Understanding and Abandoning

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 59:19

This morning in the question period, someone asked about concentration and how it fits into the practice that we're doing. Greg talked quite a bit about continuity and how important continuity is in our mindfulness practice, and that actually the continuity, the moment-to-moment mindfulness, is really the ground out of which concentration can develop.

There's another exploration that we can make around concentration. It has a kind of different approach to it, and that is to look at what gets in the way of concentration—to explore letting go of what gets in the way.

Actually, on the retreat that I just finished this past month, my practice was almost entirely letting go. Whenever there was any suffering, any holding, any clinging, the practice was to recognize it. Not so much to try to do the activity of letting go, which can happen at times, but more often the letting go happens as a result of the clear seeing. As the mind would see suffering, see holding, see clinging and let go, let go, let go, the mind became very concentrated. This really gave me such a beautiful new perspective on concentration. It's not about doing. It's not about holding. It's really about letting go.

Some of the key states that happen to be in the way of concentration are some of the main forms of suffering, of dukkha. These are termed the hindrances: sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt.

Of these states, of these hindrances, the Buddha suggests that we abandon them. That's the term—the translation of the Pali term pajahati. Abandon these states, abandon the defilements, abandon the kilesas, abandon the hindrances.

While abandoning is a translation of this Pali term, I found it interesting to reflect on what that word means in English, and how that word can perhaps help us have a bit of an understanding of what we're doing here. My understanding of the way this word is used is not so much the kind of abandonment that we think of in terms of a parent abandoning a child, but rather in the sense of—like sometimes we talk about abandoning a car that dies by the side of the road. We abandon things when they're no longer useful to us. We understand that they no longer have value.

Another way this term is used—I checked in the dictionary today—is that we abandon when we understand there is danger, such as abandoning ship. Likewise, we can begin to understand the danger of these hindrances, and with understanding, we naturally begin to let go.

The letting go of these states, the abandoning, isn't so much something that we do consciously. We might

think of it as pushing away, but rather the abandoning comes from the understanding that these things are not valuable, that these things are not useful. In fact, they can be harmful to us.

So there's a relationship in terms of abandoning the hindrances—a relationship to wisdom. We need to understand why these things are not valuable, why these states of sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt are not useful, why they are in the way. We need to understand that. And the understanding allows the mind to let them go. It's the understanding, the wisdom, that's the key. And to understand something, we need to study it. We need to get to know it.

This is related to what the Buddha says in terms of the First Noble Truth, the truth of dukkha. Guy, I believe, is going to talk about the Four Noble Truths tomorrow. The Four Noble Truths: the truth of dukkha, the truth of the cause of dukkha, the truth of the cessation of dukkha, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. Each of these truths has an action associated with it. The Buddha suggests that we understand dukkha, that we let go of the cause of dukkha, that we realize the release, and that we cultivate the path.

This understanding of dukkha—I look at this as being really a huge part of our practice. The understanding is what frees us.

The hindrances, these challenging states—"covering" is another translation of the term often translated as hindrances, nivarana. Coverings, things that cloud our mind, that are in the way of the settling into concentration, this gathering of the mind into non-distraction, unification of mind.

An image comes to mind around settling for me, and that's the image of scooping up a jar of water from a turbid stream. When I was a kid, I used to live in a place where there was a stream in the back, and we would always go gathering rocks and collecting water and looking for tadpoles. Scooping up that water from the stream was often cloudy because of all the mud and sediment that was in there.

And one of the most effective ways—or for a child, the most effective way—to let that water clear is to set it down. Set it on the shelf. Let the sediment settle on its own.

If you're running around with a jar, picking it up, shaking it, looking at it—is it going to clear? Can I see in it yet? Can I see if there's any tadpoles in it yet? If we're shaking it up and looking at it, it's not going to clear. But if we set the jar down on the shelf and just leave it alone, the mud will settle.

In a similar way, we can support the settling of our minds by not stirring them up—by leaving alone the stirring activity of thoughts and thinking, leaving alone the stirring activity of agendas, of confused or frustrated attitudes or wanting in the mind. All of these things are like taking the jar and shaking it up. And so one way to consider this possibility of settling our minds is to see if we can bring our minds into an attitude of simply observing and allowing our experience. Non-resistance to the hindrances, but also non-cooperation with the hindrances either. It's not like we're giving in to them, but we are stepping back and observing.

