



37 - The Five Hazards: overview

Charting troubled waters

“When the mind is obstructed by the Five Hindrances, it cannot see clearly. It is like water that is boiling, dark, covered by algae, stirred by the wind, or muddied with clay.” ~ Gotama (the Buddha – paraphrased)

“The obstacles to peace are not the storms themselves, but our failure to see them as passing weather.” ~ Christina Feldman

Recognising the storms and the still sky

In this third phase of the RAFT journey – Freedom – our attention turns inward to the ‘Five Hazards’ (traditionally called the Five Hindrances). These are not moral flaws or personal shortcomings, but universal inner weather systems: evolved patterns of mind that temporarily cloud clarity, balance, and wise choice. Like fog, wind, or heavy seas, they do not destroy the vessel – but they can obscure direction, dull awareness, and make skilful navigation harder if they go unrecognised. When seen clearly, they are known for what they are: passing conditions, not permanent truths.

The real danger of the Five Hazards lies not on the meditation cushion, where they may appear as mild distractions, but *off the cushion*, in the press of ordinary life. Here they exert a powerful gravitational pull, collapsing awareness at precisely the moments it is most needed. Under their influence, inhibitory control weakens, perspective narrows, and the mind slips into automatic pilot. When we are ‘covered’ by a hazard, the light of intelligence is briefly eclipsed, leaving us vulnerable to reactive urges and impulsive decisions. Freedom begins not with eliminating these inner storms, but with learning to recognise them early, stay present within them, and steer the raft with steadiness until clarity returns.

Navigating these dangers asks us to recognise that these inner storms are not merely background weather but active threats to the stability of the raft itself. When we are caught in the *siren song* of desire or the *tempest* of ill will, perception becomes radically distorted – like trying to steer by a compass

submerged in boiling or muddy water. In such moments, our usual sense of direction cannot be trusted. What feels urgent, justified, or irresistible is often the very signal that awareness has narrowed and control is slipping.

To stay oriented toward freedom, we learn to treat the Five Hazards as universal warning lights rather than personal failures – early signs of an impending slide back into our most entrenched habits and compulsions. This is the moment to *drop anchor*: to ground attention in the body, the breath, and the present moment before momentum carries us into regret. Freedom is protected not by perfect conditions, but by recognising danger early and choosing to pause, steady the raft, and wait for the waters to clear.

To navigate the Hazards, it helps to understand their distinct character. Gotama offered specific water similes to illustrate how each hazard distorts perception:

- ★ **Sensual Desire:** The pull of craving and fantasy. It is like water mixed with coloured dye – it may look beautiful, but it obscures the bottom, distorting reality with projections of pleasure.
- ★ **Ill Will:** The push of resentment and hostility. It is like boiling water – turbulent and painful to the touch, making it impossible to see a reflection clearly.
- ★ **Tuning Out:** The fog of dullness and inertia. It is like stagnant water choked with algae – there is no movement or clarity, only heaviness and obstruction.
- ★ **Anxiety and Agitation:** The choppy waters of restlessness and regret. It is like water whipped by the wind – ripples constantly distort the reflection, preventing the mind from settling.
- ★ **Immobilising Doubt:** The faulty compass of uncertainty and self-distrust. It is like muddy water in the dark – murky and obscured, preventing one from seeing the way forward.

Each hazard arises from a life-affirming impulse – protection, comfort, certainty, or stimulation – but becomes harmful when distorted by reactivity. We might also view these hazards like a blanket thrown over a lamp. The light of the mind with its natural radiance and capacity to know is still there, burning bright. But when the blanket of a hazard covers it, that radiance is veiled, dimming the view of reality as it actually is.

Deep down, these hazards are the offspring of Ignorance – not knowing or *not wanting to know* what is truly happening. This specific type of Ignorance gives

birth to craving, aversion, and confusion, which in turn give rise to the Five Hazards that deny the mind peace.

In this third stage of the journey, the Five Hazards are approached tactically rather than morally. We learn that these inner dangers and their counter-balances, are sustained not by force of will, but by the *quality of attention* we apply. As Gotama taught, the hazards are not fixed traits; they are conditions that can be either *fed* or *starved*. When our attention repeatedly dwells on irritation, craving, worry, or doubt, the hazard gathers strength. When that attention is gently withdrawn and redirected, its grip naturally weakens.

