Hindrances Can Wake Us Up

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:03:04

This morning in the instruction period I described a little bit about working with mind states in general. This evening I'd like to explore some particular mind states that tend to catch us up.

The Buddha was very kind to us in all of these lists that he made. One of the lists that he offered to us was a particular set of mind states, mental energies that tend to hinder our ability to be in the present moment, hinder our concentration. This list is called the hindrances. The five hindrances that the Buddha identified as being states that tend to get in our way, tend to make it difficult for us to meditate, to be mindful, to settle into concentration, are sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt.

The very name "hindrances"—I think because of the understanding that these states tend to get in the way of our being in the present moment, we may tend to think that if they are present, we cannot be present in the present moment. That they inherently hinder our ability to connect with experience in the present moment. What they do mostly is tend to take us away. There's a lot of habitual energy around these hindrances that tends to catch us, to have us get caught in their beliefs and their delusions, and tends to obscure our ability to be present—but does not inherently obscure our ability to be mindful of them.

In fact, in the Satipatthana Sutta, the instructions that we have of record that offer what the Buddha had to say about mindfulness and practicing mindfulness meditation, he included this list as good objects for meditation. In the fourth foundation of mindfulness, he included a whole section on how to practice with the hindrances.

One of the keys around the hindrances is recognizing that they are hindrances, they get in our way, only when we are not mindful of them. When we can bring mindfulness to them, they actually become the path. They become the soil, the compost, in which our mindfulness can strengthen.

These states, the hindrances, tend to be experienced as unpleasant, as dukkha, as suffering. In the First Noble Truth, the Buddha said, what do we need to do with suffering? Suffering happens. And we need to understand it. That was his instruction to us around suffering: understand suffering.

With these hindrances, if we apply that instruction, we need to understand these hindrances. Not intellectually. This understanding in the First Noble Truth that the Buddha was talking about is not an intellectual understanding, but an experiential understanding, a knowing, a meeting, a being with. An understanding that arises through connection with the experience, not through thinking about it.

And so we become explorers, we become naturalists, we investigate, we get to know our states of

mind—and in particular these hindrances when they arise.

I like the analogy of a naturalist in terms of investigation in our practice. The way a naturalist works: a naturalist will go out into nature and just observe. Take their time observing what happens over time. They walk through the woods, identify perhaps different plants or different animals to observe, and over time they continue to go back over and over again to look at them. The understanding arises with a naturalist as the observation gains some momentum, as the naturalist over time begins to see: oh, this is what happens to this plant as it grows. This is what this animal does at this time of year, and this is what they do at this time of year. These are the calls they make when they're mating. These are the calls they make when they've found food. These are the calls they make when they're alarmed. Over time, just through being in the environment, they learn. The knowledge grows.

Very similarly, as we—with patience, with kindness, with persistence, a gentle patience and persistence—meet these states, we get to know: how do they come about? What are the conditions that lead to them? What are they like when they're here? What are the conditions that support their falling away?

As naturalists we observe, not with the agenda to get rid of the hindrances, but with the interest to understand.

One of the principles, one of the interesting things about the way the practice works, is that things shift and change as we observe them. They shift and change not because we want them to, not because we are observing them in a particular way in order to make something happen to them, but they shift and change because as we hang out with our experiences, much as with the naturalist, wisdom and understanding begin to grow.

As we notice what happens as sense desire arises over and over and over again, wisdom begins to grow. We begin to understand something about the nature of sense desire. Or we begin to understand something about the nature of fear, anxiety, restlessness, doubt. As we begin to understand that nature, wisdom strengthens, and it is wisdom that creates the transformation. Wisdom transforms our mind. Understanding transforms our minds.

In exploring these hindrances with you, I'd like to talk about each one.

I'd like to encourage this attitude of interest, investigation, and curiosity. These hindrances will arise—probably every single one of them in every single one of you. They're going to be with us, and they're going to be with us for a while. So it might be useful, rather than having an adversarial relationship with them, to get curious about them.

For a while in my practice, I definitely had the sense that the hindrances were obstructions. They were in the way, things to be gotten rid of in order to get down to the real practice. I believed the real practice didn't begin while I was experiencing anger or sense desire or sleepiness—that it was not possible for

practice to begin until those went away.

