The Hindrances

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 56:26

Tonight I'd like to explore some energies that come up in our practice, some mental energies, some mind states that we can get caught in and that we can struggle with.

The Buddha identified five particular energies that are challenging for us. And in his usual way of creating lists, he gave this list a name: the hindrances. These are five mental energies, and they are sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt.

The Buddha called them hindrances because they tend to hinder our ability to settle into meditation, to become concentrated. This name, hindrance, is a translation of the Pali term *nivarana*. But this translation often makes us think or feel that if it's a hindrance, it means we can't meditate when it's there. There's a sense that if we're experiencing one of these energies, it's a real problem that has to be gotten rid of, and that we can't meditate. So we tend to have an antagonistic relationship with these mental energies.

Yet the Buddha, while saying that they hinder our ability to get concentrated, at the same time said that they are perfectly valid, legitimate experiences with which to cultivate mindfulness. In his discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness, the *Satipatthana Sutta*, which we've been talking about, he mentioned these hindrances as experiences that we can be mindful of. They're found in the fourth foundation of mindfulness, where he described ways to be mindful of these difficult energies.

So not only is it possible to be mindful of sense desire, of ill will, of sloth and torpor—or sleepiness and dullness, as another way to put that one—of restlessness and anxiety, and of doubt. Not only is it possible, it's extremely helpful. It's very valuable for us to learn how to be mindful of these states of mind.

These states of mind are usually experienced as unpleasant, or when we begin to become aware of them, we usually experience them as problematic. We experience them as *dukkha*, as suffering. I talked about this word *dukkha* recently—that sense of unease, of our lives being off-center or out of kilter, an out-of-balance kind of feeling. The word suffering tends to make us think of large suffering, but the term *d ukkha* is much broader than that. These mental energies, these hindrances, are usually experienced as *duk kha*. They are a form of suffering for us.

But the Buddha's whole exploration, his whole path, was around exploring this suffering. He said he found a way to freedom from suffering, but it wasn't through somehow magically transcending that suffering. It was through meeting it, going through it, understanding it. And so this is the recommendation with these hindrances. As a form of suffering, we meet them. We understand them. We explore them with mindfulness in order to understand them.

This is the key that the Buddha offered around *dukkha*: understand *dukkha*. This will lead you to freedom from *dukkha*.

Being mindful of difficult experience, being mindful of *dukkha*, means meeting it, being with it, but not indulging in it. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita in Burma, described this kind of meeting experience as being a rubbing—that we rub our experience as if we were polishing a bowl with a soft cloth. This image has been really helpful for me as a way to think about exploring and being with our experience. It's not trying to forcefully pick it apart. It's opening our hearts to and meeting our experience.

This understanding of *dukkha* that the Buddha suggested is observing experience directly—observing this unease, this dissatisfaction, all of the struggles that we have—not thinking about it, not analyzing it, but being willing to be with it. Almost as if you'd be willing to be with a small child who was in pain. That kind of being with.

This understanding that comes with mindfulness, with this willingness to be with, begins to allow these difficult energies to dissipate. It's kind of a magic thing in a way. It's the understanding that frees us. This is what the third noble truth is about: the possibility for freedom from suffering comes from the letting go of holding on to wanting things to be other than they are, this being the source of all of our *dukkha*.

The understanding that comes from being with allows us to begin—it's not that we let go of these difficulties; it's that they begin to let go of themselves as they are met with this mindfulness.

So I'd like to just offer you, briefly, the paraphrased version of the instructions the Buddha offers for the hindrances in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. And just hearing these, I think, can be helpful. I'm not going to try to cover all of these in this talk—that would take several evenings—but I'd like to put them out there.

So he says, first of all, for all of these states—I'll just use sense desire as an example and then restate the pattern for the others so that you can get a sense of the structure. For sense desire, we recognize when sense desire is present, and we recognize when sense desire is absent. That's an interesting one to think about. Noticing when these difficult energies are not present actually supports us.