This kind of non-resistant, non-judgmental, almost impartial observer is a way that the agitated qualities of these hindrances can begin to settle on their own. And we learn a tremendous amount about our minds as we watch them. We begin to gain the understanding I was talking about. It's understanding that frees.

Understanding how these hindrances are put together in our minds—the way that sense desire works, the way we go after things that are pleasant and want to push away things that are unpleasant in the case of ill will, the way our minds get confused about things. Understanding the patterns in our mind that lead to these states arising—that's one side of the understanding.

The other side is understanding that these states, which very often—particularly in the case of sense desire and ill will—the mind seems to think acting on them is going to somehow make us happy. So mindfulness begins to unveil the deluded nature of that, and it unveils the fact that these states, in themselves, in the experience of them, are very far from happiness. We think we act on sense desire thinking it will make us happy. But in the very moment of having that sense desire, we are very far from happiness. Mindfulness begins to show us this. It shows us the suffering nature of these states in and of themselves. And this is wisdom.

It doesn't feel very good to see this. Hanging out with dukkha doesn't feel very good. But sometimes that's exactly the medicine our minds need in order to understand. And in that understanding, in the seeing of the dukkha of these hindrances, the mind itself begins to understand how to let go. The abandoning begins to happen. In a way, the abandoning is the fruit of the understanding. The abandoning is the fruit of our practice.

So we might think that looking at hindrances, observing hindrances—if we're to abandon them, how can observing them actually be of any value? I know this rose in my mind early on. One of the very first things I read about Buddhist practice was that if something is difficult, like if you're angry about something, see if you can notice the state of anger itself rather than acting on it. Just observe the fact that you're angry. I read that and thought, "How's that going to help? What good is that going to do?" But I was pretty much at the bottom of my barrel at that point, so I thought, "Well, okay, I'm going to give this a try."

And actually, to my surprise—as I think most of you know—that action of turning towards, letting go of the thing we're frustrated about or angry about or wanting, and turning towards the feeling itself, is a huge shift. That very shift essentially changes the hindrances from being something in the way of our practice to being the very deepening of our practice, to being the ground of understanding out of which our practice unfolds. In this shift from focusing outwards on the thing we think is bothering us to looking at the state itself, the hindrances become our path. They become our gateway to freedom.

This is true. This is completely true.

I remember so many times in retreats, especially long ones, I would be caught in something over and over again—self-hatred, loneliness, depression, despair. And some part of my mind, even though I'd been

through this many times, would say, "Yeah, the teachers say this is the practice when it's happening, but really I know that the real practice is not going to unfold until this goes away. This self-hatred, this is the problem, and the practice is not going to—I'm not going to get to those bliss states until the self-hatred goes away." That seemed obvious. So there was that view, that belief. And in a way, a little bit of a repression of those states, like maybe I can just hold them at bay long enough to get concentrated, and then maybe I won't have to worry about that self-hatred.

When I finally surrendered—when I said, "Okay, this three-month course, this is my self-hatred retreat, this is the retreat where I really get to look at self-hatred"—the understanding, the learning, and the insights that happened out of that very exploration of a hindrance, of something so difficult, a state so difficult... Right in the midst of exploring a state like self-hatred came deep insight, deep understanding into impermanence, unreliability, not-self.

So these hindrances themselves are the path when they are present. They are not in the way; they are actually the very thing that will allow your practice to deepen in that moment. Meeting them, turning towards them.

In a way, we could say that when we are mindful of these states, these hindrances, when we are aware with this non-judgmental mindful perspective, they are no longer hindrances. They are simply any object. Like any experience, as Greg was saying—anything. It doesn't matter what we pay attention to. It doesn't matter where we are cultivating that continuity of mindfulness. If we are aware of those states, that very process of awareness of those hindrances is contributing to that continuity. And we are on the path. It may not be pleasant. Get used to that. Sometimes it's pleasant, sometimes it's unpleasant.

