire urgency, mindfulness, and wakefulness. His list included snakes and scorpions; stumbling and falling; digestion, bile, and phlegm; criminal gangs; and vicious beasts such as lions, tigers, and spirits. What are the “dangers that are just enough” in your life? What conditions demand that you pay attention, even when you are tired or busy? Vigilance protects us from external dangers, and it effectively protects us from the internal threat posed by the obstructive forces of craving, doubt, and fear.

 *Continuity of Awareness*

For most lay practitioners, formal meditation averages only an hour or so per day—a tiny fraction of our time. Distraction poses a formidable barrier to concentration. Therefore, to build momentum, we must augment the sitting meditation with careful attention during daily activities. To strengthen the focus on the breath, become sensitive to the breath as you are drinking coffee, bathing, cooking, conversing, slipping on shoes, mowing the lawn, photographing your child, balancing your checkbook, delivering a lecture, or eating breakfast. Notice at any time and during any activity how your mind is disposed, where it wanders, how it apprehends sensory objects; then encourage a composed and calm awareness of the breath as you continue to do your work or engage in the activity. During daily activities, it is not possible to exclusively focus on the breath, yet, whether you are walking, working, talking, or eating, you can use your interest in the breath to encourage a balanced state of calm composure.

THE FIVE HINDRANCES

The Buddha compared the presence of the five hindrances to trying to view the reflection of a face in a pot of water. A mind obscured by the hindrances does not produce a mirror-like reflection of reality.¹⁷ Each hindrance clouds the mind in a slightly different manner. While extensive examination of hindrances should not be undertaken during *jhāna* practice, meditators must learn to recognize and abandon these common obstructions to concentration.

The first hindrance, *sensual desire (kāmacchanda)*, obscures consciousness, as colored dyes will diminish the clarity of water, presenting

an alluring field of pattern instead of a clear reflection. Desire has the characteristic of projecting onto an object attractiveness that the object itself doesn't intrinsically possess. When you are entranced by beautiful appearances, you see what you want to see, rather than what is actually present. The misperception inherent in craving embellishes objects with the illusion of desirability or hate-ability—the illusion that the object can bring or destroy happiness. But desire and craving never actually result in fulfillment. The sense of satisfaction, of being and having the object of your desires, only lasts until you want something else; it is fragile and destroyed by the next desire that arises.

As you develop concentration and contemplate impermanence, craving will lose its power over you. You won't need to force yourself to let go. Instead, just as children who play with sandcastles will eventually outgrow a fascination with worlds made of sand, we outgrow the compulsive desires that keep us restlessly seeking satisfaction in external perceptions and activities.¹⁸

Desire arises when there is incorrect attention to pleasant feelings, whether it is a primitive craving for barbecued ribs, a refined attraction for cultural arts, an inclination toward sophisticated intellectual pleasures, or a subtle craving to repeat a perfectly tranquil meditation. Desire removes you from the direct perception of present experience and seduces you into a mental realm of hope and craving.

One *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip illustrated this nicely: The young boy, Calvin, was looking at the ground and called out: "Look! A Quarter!" He picks up the coin and exclaims "Wow!!! I'm rich beyond my dreams! I can have anything I want! All my prayers have been answered!" In the next frame Calvin stands quietly for a moment. And in the following frame he leaps onto the grass searching: "Maybe there's more."

The lustful mind is blind to the simple presence of things as they are. With the senses continually reaching toward pleasurable encounters, the mind is left unguarded and seduction is a constant threat. To steady the mind, you don't need to change what you see, smell, or feel; you don't need to eliminate pleasant encounters. You need, instead, to control how you relate to sensory experience. The Buddha taught:

A man's sensuality lies in thoughts of passion.
 Sensuality does not lie in the world's pretty things;
 A man's sensuality lies in thoughts of passion.
 While the world's pretty things remain as they are,
 The wise remove the desire for them.¹⁹

Keep your attention focused and be content with the observation of the meditation object. Hold it diligently and stray desires will not have the opportunity to seduce you. Just as when an elephant walks through an Indian market with street-side fruit and vegetable stands, the elephant trainer will have the elephant hold a rod with its trunk to keep it safely occupied, you can curb a mind that tends to wander toward attractions by firmly holding your meditation object. You may still experience sensory pleasures, but you won't get lost in them. As the Buddha describes, "He takes his food experiencing the taste, though not experiencing greed for the taste."²⁰ With the development of wisdom, you will understand that sensual desire is not pleasure; it is suffering; it is a force that inhibits the deep peace and rest you seek.