We begin to get familiar with the causes and conditions that lead to these hindrances, that lead to sense desire coming into being. What are the situations that you get into that make sense desire come up? And then we can learn the conditions that help sense desire to not appear. So essentially, in part by seeing the conditions that make it appear, we learn conditions that support sense desire not appearing. This also involves understanding and exploring what skillful qualities of mind, wholesome qualities of mind, serve to counter sense desire.

These same instructions are offered for ill will—noticing presence and absence of ill will, noticing what conditions allow it to arise, noticing what conditions support it not arising. Likewise for sloth and torpor, likewise for restlessness and anxiety, and likewise for doubt.

So he offered some very specific things for us to play with, to observe, to explore around these hindrances. Given that I can't cover all of these this evening, what I'd like to primarily talk about is what it means to be present for, what it means to explore and investigate these states when they are present. So that's that first instruction: recognize when the hindrance is present. We'll begin to explore that side of it.

The other piece that I'd like to bring in a little bit is what to do, how to work, some suggestions for how to work with these energies when they're kind of overwhelming—because we can't always bring mindfulness to these difficult energies. We can think about these energies as having a certain level of momentum or a certain level of energy. And our mindfulness, in meeting that—if our mindfulness doesn't have the same level of energy or cultivation or development as that hindrance does, it's like the hindrance is a tsunami and our mindfulness is just this little trickling stream. We can get swamped by these energies. So we need to become aware, cognizant of times when mindfulness is not necessarily the right approach for us and we need to do something else, to take some action to bring ourselves into some kind of balance around these energies.

So the first: sense desire. This is the desire to have pleasant sense experience at our five physical sense doors—seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching. This is that wish to be surrounded by pleasant experience. Generally this desire is fueled by a belief—I think I talked about this a few days ago—it's fueled by a belief that having this sense pleasure is how we can be happy. That being able to surround ourselves by pleasant sense experience is the road to happiness.

For each of these hindrances, the Buddha offers an analogy. I'll give you the analogy with each one that I talk about. And the analogy involves a bowl of water. They used to use bowls of water to reflect, so that they could see themselves—it was a form of mirror that they used. The analogy about sense desire is that the water has been laced with dye, colorful swirling colors in the water. Because of the swirling colors, we become entranced by them and can't see our reflection. We can't see clearly because we're entranced by the colors.

This is the way sense desire functions for us. We become entranced with this notion that pleasant experiences are what is going to make us happy, and we can't really see clearly. We can't see how that entrancement is actually keeping us on a cycle of just wanting to get something, wanting to get the next thing, wanting, wanting, wanting.

Sense desire keeps us from being present, keeps us from being in the present moment, because we are pulled out of the here and now in order to figure out how we're going to get that next moment of sense pleasure, even if it's only a few seconds away. We feel like life is going to be better if we get that thing. But what's happening is that we're actually giving up peacefulness here and now for the possibility of a few moments of sense pleasure sometime in the future.

It's not really the sense pleasure itself that's the issue here. It's the desire that is the problem.

It's the desire that's fueling us out of the present moment to get the next thing.

Living our lives, we are going to have a stream of experiences. Some of them are going to be pleasant, some of them are going to be unpleasant, and some of them are going to be neutral. That flow is just going to happen. But we don't just let that flow happen. We try to stop it at the pleasant ones, try to get rid of the unpleasant ones. So it's not the pleasant experiences that are an issue here. It's this desire to create a world in which there is only pleasant experience. Or the belief, actually—it's the belief that that is the way to happiness.

So what does it mean to explore sense desire? Well, with sense desire our mind is turned outwards to the world. We are focused on things out there, trying to figure out how to maneuver the world to have the pleasant experience we'd like. The helpful instruction around sense desire is to see if you can let go of the attention outwards to the things that we want. Instead, it's like turning the attention 180 degrees around and looking at the experience of what it feels like to want something. This is bringing mindfulness to the experience of sense desire itself. We don't resist it, we don't try to stop it, and we don't indulge in it. This movement of turning towards the experience of sense desire is a way of not indulging it, because in the turning towards we're not acting on it. We're not trying to fulfill that desire. We're simply trying to watch: What is this desire?