With all the hindrances, I think the basic exploration is to simply observe, allow, turn towards. And yet I think it is helpful to highlight some ways to work with each of them, because they each have their own ways of hooking us into their orbit. So I'll take a little bit of time to speak about each of these. Since there are five of them, it won't be very long for each one—just enough to get a flavor of different ways to explore each, and some of the different ways they tend to hook us.

Sense desire: the desire to have pleasant experience. Why is this a problem? Why is this a hindrance? How does this get in our way?

One of the ways it gets in our way is that when we're driven by sense desire, when we want that pleasant experience, we are essentially buying into a delusion that having pleasant experience is the way to happiness. And in buying into that belief, we end up in a kind of never-ending cycle of having to get the next pleasant thing. Because pleasant things don't last very long. So we're endlessly agitated, trying to find the next moment of pleasant. And in the moment of wanting the pleasant, even if it's only a few seconds away, we are not in the present moment.

We are pulled out of the present moment, inherently agitated, stirring that muddy jar of water, not settled

because we are leaning forward, looking for something else, something other than what's actually here.

The texts offer analogies for each of these hindrances, and they're related to a bowl of water. The image is about looking into the water and seeing your reflection—can you see clearly? The sense desire analogy is when there is a lot of dye, someone has put drops of color in the water. What happens is that we get enchanted by the colors. "Oh, aren't those pretty?" We can't see the reflection clearly because we're enchanted by the colors.

In a similar way, we can't see clearly with sense desire because we are enchanted by the promise of a hit of pleasant experience. Part of the obscuration that happens is that we do not see the unpleasantness of the wanting itself. We are so enchanted by the idea of that moment of happiness we're going to get—or few moments of happiness—having bought into that delusion of sense desire that this is going to make me happy. And we're missing the fact that we're actually suffering in this moment. We're not cultivating that sense of well-being in this moment.

There are so many kinds of things that we want. A lot of it is around comfort and pleasant experience—having food that we like, drinks that we like, nice comfortable clothes and a nice bed, pleasant smells and pleasant sights. Those are the more obvious things. We also want to satisfy our curiosity. We want to look at people. Especially on retreat, this can become highlighted—we're inclining to not let our gaze wander on retreat.

And I found that to be a very interesting exploration, because just in not letting my gaze wander, I discovered how much wanting there was about looking at people. How much desire was there about wanting to see who was in the room with me, who was walking next to me?

So the exploration here—non-resistance to sense desire—doesn't mean giving in to the desire. It means seeing if you can let go of the thing you are interested in having and turn towards the experience of desire, the experience of wanting itself. What does wanting feel like? It's that shift, turning towards the wanting. Not trying to stop the wanting, but having a completely different relationship to it.

This is a shift of attitude around the wanting. We shift from believing it, from buying into the delusion of wanting—that having that thing will make me happy—to simply recognizing: this is what wanting feels like.

Often there's unpleasant experience when we actually turn towards wanting. It feels like a pull, a magnet, this sense of "gotta have that, gotta do that, gotta feel that." There's this kind of magnetic pull, an inherently unpleasant feeling of dissatisfaction. That's what wanting is about. As soon as there's wanting, there's dissatisfaction. And dissatisfaction is not a pleasant experience. Turning towards that feeling of dissatisfaction, of wanting. Watching it without acting on the desire.

Here there are so many opportunities to do this, to get familiar with this state of wanting. It'll happen all over the place in ways that are not so threatening—like looking at people while walking. That was an

exploration for me for weeks on one three-month course: that feeling, that wanting of looking at people. Feeling how it was like the tractor beam from Star Trek, wanting to look at people, feeling that pull, watching it, then watching it spring into being. Finding a place where I could walk where there weren't too many people, and then seeing that wanting spring into being as soon as somebody appeared in my field of vision. Feeling it, watching it, not following through and looking, but feeling the wanting—and then seeing it disappear, just vanish when that person moved out of sight.

Feeling the wanting vanish like that feels like being released from a vice grip. That moment of seeing the release from wanting is such a clear demonstration of the freedom that comes from letting go. The ease, the peace that comes when the mind has let go of clinging.