Through many three-month courses and many times of basically having the hindrances so in my face—one retreat was what I call my self-hatred retreat—it was like surrender. Okay, I guess self-hatred is what I have to pay attention to. And as I surrendered to it, getting interested in it, that's when I began to see that deep, transforming understanding can arise right in the midst of observing these hindrances. Watching self-hatred, deep understanding about its ephemeral, empty nature as a mind state became possible.

So the hindrances are not in the way of practice. They are our practice. They don't tend to feel good, and so we don't like them. But that's just ill will—another hindrance.

These hindrances do at times tend to come together in what we sometimes call a multiple hindrance attack. You have a feeling of sleepiness, and then you hate that feeling of sleepiness, and then doubt arises: "Oh, I'm sleepy." There you've got three of them all at once. They can tend to come together, but they are workable. They are our path. Transformation can happen right in the midst of them. I'd really like to encourage a sense of curiosity, of interest to understand them. With that perspective, wisdom will grow.

So, sense desire. This one's pretty basic. Certain things are pleasant; we tend to like them, to want them, to want more of them. This movement of being in the presence of pleasure and not really clearly understanding whatever it is—this pleasant phenomenon—as being an ephemeral, impermanent experience. Our delusion, our mind thinks, "That is what's going to make me happy."

It's actually quite amazing when we start to really see the way sense desire works. While it's operating and while we believe it, we really do think that extra cookie is going to make us happy. Watch it for yourself. In that moment, in the throes of being caught and enthralled by sense desire, we have absolute conviction that that cookie is going to do it for us. We are not aware of just how impermanent and unreliable that bit of pleasure is.

Caught in the state of sense desire, sense desire believes that having that pleasant thing is what's going to make me happy. And sense desire also believes that if I don't get that thing, I will be unhappy. So sense desire tends to keep us from being present because we are caught in this story, caught in this fantasy.

Sometimes it's an idea in our mind. We construct something. It may be something actually there in the dining room, or it may be an idea in our minds—something from the world enters into our mind and we start planning the perfect job. "That's what I'm going to do when I leave." It becomes this kind of enduring fantasy. We can get hooked into sense desires of our own construction as well.

In that time, we are caught in the fantasy, caught in the belief that having that thing is what will make us happy. We are not noticing that in the very moment of having that sense desire and being pulled out of the present moment, there's an inherent sense of offness, of dissatisfaction happening. Essentially, with sense desire, we are willing to give up happiness here and now—the sense of ease and peace here and

now—for the possibility of a fleeting moment of happiness, maybe, in the future.

Sense desire has this powerful delusive force to it, making us believe that getting that thing will make us happy. What sense desire will not tell us is that if the sense desire goes away, there won't be a problem.

So this is the exploration with mindfulness. When sense desire arises and you notice it, you become aware of it, see if you can take your attention out of the thing you are reaching for, whatever it is that you want, and turn towards the experience of sense desire itself.

That experience of sense desire itself doesn't feel very good. It feels off, it feels like something's wrong. We get the visceral sense of why we follow through on it—in effect, because it doesn't feel good. And when we get that thing that we want, that feeling of dissatisfaction goes away for a moment. That's one of the hooks that sense desire has for us.

When we get what we want, we get a double hit of pleasure. We get the pleasure of the thing that we want, and we get the pleasure of the sense desire going away. I'd like to propose to you that the bigger part of the pleasure, the biggest hook actually for us, is the sense desire going away—that relief that we get when sense desire disappears. It's huge.

When we begin to turn towards the experience of sense desire, look at it, feel it, get to know it, and we watch it for long enough that we actually begin to see it, maybe we even begin to see it dissipate or even see it vanish, then we will know for ourselves that sense desire has been like pulling the wool over our eyes, making us believe that the only way we can be happy is to get what we want.

In one three-month course, I was doing the practice of sense restraint—not looking at people, keeping my gaze down. And I found that I really wanted to look at people. For many weeks I was walking around with blinders on. "I'm not going to look. I am not going to look. They told me not to look. I'm not going to look." So it was kind of like I was doing it because I was told to. At that time there was more of an encouragement towards sense restraint, and so I was forcing myself to do it. As I felt all that sense desire arise, it was like, "No, no, no, I'm not going to follow. Nope, nope." There was a lot of repression of the feeling of wanting.