This is the understanding that the Buddha talks about. Sense desire is an energy that pulls us into dukkha. It doesn't inherently seem like it would pull us into dukkha, but I mentioned some of the ways it does the other day. If we desire something and we're trying to get it and we don't get it, there's the dukkha right there. If we desire something and we get it, it doesn't seem like there should be dukkha there—but then we may be feeling like we have to protect it and defend it, and we get anxious and afraid that it's going to go. We've gotten something we like finally, and how can I keep it? How can I hold on to it? So there can be a feeling of anxiety around it. Or it could get lost. It could get broken. It could get stolen. No longer ours.

So we're not indulging in that sense desire, we're not trying to fulfill it—we're just simply trying to observe it, turning towards that feeling.

Now, sense desire, and actually most of these hindrances, come with some kinds of thinking. "This is what I need. This is how I have to do this. This is very important. This is what's going to make me happy." Those kinds of thoughts are going, and scheming—our thoughts are scheming how to make this sense pleasure come to us.

So there are two pieces to this exploration. One is seeing if you can let go of the thoughts and not engage in the thinking process around sense desire, and instead turn towards the feeling in the body. There's probably some kind of feeling in the body, especially when sense desire is strong. For me, it feels like I'm being pulled like a magnet towards something. That's one way it feels. Or if I'm really moving towards something, it can kind of feel like—I'll give you an image. When swimmers come to the end of a lap and they coil themselves up into a ball in order to shoot themselves out into the pool, that energy of coiling up

and shooting out in a direction—sometimes that's the way sense desire feels. Eagerness. That's the feeling of eagerness: "Oh, yeah, that—that's going to make me happy." It has that feeling of propelling in a direction.

So getting a sense of what it feels like—what does this energy of desire feel like? We can play with simple desires, simple sense desires, as a way to explore this. The energies are the same whether it's a small desire or a large desire, and there's a lot of learning that we can come to by exploring even very simple sense desires.

One day I was driving to the meditation center to teach a class, and I got stopped at a red light. I was sitting there at the red light, and there was a Starbucks just across the intersection.

Seeing the Starbucks, the mind went, "Oh, latte—that would be nice." I felt the desire spring up at that moment. Having done a lot of this practice, I thought, "Okay, I'm just going to pay attention. Just going to pay attention to this feeling. Not going to act on it, just going to watch it."

What I saw was that once the light turned green and I managed to drive past the Starbucks without turning into the driveway, as soon as Starbucks was out of my field of vision, that desire was gone. This is a learning. While it was in my field of vision, my mind thought it was the thing that would make me feel really good. Then it was just forgotten when I drove past.

So explore in your own experience these little wantings. See if you can not act on them necessarily, and play with what you can learn about sense desire. What can you learn about your own mind? In that case, there was a learning that some sense desires—not all of them, but some—are fueled simply by having something in proximity. Once it's out of proximity, it's out of sight, out of mind.

Sometimes we do have some challenge with sense desire. It can get strong, and we need discernment to recognize whether we are actually able to be mindful of sense desire or whether we're indulging it. Sense desire can appear as a fantasy in our minds, and we can think, "Oh yeah, I'll just be mindful of this fantasy." We let the fantasy run. But what we're really doing is indulging the fantasy as opposed to being mindful of what's going on.

We need discernment to know when we're allowing and observing and when we're indulging. A key for this would be: if you're indulging the fantasy, you're probably getting lost in it and not terribly mindful. When we try to bring our attention to sense desire and find we keep getting lost in it, then it may be time to take some other kind of action—to learn a skillful ignoring. Just let that be to the side. Don't put your attention there. Actively put your attention somewhere else for a while—in your feet, perhaps. It's learning how to ignore something without aversion, without hatred. Just, "Nope, I'm going to put that aside and pay attention to something else."

