



# Get Free From What Hinders You

What Writers can learn from Meditators  
(and it's not how to meditate).

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*Get Free from what Hinders You:  
What Writers can learn from Meditators (and it's not how to meditate)*

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Dear Writers,

As this eBook series draws towards a close (there's only time for one more, before some of us join the online bootcamp coming up), I wanted to be sure to include some very important information that will empower you to write with more ease, and probably also live with more ease.

Of course, for us writers, writing well is the easiest way to live with more ease. I should know because I've tried—I've practiced meditation, sometimes very intensely, for over 25 years now. I've been in long retreats in the Thai forest, and I've been consistently dedicated in my heart, and fairly dedicated bodily, for a very long time. But up until recently, I would have to admit that when it comes down to it all that meditation practice could never make me feel so good and so right, and so

quickly come to that state, than writing well could. For most of my life, writing well has been far and above the most effective way, bang for buck or result for effort, to feel well.

Probably you guys know the feeling. You've worked in the morning. You fell into what you were doing, and you got really into it. The time flew by, in a good way, and it went well. The rest of the day, everywhere you go it's like you are resting inside an interior armchair basking in the light.

Ahh... *Writer's Nirvana*: there's nothing quite like "having written well today" for a writer.

But although a writer is going to find relative peace of mind most quickly through writing well—that doesn't mean there isn't a whole lot about how to attain *Writer's Nirvana* that can be learned from meditation. Actually, a surprising number of writers these days practice meditation to support their craft—but that is not what this eBook is about. This book is about some very important and fundamental lessons we can draw from meditation: about attention, the framing of attention, and the hindrances and powers at work in

us which are intimately tied to how well it is all going to go for us.

This eBook will help you understand and recognize these factors as well as explain how to balance them effectively. It is an eBook that is primarily about attention itself. The next and final book— before it's time for the bootcamp (yeah!)— will continue this theme but get very specific about writerly steps and actions you can take that will insure that writing stays framed in your attention and you do not get dispersed by all the clutter of duties, emails, committees, teaching, and people asking everything of you all the time: in other words, it's not about attention in general but attention for us academics. How do you juggle writing into a busy life?

See you now, and see you then,

Alan

## WRITING IS AN ART OF ATTENTION

Good days, bad days... we writers have to accept that there are rhythms and patterns to our energy and creativity that must be respected, and can't be rode roughshod over: all the ups and downs that we have to be prepared to face.

And yet, it is also obvious that the downs can spiral in on each other, create feedback patterns, and get us either in a dark place, or just a place that where we notice that *the work is not getting done*. And we know it's not because of random winds: it's because of patterns in how we are relating to external circumstances and to our selves.

And if that is true, then the other side is also true, as many of you are fortunate enough to already know: when the patterns shift the other way, things are lighter, brighter, more fun and satisfying and meaningful, and the work is getting done.

And then,

*seeing it getting done is a most powerful condition to feed back into the mix.*

So we know on some level, either because we got in a rut or we are on a run, that it's not just random— there must be something we can do about this.

Now this is precisely the same thing that meditators find in their practice. We could even say—or I certainly will—that meditation is a laboratory for exploring causes and conditions that get us into skillful or unskillful mind states, and that what is learned about that in meditation is also true elsewhere.

Now, I'm not going to encourage you to practice meditation—although many, many writers do these days (a subject for a blog post sometime)—but instead I want to point out

certain things that are learned in meditation and how they apply to writing, and so how you can start applying that insight right now.

Writing is an art of attention. Sometimes that attention is absorbed into the act of writing, and sometimes it rebels in many different ways. Becoming intimately acquainted with attention can make a world of difference in how easy it is to frame writing prominently in attention and keep it there (which is, after all, the necessary condition for the source of livelihood for an academic writer).

We know the feeling of being “in the zone” and we know “resistance.” But let’s do better. Let’s look into these more closely, and even start to see some cause and effect relations that are useful.

## THE 5 HINDRANCES

In meditation, it soon becomes apparent that what we in colloquial speech call “resistance” is actually at least 5 different things. They can sometimes blend together or morph into each



other. And, you could cut it up differently—you could have 10 perhaps—but these 5 pretty much cover it.