After several weeks of this, finally I got it. "Ah, this is sense desire. This is desire. Maybe I should look at it. Maybe I should watch it as opposed to just trying to force myself to stay unmoving." And so I began to do that. I began to watch the desire. I didn't follow through on it—I kept my gaze down—but rather than having it be a forceful thing, I got interested in the desire.

It was actually fascinating to begin to see how it appeared, when it appeared. I would be walking, minding my own business, nobody around. Sense desire was very far away. The desire to look at people—when people weren't around, the desire to look at people didn't exist. That was pretty clear. And then as I was walking, somebody would pop into my peripheral vision, and boom, sense desire would arise in that instant. I was seeing it coming into being.

As I felt it, I felt like a pull, like a magnetic pull, to look at that person. It took some energy not to look up, but while I was feeling it, I was interested in the experience of that pull. Then it got even stronger. It strengthened as the person would walk a little bit up in front of me, and all it would have taken was a little flick of the eyes to look up and look at them. Oh, it got so strong. And there, just noticing, feeling the feeling.

I was doing walking meditation out here. A person would cross in front of me—oh, very strong when they were right there. And then they'd go up the steps and into the door. The desire disappeared. It vanished in an instant. I felt like I'd been released from a vice grip.

The recognition of just how powerful that experience of wanting had been—around something as simple as looking at somebody. How painful it had been to be caught in that vice grip around the simplicity of wanting to look at somebody. The mind reels at how much dukkha there is for the many kinds of wanting we have that are more potent for us than looking at somebody.

Seeing this, being curious about watching this moment—the moment of seeing it arise, seeing it strengthen, feeling it, then seeing it disappear—that was a powerful moment. Not only for the understanding of how much suffering it was, but for the understanding of the happiness that came from the release of the wanting.

In that moment, the delusion of wanting—the story it was telling me that I would be happy if I looked—was seen for the complete hoax it was.

So, watching sense desire, getting familiar with it. As we explore turning towards sense desire, there's a kind of middle way that we practice around both sense desire and ill will: we neither repress it nor indulge it. It can be quite challenging to walk that middle line. When we open to sense desire without repressing it, sometimes it can slip into, "Oh, I'm just going to feel this desire," and we end up indulging it. We might find ourselves in a fantasy, just indulging that fantasy. So it takes some honest discernment to recognize when we are slipping into indulgence rather than really paying attention to the desire itself.

In general, I would say that if you're noticing desire and there's a lot of pleasant experience, you may be indulging it—not really connecting to the feeling of the desire itself. The desire itself has a little bit of an off feeling to it. We have to learn to be honest with ourselves about whether we are indulging. If we find that a particular kind of sense desire has so much power over us, there may be some strategies that help. Let yourself not be in the presence of that thing you desire, if possible. Just keep yourself away from it. Or you may be able to turn your attention elsewhere, put your attention on something else—especially if it's a sense desire of your own construction in your own mind, a fantasy kind of sense desire. Let yourself set it aside and put your attention on something neutral in your experience. Perhaps the breath, perhaps sound. Just keep saying no to that pattern if you find that trying to pay attention to it just loops you into it over and over again.

Then there is ill will. Ill will is the flip side of sense desire, so much of what I've said about sense desire applies here as well. Ill will tends to arise when we are in the presence of something unpleasant. We don't like it; we want to get rid of it, fix it, change it, control it. There are many different flavors of mental states that can come into this category of ill will, including anger, frustration, hatred, irritation, annoyance, rage, and dislike. It's a range of experience, from extremely strong to quite subtle.

The delusion around ill will is that the mind of ill will believes getting rid of that thing is what will make us happy—or getting ourselves away from the thing is what will make us happy. Fear can also come into this category. Fear may arise as the sense of, "I don't like that thing; I need to get away from it."

Again, one of the main ways to work with ill will is to see if you can take your attention out of the thing you are averse to and place the attention on the aversion itself, on the ill will itself. It's very helpful, for both sense desire and ill will, to recognize how these mind states impact the body.