Freedom develops through this shift in attentional nutrition. Instead of struggling with hazards head-on, we learn to stop supplying them with energy and instead, to consciously feed what steadies and clarifies the mind with the Seven Supports of Awakening (Chapter 43). This is skilled navigation: recognising where attention has landed, choosing where it is placed next, and allowing balance to re-emerge without force. Over time, the mind learns which conditions lead toward stability and which carry it back toward rough seas.

The Five Hazards on our journey to Freedom

In the RAFT to Freedom metaphor, the Five Hazards are the dangerous courses unmarked on the navigational chart. They are like watercourses leading off from a swift-flowing river, interrupting, diverting, and dispersing the current – preventing the vessel from moving freely toward the open sea.

- ★ **Sensual Desire** is the alluring siren song that tempts the vessel off course.
- ★ **Ill Will** is the sudden storm that churns the waters of the heart.
- ★ **Tuning Out** is the heavy fog that dims awareness and halts momentum.
- ★ **Anxiety and Agitation** are the whirlpools of restlessness that scatter focus.
- ★ **Immobilising Doubt** is the faulty compass that spins in circles, robbing direction and trust.

These Hazards are not moral failures but predictable conditions of mind. The task is not to fight them, but to recognise them early and respond skilfully.

How to work with the Five Hazards

Before we counter or replace anything, we first learn how to *meet* the Hazards wisely.

★ **Recognise and name**

When a Hazard appears, meet it gently and impersonally:

“*Sensual Desire is here*,” “*Ill Will is present*,” “*Agitation is arising*.”

Simply naming the Hazard loosens its grip and restores awareness.

★ **Investigate with kindness**

Look into the conditions that allowed the Hazard to arise. Is it fuelled by fatigue, fear, irritation, loneliness, over-effort, or unmet needs? Curiosity replaces self-judgment; understanding replaces blame.

★ **Observe its passing**

Watch how every Hazard fluctuates, peaks, fades, and passes. Seeing impermanence weakens the sense that “*this is me, this is mine*.”

★ **Notice its absence**

When the Hazard settles, pause. Savour the clarity, steadiness, warmth, or ease that follows. Let the nervous system learn what non-reactivity feels like.

This groundwork makes everything that follows possible.

The role of the Five Defenders in recognising the Hazards (chapters 28-33)

To navigate wisely, Liberating Mindfulness takes the lead, guiding the crew alongside the Five Defenders that we explored in the second stage of our journey: Confidence, Courageous Effort, Healing Mindfulness, A Gathered Mind, and Discernment. These Defenders are not techniques to apply or ideals to live up to, but trained inner faculties – the strengths that allow the Five Hazards to be recognised *without collapse*. They stabilise the vessel first, creating the conditions in which skilful responses become possible.

In the early Buddhist teachings, these Five Defenders provide the necessary strengths for meeting and overcoming the Five Hazards. Without them, attempts to counter or replace difficult states are fragile and short-lived.

- ★ **Confidence** steadies the vessel when *Immobilising Doubt* threatens to stall the journey. It counters cynicism and loss of trust, allowing forward movement even when certainty is lacking.
- ★ **Courageous Effort** counters *Tuning Out* and the pull of sloth or disengagement. It re-engages energy, care, and commitment when momentum fades.
- ★ **Healing Mindfulness** holds all experience – including Hazards – within a field of kindness and clarity. This prevents collapse into self-attack,

shame, or aversion toward what is present.

- ★ **A Gathered Mind** counters restlessness and sensual scattering. It prevents attention from fragmenting under pressure, maintaining stability and coherence in rough conditions.
- ★ **Discernment** reads conditions accurately, recognising the danger in clinging, aversion, and reactive urges, and knowing when to hold course and when to adjust.

‘Liberating Mindfulness’ coordinates these Five Defenders, allowing the Five Hazards to be recognised early, met skilfully, and navigated without capsizing – so the journey toward freedom can continue with steadiness and resolve.

The Five Hazards and the Seven Supports (Chapters 43–50)

The ‘Seven Supports’ (traditionally known as the Seven Factors of Awakening) – which we explore after the Five Hazards – describe what the mind feels like and how it behaves when things are going well. They are not tools we force into place, but *natural qualities that show up* as the Five Defenders are functioning and the Hazards are losing their grip.

When the Defenders are steady, the mind begins to organise itself in healthy ways. Energy, curiosity, and joy tend to arise as heaviness and dullness fade. In the same way, calmness, steadiness, and balance become more available as agitation, ill will, and compulsive desire settle down.