The Buddha taught his disciples to divide pleasure into two categories: coarse sensory pleasure, which is to be feared and abandoned, and refined meditative pleasure, which is to be cultivated and welcomed.²¹ Just as a connoisseur of fine cuisine will not find pleasure in greasy junk food, the consistent attainment of refined pleasures dissolves the prior fascination with coarser pursuits. The subtle pleasures of deep meditative absorption replace painful preoccupation with temporary sensory pleasures, just as sunlight replaces shadow.²² This training progressively abandons lesser happiness to attain greater happiness. Through this quest for real peace, the mind eventually releases into a deep and complete awakening.

The second hindrance, *aversion* or *ill will* (*vyāpāda*), is compared to water that is heated on the fire. It boils up and bubbles over, preventing a clear reflection. Aversion persists when there is incorrect attention to unpleasant feeling. It can take mild forms such as irritation, impatience, and frustration; chronic forms such as pessimism, pity, miserliness, and

 *Interrupt the Craving*

You need not wait until the threshold of *jhāna* or the direct perception of *nibbāna* before you abandon cravings. In introductory meditation classes I ask my students to pause every hour during their daily activities—just a brief pause, to interrupt the seduction of familiar activities and bring attention to the body breathing. Periodic pauses of this sort can interrupt the stream of habitual cravings that dominate the busyness of daily life. Pausing provides a moment of quiet ease; an intervention in the obsession with activity, productivity, and identity; an opportunity to make a different choice. When “wanting” arises, we question it: Do I really want this thing? Is this a reliable basis for my happiness? What is the price I pay in money, time, upkeep, relationship conflict, health, self-respect? What is the long-term cost? Do I know that I have the choice to say no? You might discover that you don’t even want the things that you crave. If you don’t stop to ask yourself a few questions, you might find unused gadgets cluttering your shelves and useless thoughts cluttering your mind. Craving will pick up anything to sustain itself—whatever or whoever passes by.

anxiety; or dramatic forms such as hatred, rage, terror, jealousy, and aggression. Anything can be the trigger for an aversive reaction if there is unwise attention. You might react to theft with rage, to an illness with pity, to traffic with impatience, to a noisy neighbor with hatred, to cold weather with complaints, to a spider with fear. Aversion has the characteristic of projecting onto an object repulsiveness that the object does not inherently contain. Aversion can never end by replacing unpleasant external conditions with comfortable and agreeable conditions, since

 *Letting Go*

Become mindful of the early signs of desire—that initial pull or force that propels your attention toward the desirable object. Distinguish between the force of desire and the object or perception that is attractive to you. Is the force of craving as pleasant as you hope the experience of that object will be? Notice that in the moment of gratification, the desire simultaneously ceases. Distinguish the difference between these two occurrences—the attaining of the object and the ending of desire. Once you see these as two distinctive causes of happiness, then explore your experience to determine if happiness comes from getting what you wanted or from the ending of the desire. Does attaining the coveted object bring happiness, or could the happiness result from the momentary subsiding of that desire?

Observe a desire today. Feel the tug and the yearning associated with wanting something. Make the choice to relinquish that desire. Do not seek to satisfy the yearning. Just observe what happens when you let go of desire. You may or may not still acquire the object, depending upon the conditions already set in motion. Do you feel happy even when you don't actually get what you wanted?

the suffering is not caused by the external conditions. The problem is the quality of attention, not the physical situation that you encounter.

When the mind is obsessed by ill will or aversion, we tend to react aggressively, impatiently, or with avoidance. Feel the separation that aversion perpetuates; recognize the suffering that it creates; become mindful of anger. There are many ways to employ meditation to resolve anger. You may soften the tendency toward ill will by cultivating loving-

kindness (chapter 8); you may counter the separation that feeds anger by personally giving a gift to the person who irritates you; you may discern the object of your anger as bare elements such as a mere collection of thirty-two body parts (chapter 5), as a conjunction of material and mental elements (chapters 12–13), or as a process of five aggregates (chapter 14). As explained in the *Visuddhimagga*, “For when he tries the resolution into elements, his anger finds no foothold, like a mustard seed on the point of an awl, or a painting on the air.”²³ Through the development of concentration and wisdom, you will understand the danger posed by aversive states. Comprehending the danger it becomes easier to let such states go and peacefully steer your attention back to your meditation object.