There are often many thoughts accompanying both sense desire and ill will. With sense desire, the thoughts may run along the lines of, "How can I get that thing? I'm going to be so happy. It's going to be so great if I get that thing." With ill will, it may be, "If I get rid of this thing... How can I fix this? How can I change this? How can I control it? I can't be happy unless I figure this out." These kinds of thoughts tend to run when we are caught in the throes of sense desire or ill will. And the thoughts themselves are like fuel for those states of mind. If those thoughts are running and we're not aware of them as simply thoughts, it's as if we've got our foot on the gas pedal, fueling the belief in those thoughts and in that state of mind.

As we begin to explore sense desire and ill will, one of the most helpful things is this: as you turn towards the sense desire or ill will itself, see if you can let go of the thoughts, the story associated with it. Take your attention away from the thing that serves as the trigger and see if you can come into the experience of the ill will or sense desire itself.

It can be particularly helpful to look at this in the body. Ill will in the body often manifests as contracted feelings in the throat, tension around the heart, heat, or pressure in the case of anger. There are many bodily sensations that accompany ill will, anger, rage, and irritation. Get familiar with those. When we attend to the physical sensations associated with the emotion, with the ill will, we are in the present moment. We are mindful in the present moment. There can be some level of balance, of wise mindfulness with the experience—as opposed to being caught by the beliefs and stories of ill will.

So, turning to the body. As we explore that, as we put our attention in the body and take our attention out of the fuel of the thoughts, we begin to see things shift and change. We may experience some relief or release around these states of mind.

at least for me, it feels like bringing attention to aversive states of mind produces an almost immediate relief as I put my attention on the aversion. The aversive states tend to be really unpleasant, and when we recognize them, something shifts.

With sense desire, our minds can be caught in the fantasy or the thought, "Oh, that's going to be so great." Our mind is deluding us into thinking that we're happy or feeling good when this sense desire is going on. We're so confused that we don't even notice the unpleasantness of the sense desire itself. But with aversion, with ill will, it's pretty obvious. It doesn't feel good, usually. It doesn't feel good.

And so putting our attention on the ill will itself, sometimes we can recognize, "Oh, that's what's happening right now. Anger is happening right now." And there can be just a little bit of space around the experience. We don't feel quite so caught up or revved up in the ill will. Right in the very turning towards it with mindfulness, there can be a little bit of release, a little bit of relief. A little bit of that wisdom can begin to operate.

With ill will, with aversion, with anger—these states can often get very strong. If they're not seen, they can very quickly spiral out of control. Dislike can quickly turn to irritation, which can quickly turn to anger, which can quickly turn to hatred or rage. It can mushroom really quickly. And sometimes it gets so strong so quickly that there can be overwhelm. It becomes very difficult to bring mindfulness to it. Or if we try to bring mindfulness to it, we find ourselves hooked. We turn towards it, thinking, "Okay, I'm going to try to be present for this anger," and then boom, we're right back in the story. It becomes nearly impossible to let go of the story.

I found this happening for myself around anger at one stretch of time—a particular person that I was angry with. Whenever they came up in my mind, I would get so angry. I tried being mindful of it, but I discovered pretty quickly that when I tried being mindful, almost immediately I was back in the story. The intention to be mindful, the mindfulness itself, was not quite strong enough to meet the power of that rage.

As I began to see that turning my attention to it with mindfulness wasn't so helpful, I began choosing to put my attention elsewhere. For some reason this often happened while I was walking. The mind would be drifting, and it would land on a thought of this person and spin into rage. So what I would do when I was walking was simply put my attention on something neutral, which happened to be my feet on the ground. Just noticing, "Okay, yep, there's that anger. Yep, okay, I see you."

This shift to turn away from a hindrance cannot be done with aversion itself. It can't be done with, "Oh, there's that anger. I hate that anger. I can't be with it. I need to push it away." It has to be a more respectful kind of recognition and acknowledgment. The way I did this with my anger was almost like I bowed to it. "I see you. I see you, and I see that you're asking for attention. And I can't do it right now. So I will come back to you when my mindfulness is stronger."

That kind of respect and acknowledgment—it's like saying, "Ah, not now. I see you, not now." That whole conversation in my mind got collapsed down to just the phrase: "Not now. Not now."

I worked with that anger in that way for a long time—months. Months I worked with the anger in that

way. And actually, that simple tool, "not now," in that particular case was really powerful. What happened was this: I was mostly working with this particular anger in daily life, and I would notice it. At first it was happening daily—"Oh, not now. Okay, not now"—multiple times a day, even. And over time I began recognizing another one of the tools that the Buddha points to around the hindrances.