The second of these difficult energies, ill will, is the sense of disliking things. It is rooted in a belief that our happiness depends on getting rid of unpleasant experience or getting ourselves away from it. It can have

the impact of actively pushing something away, or we say, "I can't be here, I need to get out of here." It pulls us away from the present by making us feel we have to get rid of things in this moment. Again, it's that unwillingness to be with what's actually here because we think our happiness depends on changing it. "If only I could get rid of this state of mind, this knee pain, this pain in the back—then I could meditate."

As we begin to explore the energy of ill will, what we actually start to see is that it's the wanting to get rid that is creating the difficulty, creating the agitation. Being able to settle down to meditate doesn't depend on getting rid of that energy. It's just a reorientation.

This is very similar to sense desire in a way. With ill will, we're often focused outward on the thing we don't like, trying to fix it, change it, get rid of it, control it, or figure out how to remove ourselves. The movement is to turn toward the feeling of ill will itself. We take our attention out of the thing triggering the dislike and turn toward the feeling of ill will.

See if you can let go of the thoughts fueling the ill will—thoughts like "I can't stand this," "This has got to go," "This is a problem." All those thoughts reinforce the ill will. Turn attention away from them. See if you can let go of the thoughts and turn attention to the body. What does it feel like in the body?

Ill will does not feel pleasant at all. It's a difficult experience to learn how to be present for. But as we start to explore it, we actually see that it's easier to be with the feeling of ill will than to be caught in this state of being trapped by it, trapped by the belief that acting on it is the only way to happiness.

Now, I do want to say that what I'm talking about here—not acting on ill will and just turning to the experience—this we can always do in meditation. It's always helpful to refrain from acting on ill will in meditation. In our daily lives, we need to be careful about what we mean by that. Sometimes we can have the sense that if we don't like something, we should just sit there passively and not do anything about it.

That's not really the teaching. The teaching isn't about just being passively a lump on a log while unpleasant things are coming at you. We can take action to get ourselves out of the way of difficult situations or to take care of situations that are creating danger.

For instance, you see a child running out into the road. You're not going to just sit there observing, "Oh, fear is happening in the body." You're going to run out and try to stop that child. It demands some action. Now there may be some aversion happening, some ill will arising around the feeling of fear. But we can actually act out of compassion there. So the teaching on not acting out of ill will doesn't mean that we don't act when we see something difficult or wrong in the world. What we try to do is act out of compassion rather than out of that ill will. It's possible to change something and to want to change something without hating that thing. I just wanted to make that clear.

It's also important to recognize that with ill will, at least in my own experience, sometimes the experience can feel like a tsunami. We can get overwhelmed by ill will, and it feels very difficult to be mindful of it. A skillful way to deal with this is very similar to the overwhelm I talked about with sense desire, when we

can't really meet it with mindfulness. Can you allow that ill will to be there, but not directly meet it?

Sometimes what seems to happen is that when we directly try to meet a difficult energy of ill will—and there are many flavors of this: anger, frustration, irritation, annoyance, rage—those emotions can get very strong, stronger than our ability to meet them with mindfulness. When that happens, we try to bring mindfulness to those emotions and we just feel like we get sucked into the black hole of them. That's a clue that it's not so helpful to try to bring mindfulness to those emotions directly.

So again, that kind of setting aside, "not now," is how I work with this. It's like, "Okay, I see you. I see you, anger, but you stay over there, do your thing. I'm going to put my attention in my feet. I'm going to do some walking, and I'm just going to pay attention to my feet." Learning when you're in a state of overwhelm and beginning to learn skillful ways to redirect the attention is key.

For ill will, I really recommend that people find or learn to cultivate some kind of experience that is outside of the main core of the body. Because if you try to use the breathing, a lot of people say, "Well, I just try to come back to the breathing when I'm noticing the anger, and I just get caught back in the anger." A lot of the feelings associated with ill will happen in the area of the torso. So if you're feeling a lot of anger and you're trying to pay attention to breathing in this part of the body, you're likely to get mixed up with the feelings of the ill will.