The third hindrance, *sloth and torpor* (*thīnamiddha*) is compared to water that is covered over with slimy moss and water plants, creating a murky mental state in which the object of meditation is obscured. Sloth, sometimes described as dullness, refers to a sluggish and stiff quality of consciousness characterized by a lack of driving power. Torpor refers to a weakness or enfeeblement of mental factors. Torpor is characterized by an unwieldiness of the mind and manifests as laziness, boredom, or drowsiness. Arising together, sloth and torpor create a feeling of inertia, a sense that the mind is thick and drooping, a “paralysis due to lack of urgency and loss of vigor.”²⁴ The hindrance of sloth and torpor is a severe expression of not being awake to what is really happening.

Sleep is not the cure for sloth and torpor. You can distinguish between physical tiredness and the hindrance of sloth and torpor, between the need to rejuvenate and refresh the body and the weariness that wants to just call it a day. The Buddha urged, “To have your mind set on calmness, you must take power over sleepiness, drowsiness, and lethargy. There is no place for laziness and no recourse to pride.”²⁵ Learn what seduces you into the passive withdrawal of sloth and torpor, and conquer the urge to find relaxation through dullness or separation. You will discover that as distractions weaken and concentration develops your vital energy is no longer drained by habitually meandering thoughts. When the hindrances are absent, delight and happiness refresh the mind. Once absorption is stabilized, you will have access to an immense and rejuvenating

energy source that intensifies through jhāna practice. Your physical need for sleep will noticeably diminish.

The fourth hindrance, *restlessness and worry* (*uddhaccakukkucca*), is compared to water that is shaken by wind—it trembles, eddies, and ripples. This agitated state precludes the possibility of clear seeing. Restless and distracting thoughts are the principal obstructions to concentration; therefore I will address this hindrance at length and include several pragmatic methods to overcome the influence of mental restlessness.

It is not easy to stay focused on the breath. Most meditators sit down, apply their attention to the breath, and the mind immediately deviates. The *Visuddhimagga* aptly describes the untamed restless mind like this: “it runs off the track like a chariot harnessed to a wild ox.”²⁶

Imagine the horror if thoughts took form, had shape, or occupied space; we would all be squeezed right out of the room! Although invisible and silent, thoughts exert tremendous influence over moods, energy, health, emotions, abilities, relationships, and perceptions. Plans and worries scatter attention like a pile of ashes scatters when a rock is thrown into it. Restlessness dissipates your effort to collect attention; it prevents the cohesion of concentration.

When you are restless you are more vulnerable to whims and may act in ways you later regret, fueling worry and remorse. Even if the content of thought is beautiful, excessive thinking tires the mind and obstructs concentration.²⁷ As the Buddha remarked, “you are eaten by your thoughts.”²⁸

The primary method for working with thoughts is to learn to let them go. Clear the mind of compulsive clutter. In fact, much of what you will do when you begin meditation is to abandon thoughts. Sweep away fantasies of future events, ruminations about past activities, and commentary about present happenings. Train your mind to be quiet by not allowing your attention to fuel a constant stream of chatter and interpretation. One of my early meditation teachers compared this basic quieting of the mind to watching a football game on television with the sound muted. You don’t need the opinions of the commentator. Let go of your internal commentary and watch life’s events unfold with a silent mind.

The networking capacity of the mind is both baffling and awe-inspiring. One contact—a sound, a sight, a touch, a thought—may lead the way through a chain of associations, drawn from the archives of memory. A sight of a fruit bowl might trigger the simple thought, “I wonder what I will have for lunch.” It could be followed by a yearning for Thai noodles, thoughts of beaches along the coast of Thailand or the latest advances in diving equipment, memories of the friend who taught your children to swim, the recollection that he died of cancer, anxiety about medical insurance, and financial worries. Any thought can remove you from what could otherwise have been a mindful observation of a peach in a bowl.

 *Living Mindfully*

If the tendency to wander off into thought is a strong pattern, don't wait for your formal daily meditation. Interrupt the habit as you are driving to work, cooking dinner, reaching for the telephone, walking to the toilet, or exercising at the gym. Many times every day, notice what your attention is preoccupied by and repeatedly bring it back to present awareness.

PLANNING IS A JOKE

There is a popular joke: How do you make God laugh? Easy, just tell him your plans! Things never occur as planned, yet the pattern of planning reoccurs. The Buddha said, “What people expect to happen is always different from what actually happens. From this comes great disappointment. This is the way the world works.”²⁹ We can plan almost anything, as grand as our whole lives, as useless as what other people will say about us, as mundane as the shopping list, as subconscious as which foot will reach the stair first, or as exalted as what we will do when we are enlightened.