When we are having trouble, what exactly is going on? The act of recognizing it precisely, rather than being confused, foggy, and overwhelmed by it, is a powerful first step to overcoming it. So, when you are having trouble, which one of these is it?

1. **Desire for something else.** When you are dreaming of going to the beach or eating ice cream or thinking how much nicer it would be to sink into the couch over there—you are wanting something not present to be present, and it's taking you out of it.
2. **Aversion to what is here.** When you are really not ok with a little dryness in the eyes, the feeling of wrestling to understand a complicated theory, the bodily feelings sitting down to work, or whatever it is, you can't stick with it because you are fighting it, afraid, and averse.
3. **Restlessness.** When you can't settle down physically, you're a jumping bean, or the mind is a monkey doing

emails, checking Facebook, following the first search terms that pop in the mind, or doing another thing that will “get you ready to write.” Again, you can’t get the work done.

4. **Sloth, Torpor, Laziness, Sleepiness, Inertia.** Some of these are the meditation words typically used. I love “sloth”! Nice word. But of course you know it’s not so nice when you feel like you’re really slogging through something, hardly have any motivation, or else just can’t keep awake, can’t even get up and get started. It’s game over basically.
  
5. **And, last but far from least, Doubt:** you doubt whether what you are writing is good enough, you doubt whether you yourself are good enough, you doubt whether your mentors and the whole enterprise is right for you. This is a hard one because when you are having a doubt thought, typically, it is not seen simply as a thought—it’s true at that moment, because you think it. So whatever the thought is saying, it’s true, it’s believed, and moreover you are inside the thought as it is happening, so you don’t even know you

are doubting while you are doing it. You can only wake up out of it later, feeling crappy.

So when people talk about resistance it's usually one of these 5 things—and I know what you are thinking now—“but I have 2 or 3 of them simultaneously!”

I know, I know—the famous “multiple hindrance attack.”

This stuff can be tough. I bet you can look at this list and realize that the presence of the 5 hindrances is, on the level of attention, the main barrier to getting the work done and having it come out with the clarity and creativity that you know is possible.

Not only that, there probably isn't any activity in life that takes skill and dedication that you can think of in which it is not precisely these 5 hindrances that are blocking the way to success. So, overcoming the 5 hindrances is pretty much 98% of the game here, not only in writing but in life.

So it is really to our advantage to get clear about this. And there are things you can do which are not the most obvious, but perhaps the most basic. We often want to jump ahead to solving

our problems without including the most basic level at which they are operating. So, working with the hindrances specifically is a great tool in your arsenal, and here's the two fundamental steps:

1. Knowing what is happening. The whole point about getting more granular with “resistance” and understanding the 5 hindrances is because this knowledge becomes a frame for our attention. Instead of only focusing on the things we need to do— like “work harder,” “get more done,” “not be so lazy,” “stop procrastinating”— or having vague senses of “this sucks,” “I’m having trouble”— when our attention is framed properly we can be on the lookout for specific things, become aware of what exactly is the trouble, and that knowledge allows us to proceed more skillfully. Knowledge is power: just knowing what is happening can often reduce its influence because it’s not running rampant, unseen. But just as powerful, is that it allows you to:

2. Work smarter, not harder— once we have awareness of what is actually happening, we can take aim at the specific hindrance that is predominant and not just issue vague

marching orders to ourselves which may or may not work. And knowing how to do that is also something that we can learn from meditators, because they have been studying the operation of the hindrances for quite a while.

## THE 5 POWERS

These are the 5 powers of meditation, but they are also the 5 things that are present when the hindrances are subdued or absent. In fact we could say that our experience of life is a constant ebb and flow between the 5 hindrances and the 5 powers. So when we are “in the zone” it’s because these 5 powers are present (and this is a knowledge we can use—read on.)

1. **Aimed attention.** Attention is directed toward a specific object.
2. **Sustained attention.** Attention is continuously absorbing into the object. A metaphor used is your aim of a fork toward a piece of food is aimed attention, and the sticking in and holding the food is the sustained attention. We can

understand it as aimed attention is our directing of the attention, and sustained attention is keeping it there, sticking with it, and precisely experiencing it. We could also say aimed attention is forking the food, and sustained attention is slowly, mindfully, savoring it.

