Awareness of Hindrances: It Is Possible

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:59

It really is a privilege to sit up here and see you all, feel you all—really more than see. Just connecting to the energy of your practice. It is so inspiring to have the privilege to spend so much of my year with people who really want to look at their hearts, their minds, to explore what it means to understand what's happening and to purify, to move in the direction of love and compassion and equanimity and joy, and to begin to release the tendency to move towards greed, aversion, and delusion. It's a rare thing in this world, what you're doing.

Tonight I'd like to talk about some of the mind states, the difficult energies that tend to get in our way, that we tend to get caught in and struggle with as we practice. The Buddha highlighted five particularly challenging mental energies that tend to unsettle our minds, to get in the way of concentration. These are the five hindrances: sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt. Anybody experiencing those?

They manifest in so many different forms. They can be very obvious, screamingly obvious—"Get me out of here!"—ranging from a really strong energy to a very subtle form. Each of these hindrances has a range of strength. Along the line of aversion, it might go from the strength of screaming rage or anger or fear all the way down to the subtlest kind of "not that," or a kind of "I can put up with that"—not in a balanced way, but just a slightly resistant way.

Wherever you are in the course of your retreat, whether you're at the beginning or halfway through a three-month course, these energies will be arising. They are worth being familiar with in both their subtle and obvious forms, because they tend to represent the edges of our practice. When they are arising, there's something asking to be seen, something asking to be known.

The word "hindrance" gives us a particular sense. The Pali word *nivarana* literally means something like "covering," but it's often translated as hindrance, and the Buddha does speak of these qualities of mind as getting in the way of concentration in certain forms. That word tends to make us think, "All right, how do I get rid of these? How do I figure out how not to have these come up?" After all, if they're hindrances, we should want to not have them. That's the way we relate to that word.

And yet, in the fourth foundation of mindfulness, in the Buddha's meditation instructions, the list of these energies is right in there as a way we can cultivate mindfulness and wisdom. When we shift our perspective on these states of mind, when we explore what it means to be curious about them and understand them rather than be lost in them or believe them, instead of hindering our path, they actually become the way our practice can deepen.

You may not believe me. I certainly didn't believe the teachers when they said, "Yes, you can be mindful of aversion, and it really doesn't matter what you're mindful of. If you're mindful with this curiosity, with a wise attitude, then it doesn't matter whether aversion is arising or sound is arising." I thought they were just saying that to be nice or something. I went through a large part of my practice believing that if the hindrances were arising, I was doing something wrong and needed to figure out how to get rid of them.

But it really wasn't until I began to open to them as teachers that things shifted. They really are teachers for us. They point out places where we have something to learn. Often these hindrances are experienced as suffering, as dukkha. They're unpleasant. And the Buddha's instructions for us around suffering, in the First Noble Truth, say: there is suffering, and when suffering is arising, we understand that suffering is arising. Our task around this arising is to understand it—not in an intellectual way, but in an experiential way. This is our work, our practice around these difficult states: to explore what it means to open to them, to understand them experientially.

I think the other morning I spoke about having the stance of a naturalist in our receptive awareness. As we explore meeting our experience, receiving our experience, rather than going out and trying to figure out what's going on, we can have this stance of a naturalist who sits quietly and watches what's happening, or feels into what's happening. A naturalist in the world tries not to get in the way of the natural unfolding but simply to witness it. That can be our exploration in observing all of our experience, including the hindrances.

One language I like to explore in this receptive stance, particularly around the hindrances, is the language of being with experience.

What does it mean to be with anger or frustration or desire or sleepiness or restlessness or doubt? To me, that language of "being with" is supportive in my own experience. It may or may not be for you, so check it out. See if it's supportive for you to think about what it means to be with experience.

There's a difference between being with aversion and being averse. We know this difference. We understand and recognize a kind of shift that can happen when we explore moving from being averse to being with aversion. When we are being averse, we're caught in the midst of that difficult state. But we might be able to shift into, "Oh, aversion is happening." That's a kind of being with—aversion is happening.

That shift represents a vast difference between being averse and being with aversion, between being averse and understanding that aversion is happening. There is a kind of space that opens around the experience when we understand that shift. In that place where we can be with experience, that's where we can begin to be curious about what it means to know the human experience of this difficult state.

This exploration of human experience is another way I like to think about exploring the hindrances in general. The hindrances are human experiences. You are not alone when you experience them. The

causes and conditions that arise in your mind leading to hindrances—very similar patterns are going on in everyone's mind. It's not just you. And so what might it mean to look at it as a human experience rather than my anger, my aversion, my sleepiness?

James Baraz has a fun way to explore this perspective of being with and being a naturalist about our experience, especially around difficulty. He says there were times in his practice where he decided he would pretend he was an alien that took up residence in this human body. His job as that alien was to report back to the mothership what it was like to be in a human being. This is what it's like when they feel anger. This is what it's like when they feel happiness. This is what it's like when they feel sleepiness. It's a humorous way, perhaps a light-hearted way, to put us into that stance of curiosity about the human experience of these states of mind.