Planning is a deeply entrenched habit, effective for many professional pursuits, but an enormous obstruction to concentration.

In meditation you must sit with your own mind and notice if there is a tendency to fantasize about the future or dwell in memories of the past. H. W. L. Poonja, one of my teachers, curtly informed disciples who indulged in stories of long past events that they were living in a graveyard, digging up corpses that have been dead for a long time. In meditation you must dispel fascination with the content of your thoughts and stop retreating into a private world of imagination. You wake up to the present moment as it is.

Thoughts may seem elusive because they exist only in your mind. Each meditator must discover how to let go of this habit. I repeatedly remind myself to “make no plans” during meditation. This simple reminder helps cut through the compulsive tendencies of the planning mind. One of my students visualizes holding up a Ping-Pong paddle, imagining thoughts bouncing off with their own momentum, no aversion added. Another student visualizes a soft whisk broom gently sweeping thoughts aside. You may not need to add visualizations to the meditation; it may be enough to diligently return to your meditation object.

BE THE MASTER OF YOUR MIND

If you find that you are often lost, entangled in a quagmire of agitation, plans, and regrets, don't worry. You do not need to remove yourself to Himalayan caves or sequester yourself in a desert retreat. Trekking in a remote corner of the steppes or the wilderness of the Mohave is not the only way to discover spaciousness and quietude, for simply turning the mind away from habitual imaginings clears the space for *jhāna* to arise. Thoughts such as “what I will do, what I will say, how I will be seen, what did I experience, what will someone think of me” only clutter and weary attention. Through *jhāna* meditation you develop the ability to abide removed from disruption and entanglement and access an inner dimension that is undistracted, uncluttered, and unperturbed.

The Buddha warned, “Not understanding thoughts, one runs back and forth with wandering mind.”³⁰ Enjoy the opportunity to quiet your

mind in meditation; stop racing between stories of past and future. Be at ease where you are and discover the deep rest of concentration.

 *What Do You Think?*

Take a moment now to sit quietly. Notice if the quality and content of your mind is worthy of respect. Sometimes thoughts run on automatic—out of control—and are scarcely even concerned with topics that you value. Each meditator will discover his or her patterns and tendencies—perhaps self-criticism, blaming, dwelling in past regrets, or anxiety. Identify your vulnerable areas, reflect upon them, and make a firm decision to tackle these obstructions to concentration. On some retreats I create a personal list of the topics I will not permit my mind to think of. If a thought repeats, I add it to my list, effectively excluding the four or five most persistent themes from intruding upon my retreat.

In a conversation recorded between a group of great disciples who discussed their individual approaches to the Dhamma, Venerable Sariputta describes his power over mind thus:

Here a bhikkhu wields mastery over his mind, he does not let the mind wield mastery over him. In the morning he abides in whatever abiding or attainment he wants to abide in during the morning; at midday he abides in whatever abiding or attainment he wants to at midday; in the evening he abides in whatever abiding or attainment he wants to abide in during the evening. Suppose a king or a king's minister had a chest full of variously colored garments. In the morning he could

put on whatever pair of garments he wanted to put on in the morning; at midday he could put on whatever pair of garments he wanted to put on at midday; in the evening he could put on whatever pair of garments he wanted to put on in the evening. So too, a bhikkhu wields mastery over his mind, he does not let the mind wield mastery over him. In the morning...at midday...in the evening he abides in whatever abiding or attainment he wants to abide in during the evening.³¹

To develop a mind like Sariputta's you will need the impeccable self-discipline that develops with jhāna practice. The Buddha declared, "[A liberated one] will think whatever thought he wishes to think and he will not think any thought that he does not wish to think."³² Imagine this potential! Try it. If you don't want to think about something, then don't think about it! Focus your attention on something that you wish to dwell upon, such as your meditation object, or a beautiful quality such as loving-kindness. Resolve to not dwell with unskillful thoughts, and if they arise, interrupt the wandering mind and direct your attention to the object of meditation. Train your mind until it comes under your control and responds to your direction. Become skilled like the great monks and nuns who were described as the "masters of their own minds."³³

The hindrance of doubt (*vicikicchā*), the final one in this classic list of obstructions to concentration, is likened to water that is stirred up, turbid, muddy, and set in a darkened room. In such a state one cannot see a reflection clearly. Doubt as a hindering force is distinct from intelligent inquiry. The hindrance of doubt describes the exhaustion of mind that comes with excessive conjecture. It might take the form of doubt in your own ability ("I can't do this practice" or "it's too hard for me"); doubt in the teacher ("she's too young to teach" or "he doesn't understand the right way"); or doubt in the teachings ("enlightenment is not possible for contemporary practitioners" or "jhāna can't be maintained by lay-people"). Doubt can manifest as indecisiveness; it can come cloaked as dogmatic opinions; it may perpetuate factional sides in a conflict. Because bewilderment is a painful state, people grasp views to try to gain a feeling of certainty but end up rigid and stubborn.