Noticing when it's not there. Notice the absence of the hindrances.

And so I began noticing that the bouts of anger were getting further apart. Perhaps every few days I would have this experience and think, "Oh, not now." And then every few weeks. At some point, it occurred to me that I had not experienced that anger for a very long time. And in that moment of remembering—"Oh, gosh, that anger's not there"—of course the person popped into my mind. But the anger still did not pop into my mind. It was kind of like, "Whoa, where did it go?" It was startling in a way.

Since that moment, that anger at that person has never returned. It disappeared when I wasn't looking. It disappeared because I was willing to meet it, bow to it, and set it aside without aversion. Slowly over time the pattern got deconditioned. And so that tool also can be very powerful—a simple recognition, acknowledgement, and then turning to the breath or feet on the ground or hearing.

When we cannot meet our difficult mind states directly, wisdom can also grow in the simple recognizing and setting aside.

Then there's sloth and torpor—sleepiness, low energy, thick mind, dull mind. Often the mind is agitated around this particular hindrance because there are beliefs operating, particularly in meditation. If sleepiness arises in meditation, if low energy or thick mind arises, we often have the belief, "I can't meditate while this is happening. It's not possible to meditate while sleepiness is happening. I have to increase the energy. I have to become not sleepy in order to meditate." That's a belief that we have.

What I'd like to suggest is that if you have enough energy to have the thought, "I'm too sleepy to meditate," then you might have enough energy to be aware of the sleepiness itself, of the low energy itself. Perhaps play with it.

One of the confusions in the mind, I think, or one of the beliefs around meditation, is that we're supposed to be able to see things clearly. And when the mind is sleepy, things are very hazy—it's hard to touch what the experience is. From the standpoint of being able to clearly recognize and clearly connect with this sensation and that sound, that may not be available when you're sleepy.

I sometimes use the analogy of mindfulness being like a mirror. It reflects. It reflects whatever's there—beautiful things, unpleasant things, ugly things. The reflecting power of the mirror is not changed by what it reflects.

Then think about that mirror in the bathroom after a shower, when the mirror is coated with steam. You might be able to see a kind of hazy outline of yourself, maybe. We might think, "Perhaps I need to clear the

mirror. The mirror is not doing its job. I need to wipe it off so that I can see myself, so the mirror can do its job." But the mirror is actually doing its job perfectly. It is reflecting every drop of water on the mirror. It's just not doing the job we want it to do.

And very much when the mind is sleepy, that's what's going on. There's a state of mind—foggy, dull, low energy, droopy, drifty, dreamy. The mind is not perhaps able to choose, "Oh, I want to look at that thing," or "I want to observe this or investigate that." But perhaps, what I've seen in my own experience, is that if I align myself in the moment with what's actually happening in the mind and get interested in what's most obvious—which is that state itself—there's often enough energy to know something about it.

And again, it's not a precise thing. The state of sleepiness, of low energy, is not something we can say, "This is where it is, this is the experience of it." It's a broad state of mind.

And we can get familiar with that. I've had a lot of practice with this. It was a couple of years that pretty much every time I went to retreat, the mind was very dull, very sleepy, very low energy. And again, it was like, surrender. This is what's happening. I learned so much from that time—so much about over-efforting.

Sometimes I think, especially as the retreat goes on, that a dull mind, a sleepy mind, an exhausted mind sometimes results because we've been trying too hard. And so sometimes it's a pointer to a way to pay attention with a little less energy. Can you meet the state of low energy?

Actually, I found that using the phrase "low energy" instead of "dullness" was helpful. I was doing walking meditation out here on one retreat during this two-year period, and I was noting the dullness of mind. I was like, "dull, dull, dull." And at some point I recognized that even though I was noticing it as dullness, there was a little bit of a spin to it. It was a little bit judgmental. Dullness is bad. I could be kind of aware of it, but there was just this belief that dullness was not a good state.