3. **Thrill, fun, zest, enjoyment**—a common translation is “ecstasy” which is on one end of the spectrum of fun, but the main point is that this power that arises is not dull or neutral—we’re having a good time and are really “into it.”

4. **Contentment and Satisfaction**—when the five hindrances are subdued it’s not only fun, but satisfying, and brings a deep peace in the heart. With writing, this often lasts past the writing session. I’m sure many of you writers out there know this: there is nothing quite like the peace of the writer who has written well. Everything feels right. Life is good.

5. **Collectedness and One-pointedness**— it’s like you are all gathered up, things are not frayed, you do not feel

divided but one, and the object begins to become the sole object of fascination and other things just fall away.

These are our great 5 powers, which spontaneously arise when the hindrances are gone. These are the 5 powers that, each in their particular way, subdue a particular one of the 5 hindrances, which is the really interesting thing for us. These are the 5 powers that enable us to write well, write beyond our wildest dreams.

The good, good news is: these 5 powers are what you can use to counter specific hindrances. So, step one is: know what is going on. Step two is apply the antidote.

And I'll start to explain that with a little story, about a little 12 year old boy.

I'll never forget my first quarter of 7<sup>th</sup> grade math. I wasn't doing so well, like a B, and my teacher recognized I could do a lot better and took me aside and asked me what's going on. I told her, "I don't like math." Being a skillful teacher, she said just the

right thing, "You know, if you try to like it, you'll do a lot better. Pretend it's fun."

The idea that I could change my own mind was something that had never occurred within the brain of that 12 year old before. Of course, it's not just the words but the teacher herself who must have inspired confidence in them. But whatever the reason, I believed her, and like magic, it all turned around and I got "H" the rest of the year, which is higher than A. I just changed my attitude and it changed everything.

I was lucky to have that magic experience because it created an even stronger belief in this power to change your attitude and change your life: that there are fundamental shifts in mindset which make everything better. First, I must have had some belief in her. That belief led me to try what she recommended. Then, I saw the results myself and was convinced. Which led me to continue to work in this way, and it probably led to me being able to be a Professor and everything. Wow—I'm so grateful.

And, rats, I don't even remember her name.



Now we might not be so open now as that 12 year old, so that might be the first work that has to be done— to take the first steps with an open mind, willing to trust and take a look into these matters. Then, the evidence itself will be enough to carry you the rest of the way.

So here is the way the 5 powers line up with the 5 hindrances, which might not be what you expect, but just start with believing me, and then you'll get to the evidence yourself in your life. And then we'll go into what this means:

1. Desire for what is elsewhere: countered by **one-pointedness**
2. Aversion for what is here: countered by **fun, zest**
3. Sloth, Inertia: countered by **aimed attention.**
4. Restlessness and remorse: countered by **contentment and well-being**
5. Doubt: countered by **sustained attention.**

You'll notice now that my 7<sup>th</sup> grade Math teacher knew the precise attention adjustment for my problem. Now before we jump ahead and say "This is too simple," let's take a look at how to use this...

When you feel like you don't like your work, you don't like your research topic, you don't like your writing, you don't like your life, what you might do is tell yourself "work harder," "be better" or other similar vague and unskillful commands. There is a very specific hindrance arising, aversion, but the response is not focused enough on exactly what is needed and is not as skillful as it could be. Then, if you start to lose out to the hindrance, no matter how many commands you issue to yourself, you start to feel the problem is you, you suck, you suck at writing and you suck at life. Now the aversion is running really high!

So I think this is getting across now: simple as it is, knowing the hindrances specifically, and knowing what to emphasize in relationship to them, is a far more skillful way to go.

So one thing you can do in the instance of **aversion** is emphasize the fun. It may mean you need to have more fun in your life in general, and that you should be making more time for it. It probably also means you must have more fun in what you are doing. Actually make a specific point of having fun, or even “faking it till your making it,” try to maintain an emphasis on fun, zest, interest, thrill, as much as you can, while you are writing. Associate with other writers who are having fun or who make writing fun.