I like to suggest that people cultivate something else. Hearing is a good one for ill will—it takes you out of the physical body, and you can simply attend to sounds. Unless, of course, the sound is what's creating the ill will, which can happen. So hearing is good, or putting your attention in your hands or your feet. Something grounding—your buttocks touching the chair or cushion. Something to allow you to stabilize while you let that experience be in the background. Again, it's not repression. It's not pushing away. It's kind of a gentle "not now."

The third of these hindrances is sloth and torpor, or sleepiness and dullness. This often comes with low energy. The mind and body are in a low energy state—that's the sleepiness side of things, when the body has low energy. When the mind is low energy, it can just feel dull and foggy, or thick, kind of like pea soup. The mind feels unclear.

We typically get agitated around this state because we think, especially if we're trying to meditate—if we're going to sleep, it's not a problem. But if we're sitting in the meditation hall trying to meditate and we feel sleepy or dull, it feels like a problem. How many of you have had the thought, "I can't meditate because I'm too sleepy"?

What I'd like to propose is this: if you can have that thought—"I'm too sleepy to meditate"—then you have enough mindfulness to at least explore what it means to be mindful of sleepiness.

Let me offer an analogy I've found really helpful. I've talked about mindfulness being like a mirror that reflects what it experiences. It doesn't care what it's reflecting—it can reflect beautiful things or ugly

things, and the quality of the mirror is not changed by what it reflects. Now think about that mirror after you've been in the shower, when it's all steamed up with fog. If you're trying to use that mirror to see your reflection, it's not going to work very well because it's covered with steam. But you know, just knowing how mirrors work, that mirror is doing its job perfectly. It is reflecting every drop of water perfectly. It's not doing what you want it to do, but it's doing its job.

What I'd like to propose is that when the mind is dull or foggy or sleepy, there can actually be enough energy to simply recognize: sleepiness is happening, dullness is happening. If you're trying to use that dull or sleepy mind to pay attention to the breath with all its different sensations, or you have some agenda about what you need to be paying attention to, it's going to be frustrating. But mindfulness can perfectly reflect that dullness, that sleepiness, that fogginess.

One thing I've discovered in exploring this is that when I play with it this way, not resisting the sleepiness, it's not actually a problem if you're sleepy or dull when meditating. It's only a problem because you think it's a problem. It's your idea that makes it a problem. When I turn my attention to the feeling of sleepiness without resistance, the experience transforms. But when I do resist it, trying to do something else, the feeling of sleepiness becomes really unpleasant. I think most of you have experienced that—sleepiness feels terrible when you're trying to meditate and pay attention to something. But if you don't resist the sleepiness and simply allow yourself to observe it, it's actually quite pleasant. It feels really good.

This is a little carrot for you, a way to hopefully get you interested in exploring sleepiness, because it can feel remarkably pleasant—just observing the feeling of sleepiness come over you. The body gets deeply relaxed. The brain goes into this lovely vibratory state. I explored this on one retreat where it became clear to me this was possible. I watched all these feelings descend through the body, this mind going into this state. And I got to the place where I could see right before the body dropped. I could know right before I was going to fall over. And in seeing that, I could just straighten up my body a little, open my eyes, let a bit of energy come in, then close my eyes and let the whole thing happen over again. It was like the best Disneyland ride. It was so much fun to play with sleepiness.

Now, there are times when the mind is too sleepy, when there's more sleepiness than mindfulness. It takes some kind of balance between the two. But it's possible more often than you think to be mindful of sleepiness. If you explore this and find that you just end up nodding off for ten minutes, well then, when you come back into awareness, stand up, open your eyes. Perhaps at the next walking period, do some faster walking, bring some energy into the body. These are ways to work with that energy when it's a little too much for our mindfulness.

There's another side to this difficult energy, and that's the thick mind—the torpor, the dullness, the pea-soup mind. It's possible to just know that pea soup. And again, without resistance, it's possible to see that state. One of the antidotes to that state is counterintuitive. If you find that state so thick that you just continually disappear into that fog, one remedy is to bring a little more precision to how you're paying

attention. Try to notice the sensations at the very beginning of the in-breath. See if you can know the first sensations as the breath begins. See what happens. It's counterintuitive, but it works because making effort like that generates some energy. Just doing that can begin to clear up the pea-soupy mind.