And then when I shifted it—when I recognized, well, what's actually happening here is the energy is low—okay, low energy is happening. That had a more neutral feeling to it. And then as I explored low energy, I noticed that in the dull state, my mind had been going, "God, I cannot pay attention to hearing. I can't notice the sensations." But as I began to recognize, "Oh, this is actually low energy," and I just turned to the feeling of low energy through the body and the mind, I recognized, "Wow, hearing is already happening. I don't have to do that. I'm already experiencing body sensations. I don't have to do that either."

And so the practice helped me to see that there had been a little bit of over-efforting, trying to see experience that was actually already available.

We often believe that our minds need to be in a certain state in order to meditate. And this state of mind around low energy, thick mind, dull mind, sleepy mind—these tend to be states that we believe we cannot meditate or we cannot be aware in. Spacing out, for instance. We might think spacing out is inherently

non-mindful. Isn't that the very definition of spacing out? Wouldn't that mean that you're not mindful? That's what I thought—until I began getting curious and let go of the idea that spacing out means I'm not mindful.

I was having breakfast one morning and noticing that the mind was spacing out, and at that period it was like, "Okay, spacing out. Okay, come back to breakfast." To me that's what being mindful meant: being mindful of eating, the physical sensations, and so forth. And so I was turning my attention back to the physical sensations of eating, and the mind would space out again. Okay, come back. It was this come-back, come-back approach.

But at some point during that meal, I began to see that while I was paying attention to breakfast, there was this pull, a feeling of the mind wanting to let go of paying attention so hard. And as I noticed that, I was curious: "Wow, I can see that. Why don't I just see where the mind wants to go?" Instead of trying to hold my attention on the physical sensations of eating, I watched the mind go into this very pleasant, vibrating, energetic space. I could be completely mindful of it. I was right there for it. It was very restful. And in about thirty seconds, it cleared. Then I was just very present with my food, my body.

And in that coming back after it cleared, I understood: the mind had been tired, exhausted. It wanted a rest. And it was taking its rest whether I wanted it to or not, but I could be there for it while it took its rest. It got its rest, and then it was available again. I was available to be with it while it was spacing out.

And so if there's ever a state of mind where you think it's not possible to be mindful while X is happening, don't believe that thought. Play with it. Explore. How might it be possible?

Maybe you could turn the question around: How might it be possible to be mindful while this is happening? Over and over again I've seen that it is possible—far more than we can fathom.

Another piece about sleepiness that I want to drop in is that so often we resist it. Sleepiness, dullness, low energy—and often the very resisting of it creates an unpleasant experience. Have you noticed that? When you're meditating and you're sleepy, the experience becomes so unpleasant if you're resisting it. The resistance itself is what creates the unpleasantness.

What I've discovered is that when that resistance goes, when I'm willing to just observe the sleepiness and watch without worrying whether I'm going to drop, but simply notice the sensations—oh, the feeling of the body getting heavy, the feeling of relaxation—it's really pleasant. It feels really good.

I spent one sitting at Yucca Valley in California where I had so much sleepiness, but I let that sleepiness happen and remained completely mindful of it. Then it would happen that I would drop, but I was sitting, so dropping woke me up, and I just sat up and did it all over again. In the course of that forty minutes, I never got past the sleepiness, but I was mindful for almost the entire thing, with the exception of very brief times when I dropped. So if you can let go of the resistance to sleepiness, there's a carrot waiting. It feels really good. See if you can be present for it.

Then there's restlessness and anxiety. Restlessness has both physical and mental aspects to it. Restlessness in the body is often very physically unpleasant—it feels sometimes like jumping beans under the skin, like you just cannot sit still. Restlessness in the mind is often like a whirling mind, a lot of thoughts.

What I found most helpful with restlessness, especially the physical side—well, both actually—is to let the attention get broad. With physical restlessness, if you're trying to hold the energy in the body or come in and be very precise about noticing all the various sensations of the restlessness, it's like putting yourself in a pressure cooker. All of that restless energy is trying to be contained in this tiny little space. But if you have the sense of letting your awareness get as big as the room, letting the restless energy get as big as the room, it creates more space for it. This has been the most helpful instruction for me around physical restlessness.

Around restless mind, when the mind is just spinning and spinning, often there is some kind of emotion connected to it—maybe some kind of worry or anxiety. So again, seeing if you can let go of the thoughts and come into the energetic experience of how that restlessness is manifesting. It may feel like bees buzzing in the head, or whirling energy in the body, or a feeling like—at one point I felt like there was a pinball rolling around in my mind, in my head, just this swirling energy. If you can connect to the energetic experience and let go of the thoughts, the thoughts keep the state of mind stirred up. When we let go of the thoughts and connect with the energy, all of these states have their life.