There are all kinds of opportunities to play with this. I really think of practice as a big sandbox. Let's try this thing. Let's try that thing. Let's play with observing these states. Play with not going back if there's a dessert some night. Play with not going back for seconds. And watch your mind. It's something you want—just play with it.

We need some discernment with looking at sense desire, to recognize the distinction between allowing the feeling of desire and indulging the feeling. Sometimes the desire can move into fantasy of having that thing, and the fantasy is pleasant, and it will mask that sense of dissatisfaction. So we need to be honest with ourselves about when we are actually looking at the desire and when it kind of slips into indulging.

We also need to be compassionate with ourselves. Sometimes our mindfulness isn't quite strong enough to meet the hindrances. This is true for any of the hindrances, and in the case of sense desire, sometimes there's something we have such a pull towards, some habitual desire that we have such a pull towards, that when we try to bring mindfulness to it, the momentum of the desire is stronger than our ability to meet it. That mindfulness just gets sucked into the momentum of the desire.

So we also need to be honest with ourselves when we find that it's not so helpful actually to try to relax, observe, and allow sense desire—when we try to relax, observe, allow, and two seconds later we're caught back in that state of desire. Maybe it's time to pick some other experience. Not to repress the desire, but just kind of set it aside. It's like, "Yeah, not now. Not now. I'm just going to put my attention over here."

I'm going to put my attention on something else—I'll open my eyes and pay attention to seeing for a little while. So just placing your attention elsewhere, perhaps on something a little neutral rather than something pleasant in this case.

The second of the hindrances is ill will. This is related to the aspect of aversion—not liking things, wanting to get rid of things, wanting to push things away. Dislike of things, of people, of situations, of experience, of ourselves even. In this case, we are buying into a delusion. The story that ill will tells us is that happiness will depend on getting rid of this thing, getting rid of this unpleasant thing. The agitation, the stirring, happens with the feeling that we have to get rid of it. Again, the movement to fix, to control, to

change. We're pulled out of the experience of the present moment in order to do something, to get rid of something. If only I could get rid of this thing, then I'll be happy.

It's essentially like we're stirring up that jar of water, trying to scoop out little bits of mud. Every time we stick the spoon in to try to get a little bit out, to get rid of it, we're just stirring it up more and more. So the wanting to get rid of is just contributing to the agitation. The bowl of water analogy for ill will is that the water is boiling. The heat agitates the water and we can't see clearly the reflection.

So again, non-resistance to this state—very similar in a way to sense desire, kind of the flip side of sense desire. Taking the attention away from the thing we want to get rid of and turning the attention to the feeling of ill will itself. What does it feel like to want to get rid of something? What is that feeling of pushing away like? Turning the attention to the body. Often it's really helpful to turn the attention to the body with this experience. Seeing if you can let go of thoughts around ill will—likewise with sense desire. Thoughts like "they shouldn't have done that" or "I have to have that"—thoughts contribute to the stirring. And so if you can take your attention and put it in the body, it helps to let the thoughts settle so that they're not stirring things up.

What is it like to feel that you don't want something? When we can turn to that feeling itself, we see that this feeling of ill will has somehow convinced us that the only way to happiness is to get rid of the thing we don't want. The delusion of ill will is not going to tell us that if the ill will goes away, it won't be a problem. Likewise with sense desire—the delusion of sense desire isn't going to tell us that if the wanting goes away, the problem goes away. The delusion of sense desire, the delusion of ill will, is focused on the thing we want, the experience we want, the state we want or want to get rid of. So can we turn towards that feeling itself? The state of the body—how does it feel? Just the simplicity of: what does it feel like to want to get rid of something? It's not so threatening actually when we can just be with that feeling. Oh, this is what wanting to get rid of feels like. This is what hostility, pushing away feels like.

As with sense desire, there are times when the state of ill will—which can take the form of self-hatred, can take the form of rage, really strong forms of that aversive state of mind—sometimes the energy of that ill will is stronger than our ability to meet it. When we try to turn our attention towards that anger, that self-hatred, we find ourselves sucked into the story of it again and again and again. So again, being honest with ourselves about when it's not so helpful to use that relax, observe, allow. Instead: not now.

