The Hindrances

All it takes is a few minutes trying to rest our attention on the breath, and it becomes pretty clear that our minds seem to take on a life of their own. In some ways this is familiar territory, not so different from active addiction, where we found ourselves unable to stop using a substance or acting out a behavior even though some part of us really wanted to.

This seems to happen all the time. It's 4PM and we find ourselves restless. A replayed conversation somehow makes us just as angry as when it happened. The worrying, the planning, the heaviness that pulls us toward the couch, the kitchen, or the screen. Buddhism has a map for these, and calls them the five hindrances.

The first is sensual desire, or simply wanting. Not only lust, but the constant low pull toward the next pleasant thing: the snack, the notification, the small reward that promises to make this moment better than it is. The second is ill will, the movement of aversion: irritation, resentment, the grudge that will not let go, and often the harshest voice of all, the one turned against ourselves. The third is sloth and torpor, a dullness or heaviness of mind. It feels like fog, something that looks like rest but is closer to avoidance, or procrastination.

Restlessness and worry is next, the agitated state that will not let the mind settle, the racing planner, the body that cannot sit still or find comfort. And finally there is doubt, the quiet erosion of conviction, the voice that says this is not working, that we are not the kind of person this works for, so why bother.

The hindrances are usually presented in the context of formal meditation, as one of the contemplations of dhammas in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. A formal sit is a wonderful place to become familiar with them, to see whether one happens to be present, and to watch how it behaves.

And at first, that noticing and watching is the whole of it. The Buddha describes contemplating a hindrance in just a few ways: knowing when it is present, knowing when it is absent, knowing how it arises, knowing how it is released, and knowing how it is kept from arising again. That is the entire territory. It sounds almost too simple, but it is remarkably freeing. We can identify which hindrance, if any, is at play, notice which of those states it is in, and only then consider what might help.

Because the tradition is not content to only name the hindrances. It also offers antidotes, active things we can do once we have noticed that one has arisen.

The first antidote is the same for all five: to name it, to see it clearly as a hindrance, and to recognize that it is not intrinsically "me." It is just the mind doing what minds do. With a little practice this recognition alone is often enough, and it can be met with a certain lightness, even with the warmth of humor when we catch the mind in one of its old tricks.

When naming is not enough, each hindrance has its own response. Wanting loosens when we guard the six sense doors and stop reaching, and when we see clearly that the desire and whatever satisfaction it promises are both impermanent, already passing even as they arise. Ill will can be met with the heart practices: recollecting how interconnected all of this is, generating goodwill where there was resentment, or seeing through the solid self that takes everything so personally.

Sloth and torpor calls for energy, which we can rouse through the breath, through brightening our attention, through movement, sometimes through simply standing up. Restlessness wants the opposite: a settling, a grounding, a return to the body and the breath until the agitation has somewhere to rest. And doubt is met by recollecting what practice and recovery have already shown us, the fruits we have seen in ourselves and in the people around us.

It can sound almost absurd, this catalogue of possible states and responses. It helps to remember that Buddhism does not offer it as dogma, but as something to try out. Maybe it fits, maybe it helps. It is something different to try.

Consider how many times we reached for our addiction simply because a hindrance came up, and we had no other move to make. We know that didn't work.

So even though the hindrances are presented in the setting of formal meditation, and the cushion remains a fine place to work with them in isolation, the truth is that they arise everywhere a life is lived. The same antidotes work just as well at 4PM, or in traffic, or in the middle of the replayed argument. We call it meditation practice in part because it is practice. The main event was always bringing what we develop there into our daily lives. That turns out to be recovery.

Sources
Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), contemplation of dhammas
Nīvaraṇa Sutta (AN 9.64)