The next of these energies is restlessness and anxiety. This too has both a physical and mental component, much like sloth and torpor has the physical sleepiness and the mental pea-soup quality. Restlessness in the body has a quality that's deeply unpleasant—it feels like jumping beans under your skin, like your nerves feel itchy. It's really uncomfortable. The agitated mind has the quality of feeling like it can't land anywhere. It touches something and then goes someplace else, and someplace else, and someplace else. It just feels scattered.

It doesn't feel like it can collect and attend to anything.

Oh, I've been forgetting to tell you the analogies! Let me share the one for this hindrance. You have a bowl of water, and you're trying to see your reflection, but the wind is blowing and the surface is rippled with agitation. So there's that constant disturbance on the surface.

With physical restlessness—that jumping bean quality—the thing I've found most helpful is to see if you can let the attention get really big. Allow that feeling of the jumpy bean body to expand as big as the room. Sometimes when we try to be mindful of something like restlessness, it's like we attempt to contain awareness within the body. This becomes almost like a pressure cooker, tightening down on the experience and making it even more agitated. But if you just explore with curiosity—what would happen if I allow this feeling of restlessness to get as big as it wants?—it's like giving it more space, so it doesn't have quite that agitated quality. Let your mind get really big and allow that feeling to expand as much as it needs to.

With restlessness in the mind—the mental kind—it's often helpful to check in and see if there's some emotion happening underneath. Because when the mind gets restless, when it's spinning in thought, there's often an emotion beneath those spinning thoughts. If you can just check in—what else is going on here? Is there some emotion present?—you may find worry, anxiety, regret, remorse, something stirring beneath the surface.

In that kind of situation, the movement is again about letting go of thoughts. See if you can release the thoughts associated with the spinning mind and ground your attention in the body—in how that emotion manifests physically. We'll talk more about this tomorrow morning: how to pay attention to emotions through our bodily experience.

So you feel remorse—how does that remorse impact your body? You feel fear—how does that fear impact your body? Tightness, constriction in the throat, a feeling of jumpiness in the stomach. Ground your attention in the body. When we ground our attention there, we're closer to the actual experience. We're not allowing attention to remain in the thoughts, which tend to fuel the whole cycle around the

experience.

Again, there are times when restlessness can get too strong. If you're trying to bring mindfulness to this difficult state and you get swamped—you just feel lost in the restlessness—then it's probably helpful to take some other action. Open your eyes. Go for a walk. Go out in nature. These kinds of things are really helpful when mind and body are deeply restless.

The last of the five hindrances is doubt. The doubt referred to here is doubt around the practice, doubt around our ability to practice, doubt in the teachings, doubt in the teachers. It's not doubt like, "Can I go skydiving? Do I have enough courage?" That's not what we're talking about here. This is doubt specifically around the practice.

The description of doubt is that it creates a wavering—the mind wavers back and forth. There's an analogy: someone in doubt is like someone lost in a desert. You take a few steps this way, think, "Oh, that can't be right," go back and take a few steps that way, "Oh, that can't be right." It's that wavering, that vacillation—the quality of doubt. The mind can't decide what to do. Or it flip-flops: I should do that. No, no, I should do that. No, I should do *that*.

Or you find the mind spinning in logical arguments about the practice: "I should be doing this kind of practice. I shouldn't be doing this mindfulness practice. I should be doing some kind of dancing practice instead." Sometimes these thoughts can sound very wise. They have a rationality to them.

So the key with doubt is really learning to recognize when it's happening—because doubt is a great deceiver.

Doubt can completely trick us into thinking we are entirely rational and wise in our reflections. For me, one of the big clues that doubt is happening is that I'm having a lot of thoughts about the practice, about my ability to practice, about what kind of practice I should be doing at this moment. "Oh, metta right now. No, no, mindfulness of breathing. Oh, no, open awareness." If I'm thinking about what I should be doing, that's a form of doubt. And just as a small piece of guidance right there—if that's the kind of doubt you're having, just pick one. It doesn't really matter. Just pick one.