That "not now" is a setting aside, a kind of skillful ignoring. The way I framed it to myself was this: I would see something like anger arise and recognize, yeah, not a good time to pay attention to this. And the little conversation in my mind would go something like, "Yeah, I see you. I see you're wanting some attention, but this isn't a good time. So you do your thing—I'm not going to stop you—but I'm going to put my attention on my feet. I'm just going to put my attention on my feet and walk right now."

So letting it be, essentially. Not trying to repress it, but also not engaging with it. That whole conversation I had with myself did get collapsed down to just: not now. With essentially that light tone. It wasn't "NOT

NOW!"

It was not now. I'm going to put my attention here. A very, very skillful tool when ill will is strong in that way—kind of recognizing when we're overwhelmed by that state.

The third of the hindrances is sloth and torpor. In my meetings with many of you, you've mentioned this as being something that's present these days. It's a pretty familiar state for the beginning of retreat. Sometimes we call it "the swamp"—you know, the first few days of retreat just feel like we're trudging through sludge. And in fact, the analogy for sloth and torpor, the water analogy, is that there's algae growing on the bowl of water. So, kind of a literal swamp.

Sloth and torpor is a low energy state. It's the states of sleepiness, dullness, fogginess, being spaced out—that kind of state of mind. Sometimes actual sleep. The energy is low, and because the energy is low, it's hard to see clearly.

But much of the agitation around this state has to do with thoughts like, "I can't pay attention while my mind is this dull. This is a problem. This has to be fixed." The thought "I can't meditate if I'm in this state." How many of you have had that belief, had that thought come into your mind when you're in a state of dullness? "I can't meditate in this state."

I'd actually like to propose that if you have that thought, if you can be aware that you have this thought—"I can't meditate when my mind is this dull"—there's actually enough energy and mindfulness to meet the sleepiness and the dullness, to actually be aware of it. Now, if you're actually falling asleep, you're not going to have that thought; you're going to be asleep. But if you find yourself thinking that thought, question it. See if you can turn it around and say, "I've got enough mindfulness to think that thought. Let's see if I can meet the dullness and sleepiness."

Sleepiness is an interesting experience because it has this quality when we're resisting it—which we often do in meditation. When we're sleepy and we're meditating, we feel like we're not supposed to be sleepy. We're supposed to be alert. It's when we're alert that we can see things clearly, and that's when insights are going to come. So we have those thoughts, and we're resisting the sleepiness.

When we resist the sleepiness, the dullness, those states feel really unpleasant. It doesn't feel very good. We're fighting them. But often—not always, sometimes the thickness of mind itself has an unpleasant quality—but often the resistance to sloth and torpor is the largest part of the unpleasantness of it. And many times I've seen that as soon as the resistance stops—oh, does it feel good! It's a really pleasant experience to be sleepy.

That's a little carrot for you. When it feels good, it can be a little bit more fun to try to pay attention to. So even just the shift from resistance to non-resistance, if you can feel the sensations and recognize the pleasantness of it, that might be enough to keep you aware enough to be present for the experience itself.

On one retreat, one of my early retreats, I finally realized that I just couldn't resist the sleepiness, but I found that I could kind of watch it. And during one particular sitting, I let go—I just completely let go of the resistance to it. And I just watched it. I felt the sleepiness descend. The body first got really relaxed. The body was like, "Yeah." There was awareness, but the body was really relaxed. That felt pretty good. The muscles got all soft. The inside got all soft. I thought, "That's pleasant. That's really pleasant."

So noticing the pleasantness of that, and then watching the mind go into these really pleasant states—like just before sleep, the mind goes into these really pleasant, wave-like experiences. And then I would fall asleep. I was sitting, right? So this woke me up. Okay, I'm awake. Let's do it again. Just let the body get all soft and gushy. Let the mind go.