In simple terms, the ‘Seven Supports’ describe the lived experience of a mind moving out of trouble and back toward clarity. They show us what freedom looks like *from the inside* – not as an idea, but as a felt shift in how we attend, respond, and stay present as the Hazards are displaced.

Many traditions describe the Supports as *counter-forces* to the Hazards. In the fourth foundation of mindfulness – Mindfulness of Principles – practitioners are encouraged to remember both the Hazards and the Supports, recognising their ongoing relevance.

The Five Defenders are the basic inner strengths that make skilful navigation possible. They help us stay present, steady, and able to respond when difficulties arise. The Seven Supports describe what the mind is like when those strengths are working well and the Hazards are loosening their hold. They show up as felt qualities such as energy, clarity, calm, and balance.

In practice, we don't choose one instead of the other. The Defenders give us the strength to stay with experience; the Supports describe how the mind begins to settle, open, and move toward insight and freedom as a result.

Freedom in the absence of the Five Hazards

The third stage of our journey is not merely to survive the storms but to dwell in the clear skies that follow each storm. As each Hazard is stilled, a new quality of Freedom is revealed.

Gotama described these freedoms using powerful metaphors of relief:

- ★ **Freedom from Sensual Desire** is like paying off a debt. The constant pressure to repay (crave) is gone, bringing a sense of ownership and independence.
- ★ **Freedom from Ill Will** is like recovering from an illness. The burning fever of anger subsides, restoring health and ease to the system.
- ★ **Freedom from Tuning Out** is like being released from prison. The confinement of dullness lifts, allowing free movement and vitality.
- ★ **Freedom from Anxiety and Agitation** is like being freed from slavery. One is no longer forced to obey the erratic commands of restless thoughts, regaining autonomy.
- ★ **Freedom from Immobilising Doubt** is like crossing a desert safely. The danger and uncertainty of being lost are replaced by the security of arriving at a safe destination.

These absences are not neutral gaps; they are moments of direct liberation – experiential verification of Gotama's third realisation, that freedom from craving, aversion, compulsions, and confusion is possible.

Working with the Hazards: Starve, Feed, and Balance

Each Hazard can be worked with in three simple ways: by *starving* it of the attention that keeps it going, *feeding* a healthier quality in its place, and *restoring balance* using strengths from the Five Defenders or the Seven Supports.

★ Sensual Desire (Craving)

- *Starve*: Stop replaying the fantasy and return attention to the immediacy of the body and breath.
- *Feed and balance*: Cultivate contentment and grounded presence,

which cool grasping and bring ease.

★ Ill Will:

- *Starve*: Let go of the inner story and soften areas of tightness in the body.
- *Feed and balance*: Bring in friendliness, compassion, or forgiveness, restoring warmth and perspective.

★ Tuning Out (Sloth and Torpor):

- *Starve*: Brighten attention – adjust posture, open the eyes, deepen the breath, and re-engage interest.
- *Feed and balance*: Encourage energy and curiosity, lifting clarity without forcing effort.

★ Anxiety and Agitation:

- *Starve*: Ground attention in the breath and body, and widen awareness rather than narrowing around worry.
- *Feed and balance*: Support calm, steadiness, and clear investigation, allowing agitation to settle naturally.

★ Immobilising Doubt

- *Starve*: Notice repetitive, looping thoughts and return to direct, present-moment experience.
- *Feed and balance*: Strengthen confidence and joyful effort, restoring trust and a sense of direction.

Self-reflections

1. Which of the Five Hazards most often visits the mind?
2. What signals the arrival of a Hazard – body tension, specific thoughts, or a shift in mood?
3. What supports navigating through a Hazard? What does the body-mind feel like afterwards?
4. How can the Five Defenders help stabilise the mind when hazards arise?
5. What are some specific ways the mind unknowingly ‘feeds’ a predominant hazard (for example, scrolling, rumination, specific company)?
6. Can the experience of freedom from these storms – the debt paid, the illness cured – be recalled?
7. How does viewing hazards as passing weather change the relationship with them?

Journaling prompts

1. **Hazard log**: Record episodes when sensual desire, ill will, tuning out,

anxiety and agitation, or immobilising doubt arose. What conditions fuelled them?