Sense desire, ill will, restlessness—if we can open to them with mindfulness and not put the foot on the gas pedal with the thoughts, they have a life. They may last for a certain period of time, but if we're not fueling them, they will eventually dissipate.

It's kind of like a car going a hundred miles an hour down the freeway. The emotion—the sense desire, the ill will, the restlessness—is like the car hurtling down the road, and the thoughts associated with it are like our foot on the gas pedal. If we take our foot off the gas pedal and put the car into neutral—which is a good analogy for mindfulness, putting our minds into neutral—if you do that while going a hundred miles an hour down the freeway, the car doesn't stop immediately. It has momentum. But it will stop because you're no longer fueling it. You know it will stop. You can hopefully steer while the car's hurtling down the road as it's slowing down.

That's what we aim to do with our mindfulness. We aim to put our minds into a space that's more neutral, able to let these states flow through, live their life, and begin to dissipate. In the process, we learn something about the conditions that create the state of mind, about the experience of that state of mind. We learn about the dukkha. We learn about the dukkha of sense desire, of ill will, of restlessness. Understanding grows as we have the mind in neutral, allowing the state to begin to dissipate.

With restlessness we also need to learn when not to engage with it directly. Again, if we try to turn towards any of these states with mindfulness and we find that they're strengthening,

or that aversion is growing as we try to turn toward these states with mindfulness—when that happens, we may need to change the channel, put our attention on something else.

With restlessness, it can be helpful to go out, take a walk, be in nature, look at trees. I found looking at trees to be a really helpful way to work with restlessness. So open the eyes. See if you can again let the container get big.

Then there's doubt. Kamala talked so beautifully the other night about faith, and faith is the flip side of doubt—or rather, doubt is the flip side of faith. So much of what she talked about with respect to faith illuminates what supports us to release doubt. There's doubt in the same things that we have faith in: we have doubt in ourselves, in the teachings, in the practice.

I think with doubt, when it arises, one of the key things is that we need to learn to recognize it's happening. Because when we're caught in doubt, our mind is so far from mindfulness. If we can begin to recognize the stories that doubt tells, we have the possibility to turn toward it. Doubt cannot last long. Doubt doesn't last long when we turn to it with mindfulness. It really doesn't have a lot of traction when we can meet it with awareness.

Beginning to recognize the thoughts of doubt—for me, what I discovered most indicative of doubt was thoughts about the practice. Usually thoughts that it doesn't work, that I can't do it, or that the teachers don't know what they're talking about. If there are thoughts in your mind like that, see if you can recognize: doubt is happening. If you're having thoughts about the practice in that way, just play with it—okay, maybe doubt's here. Maybe this is doubt. Maybe I could notice this is doubt.

Again, there's often an underlying feeling. When I would turn toward doubt, when I recognized "oh, this is doubt," I would ask myself: What's here? What else is here? What does doubt feel like? It had different flavors and was often connected to some other kind of emotion—vulnerability, a feeling of inadequacy, a feeling of failure, a fear of the unknown. At one point I remember asking, what does doubt feel like? It felt like grief. And as I opened to that feeling, it was like, "Oh, I can be with this."

Learning to recognize the stories of doubt is probably the most powerful tool we have, because doubt is almost always manifesting as thoughts in our mind.

The piece I most want to leave you with is hopefully some sense of interest in the exploration of these states that can sometimes be so difficult. There's a lot of power that comes from being willing to have the courage to meet our challenging states of mind. It took a lot of courage for me to meet that self-hatred over and over again. And there were times when I had to set it aside. But the power of mindfulness—of wise mindfulness—to begin to transform these difficult energies is profound. Not that we do this transformation, but the understanding, the learning, the wisdom that develops as we meet these difficult states has the power to deeply transform us.

Sometimes Joseph says we want insight into suffering without experiencing suffering. These states are

often experienced as suffering, and we have to meet suffering. Insight into suffering happens through connection, through contact with it.

So open to them. Be curious about them. Get to know them, understand them.

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