And do it again. It was so much fun—better than any Disneyland ride I'd ever been on. It was a really fun exploration, and something that surprised me as I did this. Through this exploration, in the period of a forty-five-minute sitting, my mind began to recognize the state just before I dropped. The mind knew the moment before I was going to fall asleep. And when it recognized that moment, all I had to do was straighten my spine a little bit. There'd be a little rush of energy, then I could let go and do it all again. That entire sitting was an exploration of mindfulness of sleepiness, mindfulness of that hindrance. And yet it wasn't hindering the mindfulness. It wasn't hindering the continuity. It wasn't hindering the cultivation of concentration. In fact, it was the very support for that cultivation.

I really encourage you to have fun with your hindrances. It's kind of amazing. We think there are certain states we cannot be mindful of. And if there's any state you think that about—I can't be mindful when I'm spaced out, I can't be mindful when I'm this or that—question it. I started to question that and got interested in how it might be possible to be mindful of spacing out, and I discovered that it is possible. So looking at this as a possibility for waking up.

Now again, there are times to use the antidotes—when if you try to be mindful of sleepiness, you fall asleep and you're out until the bell rings. If you're finding that level of sleepiness, it takes some honesty. It takes some willingness to look at what's happening and recognize, okay, mindfulness for sleepiness right now doesn't seem to be working. I would try mindfulness first and see what happens. And if you end up lost in the sleepiness or asleep for long stretches of time, then use some of the antidotes. Stand up, open your eyes, look at light, do some walking meditation, walk backwards. That's a great antidote to sleepiness. My teacher in Burma, Sayadaw U Janaka, taught me that one. Walk backwards. It's amazing how it makes the mind more alert.

The fourth of these hindrances is restlessness and remorse. This hindrance has both a bodily side and a mental side. Sometimes the bodily side is just the restlessness of body—feeling like jumping beans under your skin, or restless leg syndrome, like you just cannot sit still, like your body is going to explode. The restlessness of mind is the mind feeling like it can't settle, like the mind is so jumpy. The analogy for the bowl of water is that the water is rippled by the wind.

With physical restlessness, that jumping-bean quality, there are different ways to pay attention to something. Often we have a focused quality to our attention—we dive in and look at things closely. With restlessness, it's really helpful to have a wide-open lens. Almost like letting the restlessness get as big as this room. Let the awareness get as big as the room. Let the restlessness get as big as the room. It sounds a little scary to think of it that way, but when we're trying to contain that physical restlessness in the body, it's like a pressure cooker. We're holding it in this really small space, and it's like all this fast energy sparking around. Whereas if it's got a big container, that energy has much more space to be held. So that sense of having a big container of awareness can be very helpful.

With the restless mind, with the spinning in the thoughts, when the mind feels like it just cannot settle, just jumping from thing to thing to thing—sometimes there's an emotion underneath that. Anxiety, worry. We'll talk in a few days more about working with emotions, but one of the most helpful tools is turning toward how that emotion feels in the body. If you notice restlessness, you might just check in. Is there something else happening here? Some other emotion going on? Oh yes, there's worry. What does worry feel like in the body? Again, seeing if you can let go of the thoughts and turn toward the bodily experience. Sometimes this restless mind is the mind trying to work something out, trying to figure something out, motivated by this emotion.

And sometimes the restless mind is that emotion trying to get our attention. *Pay attention to me. Something's wrong here. We need to do something about this. Hey, you got to fix this.* So sometimes the restless mind is that emotion seeking acknowledgment. And when we actually turn to that emotion itself, the emotion goes, *Oh, thank goodness you're paying attention to me.* And it stops spinning out so much.

There's a lot more that we could say about restlessness, but time is limited this evening. I would really encourage exploring that broader attention for a restless mind. Restlessness is a very core hindrance. It's said that restlessness is one of the last hindrances to go before we get enlightened. So it's going to be with us for a long time. It's worth getting familiar with it, beginning to understand it, learning about it. The learning about it will allow the grosser forms, the larger forms, to begin to release and settle. And then we start working with subtler forms and subtler forms and subtler forms. Restlessness is embedded very deeply into our minds.

As for using antidotes, again, if it feels like the mindfulness just makes it explode—sometimes with restlessness, if we turn towards it, it's like a positive feedback loop and it becomes a screaming restlessness in our experience—it might be helpful then to take a walk, go outside, open your eyes, be in nature. Just take your attention off the restlessness itself and put yourself in a more spacious container. Allow for a spacious mind.