When mindfulness is not yet strong enough to penetrate the object of attention, then the mind might do what minds do—think. Habitual thinking rarely leads to revelation. Questions will inevitably arise as your practice develops since you cannot fully understand this process until you have genuinely experienced it. Yet it will help to suspend doubt; curb the tendency to intellectualize about phenomena, and stop the thoughts before they digress into conjecture. If agitation, perplexity, indecisiveness, or excessive analysis occupies attention, then exhaustion and doubt will often follow in its wake. You must set aside the tendency to doubt in order to see the true nature of mind—only then will you no longer have doubts about it.

SETTLE ALL DISTRACTIONS

With practice, you will learn to settle all distractions. Never abandon careful attention. If there is only one chair in your house and you are always sitting in it, although unwelcome guests may come to visit, they will not stay long. Maintain your stance of mindful attention and eventually hindrances will stop appearing. The nutriment for all hindrances is careless attention;³⁴ simply giving consistent and careful attention to your meditation object will starve hindrances of fodder and nourish concentration and insight.

Progress in meditation requires the willingness to abandon the obstacles. Remain vigilant. There will come a time when you look into the mind and see clearly that no hindrances are present. The Buddha commented, “Friends, when a bhikkhu reviews himself thus, if he sees that these evil unwholesome states are not all abandoned in himself, then he should make an effort to abandon them all. But if, when he reviews himself thus, he sees that they are all abandoned in himself, then he can abide happy and glad, training day and night in wholesome states.” He offered the analogy of a youth who views her own face in a mirror. If she sees a smudge or blemish, she will make an effort to remove it. And if she finds her face is clean and clear, she will be glad and happy.³⁵ As your practice deepens and you approach the threshold of *jhāna*, hindrances are removed. Tremendous relief and joy may flood your awareness when

TABLE 1.2
Five Hindrances (nīvaranas)

| HINDRANCE | CHARACTERISTICS |
|------------------------|--|
| Sensual desire | Thoughts in favor; craving, especially sensual pleasure |
| Aversion or ill-will | Thoughts against; judgment, censure, disliking, malice toward others |
| Sloth and torpor | Dullness, boredom, lack of energy, sluggishness and weakness of consciousness and mental factors; may manifest as sleepiness |
| Restlessness and worry | Distracting thoughts that inhibit calmness; remorse, anxiety |
| Doubt | Absence of trust or confidence, lack of faith, unwise skepticism |

these hindrances are set aside. The mind will be radiant, unblemished, and beautiful. You can be happy, and use this opportunity to further develop wholesome states.

Recognizing the mind unthwarted by the hindrances establishes a remarkable confidence and joy that sets the stage for deep concentration. In a sequence of analogies the Buddha compared the gladness of a mind freed from the burden of desire to the happiness of a man whose business prospered and was finally able to repay a large debt.³⁶ He compared the joy of a mind without aversion to the delight of someone who had recently recovered from a terrible sickness. He compared a mind released from the bonds of sloth and torpor to the joy of a man who had been locked in prison and is finally freed from his confinement. He compared a mind unoccupied by restlessness and worry to the thrill of

a slave who is freed from slavery, able to go wherever he liked. And he compared a mind unfettered by doubt to the feeling of a merchant who, fearing for his safety and survival while traveling through a dangerous desert, finally arrives at the edge of a village. These people would surely rejoice.

Until you perceive the disappearance of the hindrances within your own mind, you will suffer as a debtor, sick person, prisoner, slave, and desert traveler. Perceiving the disappearance of those same hindrances, you can celebrate as one released from bonds, dangers, and burdens. “And when he knows that these five hindrances have left him, gladness arises in him, from gladness comes delight, from the delight in his mind his body is tranquilized, with a tranquil body he feels joy, and with joy his mind is concentrated.”³⁷ With the honest recognition that the mind is unhindered, happiness develops, concentration matures, and you gain the prerequisites for entrance into *jhāna*.