Now, it may seem to some that you can't just pretend something's fun when it's not—but that is simply not true. It's a belief. You have to try and see before you can make a conclusion about it. At the very least, you can see perhaps that it is possible to attempt to detect fun even in tiny shreds and scraps and make a note of it. Really take it in. Notice it. That attention will supply power to it. Like I said, what we are speaking of here is writing as an art of attention, so at the very least, this can mean being on the look out for any traces of fun.

It can also mean, and this is a deeper thing meditators come to, that something has to change. The hindrance is trying to show you something. The hindrances are not just enemies, they are also your friends and teachers. You may need to make some changes in how you are approaching writing, your topic and subject matter, in order to ensure you are having some kind of fun, thrill, zest, etc.

But the most important thing of all is aversion tells you what you need to emphasize specifically to get your writing engine in gear, and that means also not emphasizing all kinds of other thoughts which are not doing you any good.

Similarly, if it is **desire for what is elsewhere** and desire for treats, comforts, sensations of various sorts like lounging about, eating, sex, etc., well maybe you need a bit more of that in your life at other times, but it's obviously going to be hard to get into your writing when you are wishing that you were doing something else. Now this seems related to aversion, and it certainly is, but deciding which one is more predominant is simply a matter of deciding which is stronger: how much you are not

liking writing, and how much is your attention is on something else that you would like. That tells you what to focus on. And if its desire for what is elsewhere then what you need to emphasize is gathered-ness, collectedness, and one-pointed attention. You need to go the extra mile to focus on one thing and one thing only. It might mean having only one project, having only one window open on the desktop, and it most definitely means practicing, doggedly if necessary, bringing attention back again and again to the task at hand every time it wanders, and tolerating no wandering either.

And remember, this is all about getting specific here, other times it might be fine to be wandering and roving about, that can fuel your inspiration, but just not at the times when images of ice cream cones keep dancing in your brain and your work is not getting done. That's when attention has to emphasize "one."

And if you know of way to write a lot while having sex, let me know cause I don't know how.

(on second thought—don't tell me. I'm fine over here.)

Ah... moving on...

It can make a big difference if you identify that contentment needs to increase, in order to counter remorse and **restlessness**. Attention needs to be framed on contentment, it needs to detect it and feed it. That might mean something as simple as finding it in your experience, and emphasizing it through attention, to something more involved like saying: that's enough work on the book—I have to take up tennis again, or be with people more, or whatever it takes to be more content. Then, that email-checking facebooking google-searching stuff will die down. It's great to issue the commands to stop all that stuff, but the follow through will be so much easier if you emphasize precisely the one thing that directly counters it.

Let's face it—we're all works in progress. We can't focus on a million different things that are going wrong and try to fix them all. It won't work. We need to pick. We need to know what to focus on. We need to become skillful with our attention.

So if its **sloth and inertia**—you need to reach for aimed attention. Set a timer and write for 15 minutes, or 5 minutes. Hook up with a friend and write for 20 minutes. Find groups of writers who do short focused bursts of writing. Don't solve all your problems from now to the future. Aim your attention very specifically for just a few minutes. You know you can do that, but something says "that won't work, I need to write three articles in the next year, or whatever." That is unskillful thought. That thought is focusing on the wrong thing at the wrong time. The antidote to inertia is to aim the attention on writing.

You can feel all lazed and confused, and say "I gotta work harder" I need to work 4 hours a day for the next 4 months and get this thing done—but those thoughts aren't the right ones right in the midst of a sloth and inertia hindrance attack. **It is aiming the attention that is needed.** So direct the attention to something, anything. When you've snapped out it, today, or maybe after a few weeks of small, focused writing sessions, then you can start to think about those other long term things, but it won't do you much good when you are in the grips of sloth and torpor.

Or you've become aware that it's **doubt** assailing you. Now there are many ways to deal with this— in keeping with how all pervasive, cleverly vexing, and many-headed doubt is. Hopefully we have developed some skill in reframing our doubt thoughts (something I will get into in the last eBook), but just imagine how much more powerful your approach to doubt could be if not only can you counter doubt thoughts with other thoughts, but you know the specific frame of attention that counters doubt: sustained attention.