The fifth of the hindrances is doubt. There are so many different kinds of doubt in our practice. Doubt in ourselves is probably the biggest one that we meet. We also doubt the teachers. We doubt the teachings. *T he Buddha lived 2600 years ago. What on earth does he know about the kinds of suffering I'm experiencing*

here and now? It does happen to turn out that minds haven't changed too much, so the tools he offers us are completely applicable to our situation.

The analogy for doubt is water clouded by mud so that we can't see. It often manifests as a kind of wavering, a vacillation. In terms of our practice, sometimes we have doubt about what practice we should do right now. *Should I do metta? Should I focus on the breathing? Maybe I should go take a walk. Or maybe I should do mindless gazing, useless gazing practice and have a cup of tea.* We're caught in this what-should-I-do mentality. The mind walks two steps down the path of one practice. *Well, let's do loving-kindness. May I be happy. Oh no, no, let's do anapanasati. Breathe in. Oh, let's take a walk.* So we end up taking only a few steps this way, then coming back and taking a few steps that way.

The analogy is of being lost in the desert. We take a few steps this way. *Maybe that's the way I'm supposed to go. No, no, that's not right. Let me go this way. No, no, that's not right. Let me go this way.* Doubt has that vacillating quality to it—not being able to decide what to do. The mind can spin in what can sound like very logical, wise arguments, discussions in our heads. And yet those very thoughts are keeping us from being here in the present moment.

One of the most important tools with doubt is to get familiar with the stories of doubt. *I can't do this.*

What good is this? I should do another practice. What do these teachers know? Get familiar with the stories around doubt. When you recognize the mind caught in a story of doubt, there's hope. Then we can start to pay attention to it. Then we can turn towards the experience of doubt. What does doubt feel like?

Often there is some kind of underlying emotion with doubt as well. I find it often related to fear—some kind of vulnerability, a feeling of inadequacy, a fear of failure, a fear of the unknown. Often these kinds of emotions will lead us to doubt. But look for yourself. When you recognize doubt, when you recognize, "Oh, this is doubt"—I remember on one retreat, I was in a state of doubt. I was doing walking meditation in the courtyard out here when it hit me: "Oh, this is doubt. That's what's happening here." My mind had gone off into these thoughts—I shouldn't be here, this practice isn't for me, I'm obviously not worthy of this practice. And at some point it was like, "Oh, this is doubt. Okay."

What does doubt feel like? And I turned towards my experience. What's here? Doubt is here. And what's here? The feeling was a surprise to me. The feeling was grief. That was the feeling. And when I felt the grief, the whole thing collapsed within a few minutes. And I was just back in the practice.

Doubt feeds on non-mindfulness. When the mind is aware of what's happening in the present moment, doubt cannot get a foothold. The antidote to doubt is attention in the present moment. And so if you can recognize "this is doubt," that very recognition is the beginning of doubt falling apart.

Sometimes our doubt is intellectual. We want to understand how things work, how the practice works, whether it will work, whether it's worth doing this practice versus that practice. And so we think about it rather than actually doing it. There's a term that's applied to the Dhamma: *ehipassiko*. It means "come and

see." Try it. Instead of thinking about whether something's going to work, run the experiment. Try it and see.

For me, this has been a great antidote to that kind of intellectual doubt. Like that question I had at the very beginning, when I read that book and it said to pay attention to your anger. "Well, what good's that going to do?" That was doubt. But as I said, because I had hit bottom, I was willing to try it and see. Somebody says it's useful. Maybe it's helpful. So there's the willingness to run the experiment, the willingness to try. Come and see. That willingness is the step of faith that also is the antidote to doubt.

I hope that you really have gotten a sense of the possibility of working with the hindrances—not simply because we need to get rid of them in order to get to the real practice, but that this *is* our practice, and the depth of what we can learn in the exploration of it. How much we learn about our hearts and minds in this exploration, and actually how much freedom is possible through that exploration.

Let's sit together for a moment.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.