Then there are doubts about the teachings themselves. "The Buddha lived 2,500 years ago. How can what he learned possibly apply to the twenty-first century?" If you're having thoughts like that, if you can just recognize, "Oh, this is doubt," that is two-thirds of the difficulty. Two-thirds of the battle around doubt is recognizing that doubt is happening.

Often there are emotions underneath doubt as well—feelings of vulnerability, feelings of insecurity, a fear of failure. That was a big one for me. Fear that if I don't do it right, I'm going to be a failure. And so my mind kept asking, "How can I do it right?" There was a lot of doubt in my mind about doing it right, motivated by this fear of failure. Fear of the unknown can also lead to doubt.

So just recognizing that doubt is happening is huge. And then we can begin to see what's underneath. What else is happening here? What emotion is going on? What's fueling this doubt?

In one practice period at Spirit Rock, I noticed that one afternoon I was caught in doubt for several hours. Finally, after all that time, I came to the surface and thought, "Oh, doubt—doubt is happening. What do I do with this?" I was really caught by it. I thought I had to get rid of the doubt in order to practice. That was my mind state. Finally, it was like, "Oh, doubt's what's happening. Maybe I should practice with doubt."

Immediately I recognized that there was a feeling underneath it. In this case, it was a feeling of grief, because I felt like I had lost my way, lost my faith in the practice, my confidence in the practice, and there was this feeling of grief. Having recognized, first, that doubt was happening, that I could be aware of it, and then the emotion underneath it—it passed within fifteen minutes. Just the willingness to meet it. I had been stuck in it for hours, and when I finally came up to be able to watch it, it dissipated very quickly. So that is the biggest key with doubt—just learning to recognize it.

We do have this feeling that these hindrances are somehow in the way of our practice. As I said, in that case of doubt, it felt like I had to get rid of this doubt in order to continue. We'll have that feeling at times. But the wanting to get rid of is just another hindrance. It's simply the hindrance of ill will.

The Buddha has told us we can be mindful of these hindrances. He's given us instructions on how to be aware of them. He didn't say push them away. He didn't use that "bear down, grit your teeth, get rid of" kind of instruction. He said notice it, observe it. When these energies, these hindrances, are seen with mindfulness, when we can bring that quality of mindful attention to our hindrances, they are not in the way of our practice. They are our practice. They become the path. They become the unfolding of our path.

They become the learning that is arising in this moment. We can use suffering as a guide. When we're suffering, there's something that needs to be understood. When these hindrances are present, there's something to understand. The understanding of that is what leads to freedom.

Really, truly, these hindrances are not in the way. I have had deep recognition of impermanence, of not-self, through the exploration of hindrances. Just a real recognition: this thought that's arising in my mind, this self-hatred that's arising in my mind, is a construct. It's empty. It's quite amazing to be able to witness our deep patterns, our deep difficult patterns, with mindfulness and begin to see how they can release and fall apart.

So these hindrances are going to be with us for a long time. The Buddha talked about the path of awakening unfolding in stages. He talked about there being four stages to awakening. At each stage of awakening, there's more freedom, more releasing, more letting go. And some of the teachings map these hindrances onto these stages.

At the first stage of awakening, it is said that doubt goes away. It's not until the third stage of awakening that sense desire and ill will go away. And it's not until the fourth, the final stage of awakening, that

restlessness and anxiety and sloth and torpor go away.

So get used to them. Make friends with them. And get interested in them. Really, the interest—if you can bring some interest to this exploration, you will have much to learn and much benefit.

So that's my wish for you: that you can bring an interest to this exploration of these difficult states.

Let's sit for a moment. I'm going to drop a poem into your sitting. It's a poem some of you may have heard several times, by Rumi:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival—a joy, a depression, a meanness.
Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all.
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice—
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

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