2. **Moments of calm:** Describe times the mind was free from hazard. How did that clarity feel?
3. **Turning points:** Note what helped each hazard release – forgiveness, curiosity, breathing?
4. **Feeding versus starving:** Identify one way the mind feeds a specific hazard and one concrete way to starve it using appropriate attention this week.
5. **Doubt and confidence:** Write about a time when trust replaced confusion. How did that shift feel in the body?
6. **Hazards and compulsion:** Reflect on how these hazards connect to cycles of reactive behaviour. Does craving often arise when the experience of restlessness, ill will, or tuning out is present?
7. **Lessons from the storms:** What has each hazard taught the mind about the nature of impermanence and the requirements for freedom?

Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of the Five Hazards, the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience:** Each hazard reflects a distinct neural pattern. Sensual desire activates the dopamine reward pathways that evolved for survival but are easily hijacked by compulsive behaviours. Ill will trigger the amygdala's threat system, narrowing attention around what feels wrong. Tuning out arises from low cortical arousal and parasympathetic dominance, producing a collapse of clarity rather than true rest. Anxiety and Agitation engage the default mode network, fuelling rumination, while Immobilising doubt over-activates the brain's conflict-monitoring system (anterior cingulate cortex), generating indecision. Mindfulness training strengthens prefrontal regulation across all these circuits, reducing automatic reactivity and restoring choice – a process neuroscientists describe as 'decoupling stimulus from response'.
- ★ **Psychology:** The Five Hazards are not personal flaws but natural, evolved survival strategies. Each one reflects an ancient mechanism that once protected our ancestors: desire sought resources, ill will protected against threats, tuning out conserved energy, anxiety acted as a smoke detector for danger, and doubt provided a pause for reflection. In modern life, these mechanisms often become misapplied, leading to suffering. Contemporary

therapies mirror Gotama's insights; MBCT and ACT teach decentering – seeing thoughts as passing events rather than commands.

★ **Philosophy:** The Stoics viewed the passions as misjudgments of value – errors in perception rather than enemies – corrected through reason. Existentialists reframed doubt and anxiety as thresholds into authenticity. Buddhist philosophy treats the hindrances as teachers of impermanence (*anicca*) and not-self (*anattā*): seeing that hazards arise and pass reveals that the self is not a fixed entity but a fluid process. From this perspective, the hazards are not obstacles to battle but doorways into deeper clarity.

Remember to remember

The Five Hazards are the common storms marked on the navigational chart of the mind. Learning to recognise these storms when they arise is the crucial first step in learning not to be shipwrecked by them. Remember, these Hazards are temporary, conditioned states, not permanent features of the seascape or fatal flaws in the vessel. They are rooted in evolved tendencies, but it is attachment and reactivity to them that causes suffering.

The task of mastering the Five Hazards is akin to a sailor studying the specific characteristics of five types of storm – the sudden boiling squall of ill will, the thick algae-like fog of tuning out, the choppy waves of restlessness, the coloured water of desire, and the muddy darkness of doubt. By knowing the conditions that feed each storm and the skillful actions that starve them, the navigator shifts from reacting to the weather to steering by the stillness that exists between the gusts.

“Each moment of awareness is an island of safety.” ~ attributed to Thich Nhat Hanh

“When you understand the hindrances, they lose their power.” ~ Bhante Gunaratana

Sutta References

★ **Satipatṭhāna Sutta (MN 10 / DN 22) – The Foundations of Mindfulness:**

- Summary: Details mindfulness of the Five Hindrances as the first category under Dhammānupassanā. It instructs the practitioner to know when each hindrance is present or absent, how it arises, how it is abandoned, and how its future arising is prevented.

★ **Saṅgārava Sutta (SN 46.55) – To Saṅgārava:**

- Summary: Explains why the hindrances obstruct wisdom using water similes. It compares a mind overcome by each hindrance to various states of obscured water (dye, boiling, algae, wind, mud) where one cannot see clearly.

★ **Āhāra Sutta (SN 46.51) – Food:**

- Summary: Shows how hindrances are ‘fed’ or ‘starved’ by the way attention is applied (e.g., inappropriate attention feeds sensual desire). Offers practical guidance for using attentional strategy to manage hindrances.

★ **Samaññaphala Sutta (DN 2) – The Fruits of the Contemplative Life:**

- Summary: Compares the state of mind when the Five Hindrances are abandoned to experiences of relief and freedom: like being free from debt, recovered from sickness, released from prison, freed from slavery, and arriving at a place of safety after a desert journey.

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