In meditation, sustained attention means as you meditate, you are constantly checking in on attention to see if it is remaining with the object, kind of like silently asking, over and over is the attention, say, on the breath now? What about now? What about now? And it means also looking into what exactly, in as much detail and vividness, is precisely happening with the object. So as you meditate you keep checking in and drawing it out in time, emphasizing the continuity and detail. In writing, this can mean making a deliberate effort to continually check one's progress, check how much time one is spending, and making sure it is



regular, repeated, and sustained from day to day to day over the long run. It means taking a sincere interest in what is going on with your writing life and experience, knowing it vividly, intimately, and precisely. In a sense this kind of reflecting on writing, the whole process in these eBooks themselves, is the itself a powerful antidote to doubt.

So with aimed attention we sprint, have timed sessions, etc., and with sustained attention we focus on continuity and awareness of what is happening over the long run. Your doubts will disappear when writing is sustained steadily over time, when you are checking on that continuously, and learning very intimately about how you tick as a writer.

So.... there is whole lot more that can be said about all this. I hope to get into all the nooks and crannies of all this with you some day. Talking together, and responding to particular issues, would probably get more of that across than writing it all out. But there is actually a ton of stuff here you can go ahead and use right now:

1. **Writing is an art of attention.** And how you frame your attention is going to powerfully influence how it all goes.
2. **Don't be vague about "resistance."** Know exactly what is going on, and practice in that knowing. Memorize the 5 hindrances and get to know them very well. The more you get to know them, the faster and more clearly you will recognize them, and so therefore the sooner you will begin applying the specific antidote that is called for.
3. **Work Smarter, Not Harder:** Recognize the 5 powers of attention that enable you to do well in anything, and in life in general in fact. Focus on cultivating those specific qualities that are called for based on the specific hindrances that are present.

And there's a fourth: while its great to solve problems and counter the hindrances, and that might be what's called for right now, *be willing to abandon the hindrances in favor of the powers.* In fact, I want you to promise me this. I wouldn't be sharing this with you now if I thought everybody was going to see

this only as a problem-solver eBook. Obviously that is what it seems to be. So...

Let me tell you what I mean:

I am giving this information to you because it's gonna help and it's nice and it's the right thing to do. But you have to do a favor for me in return:

Don't only see this information as an antidote for ailments. By which I mean don't only focus on ailments. This is **really important** and something, actually, it is my true mission and purpose to get across:

Focus on the 5 powers for their own sake. Recognize when they are present. Pay attention to them.

What we pay attention to, grows in power. All these mental hindrances: they have no real power of their own. They run on our attention and belief. And when we shut off the power supply,

they may protest and cause a big fuss at first, but that's just because they are losing ground, and are fading away.

I know we have problems, and they need fixing sometimes, and I am all about getting out of trouble and back on course. But once we are on course, that is where most of the attention needs to go. Once we've got things going, we keep them going mostly by repeating the right conditions and keeping the powers of attention on what is working.

But, there is a little part of us that is so much more fascinated with problems than with solutions and what works. So please do see this eBook not only as way to get some insight into what is hindering us, but as an invitation to bring our attention more often, more consistently, to what is working also.

Eventually you will come to the point as a writer where you simply don't have any interest in problems anymore, your attention is fixed on a sweeter song, and then how will those problems get any power from you?

Keep the 5 powers in mind.

## EPILOGUE

The final installment of this particular eBook series, *Writing as an Art of Attention*, is coming, and it is a sort of part 2 for this one. We will leave the more distilled sense of attention here and get into specific writerly actions and steps we can take to move us into a state of momentum in our writing and not distracted and frazzled by all the million things and people that disperse our attention: a particularly acute problem of the specifically academic writer.

So the final eBook, before some of us enter the bootcamp, will be packed with some simple, practical steps that answer the question: How do I keep writing framed in my attention, in a way that is appropriate to its true importance in my life?

For more on how to implement these insights in your writing life, consider joining the Creative Academic Writing Bootcamp.

A session is starting soon at [www.academicmuse.org/bootcamp/](http://www.academicmuse.org/bootcamp/)

**Alan Klima** is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Davis and the author of the award-winning book from Princeton University Press, *The Funeral Casino*, and the writer, director, and cinematographer of *Ghosts and Numbers*. A new experimental book is coming soon entitled *Ethnography # 9*.

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