As we meet hindrances from this stance, as we meet experience from this stance, hindrances are no longer hindrances. They just become another experience that can be known, that can be understood, and around which wisdom and understanding can arise.

So I'd like to take some time with each of the five hindrances, to offer some thoughts and suggestions about working with each of them. Actually, more what I'd like to explore is ways that I have found helpful for meeting these experiences—opening to them, exploring them with mindfulness—so that they aren't something I'm battling with, trying to somehow get rid of them, but rather something I'm curious about. What is the experience of sense desire? How does it work in a human being?

Sense desire is a desire to have sense pleasure. Very natural, as Greg mentioned the other day. It's a natural movement. We all move in that direction, towards surrounding ourselves with things that feel comfortable, things that feel pleasant. Having comfortable things around us, having pleasant experiences, is not in itself particularly an issue. But what happens is that our mind begins to orient towards having to have things in a certain way, trying to construct our lives such that they're a string of pleasant moments, like we're stringing beads—pleasant moment after pleasant moment after pleasant moment. And if we miss and don't get a pleasant moment in there, we feel like we've done something wrong. We are driven by this desire, this urge to satisfy that wish for pleasant experience.

As Greg said the other day, this kind of pleasantness, this kind of having pleasant experience, it's a form of happiness, and the Buddha spoke about that. He said that kind of happiness isn't particularly a problem. But he did point to it as a lesser kind of happiness. The happiness of concentration, the happiness of understanding, the happiness of release, the happiness of equanimity, of being okay with things as they are—these are much deeper forms of happiness. And we do have to explore what it means to let go of this lesser happiness in order to move ourselves in the direction of this greater happiness.

So we are driven by this desire, this wish, this wanting to surround ourselves with pleasant experience. Again, it's not the pleasant experience that's inherently a problem, but this wish, the wanting to have it be a certain way. This is what we need to look at. The energy of desire kind of keeps us out of the present

moment when we're not aware of it. When we're not present for desire as it's arising, we're believing it, buying into it.

We believe we have to fulfill desire. The story of desire is, "I need this thing, this experience, this state of mind, in order to be happy." That's the belief that stands behind desire. And when we're caught by a desire, when we're in that belief, it's like we do not see any other possibility than satisfying that desire.

So the first exploration around desire is to see if we can recognize that desire is happening, instead of buying into the belief of desire. That takes a little bit of a step back. One of the first explorations when we recognize that desire is happening is to see if we can perhaps take a step back from the thing we're desiring. When desire is running rampant, our attention is on the thing that we want—that cookie, that state of mind, that fantasy, that state of life. Our minds are kind of pulled out, thinking about how great it's going to be when that happens or when we get that thing. So our minds are projecting forward, not in the present moment, not aware of what's happening in the present moment, and not particularly aware of the experience of desire itself. Because the story of desire is putting us into the future where we would have that pleasant thing.

And so sometimes we think that desire feels good, because it's connected to the wanting of something pleasant. But if we take a step back, let go of putting the attention on the thing that we want, and feel into the experience of desire itself, we quickly see that desire itself actually doesn't feel good. It's an unpleasant state. As soon as desire springs up, there's a feeling of lack in our system. As soon as there's desire, there's a feeling that something's off, that it has to be fixed, it has to be changed, I need that thing. It really is this pattern around desire that has us believing that getting that thing is what's necessary. That's the story of desire.

Some of the process by which desire unfolds, some of the reason why this is such a potent force for us, is that when we get the thing that we want, when we act on that desire and we get the thing that we want, there's some measure of happiness that comes from having that thing, that state, that experience. Some measure of happiness comes from the having of the pleasant. And at the same time, there's a measure of happiness that comes from the relief of that unpleasant wanting. So we have both the release of an unpleasant and the getting of a pleasant—a very potent force in our minds.

Desire believes that it has to get the thing that it wants in order to have that release. Desire is not going to tell you that if you just let go of wanting that thing, if you just explore the experience of desire and see desire disappear, that release will bring a deeper kind of happiness than the having of that thing. That's what's quite amazing as we step back, as we see if we can let go of having our attention on the thing that we are wanting and step into the feeling of desire.

We feel into maybe the pull. Sometimes it feels like—if any of you are Star Trek fans—a tractor beam, you know, kind of the pull to something. That's sometimes the feeling of desire. It's like, "Ooh, need to have that thing." A cookie. It's like the feeling of the cookie is pulling. That feeling is kind of a feeling of being

off. There can be a physical sense. We can come into the body and feel into the physicality of what it feels like to want something. There's a mind that feels constricted and tight around that particular thing that we need. And so we can explore that state itself. What does it feel like? What is that experience?

I have spent a lot of time on retreat watching this experience. Sometimes as I watch it, I commit myself to not follow through—not always, but sometimes I would pick something and say, "Okay, I'm not going to follow through on that. I'm just going to watch it." At one point I spent quite a bit of time watching the wanting to look at people, especially in walking meditation. People walk by, I really want to see who's walking by, but I just decided I was going to explore the wanting instead. That feeling of that pull to look at somebody, just watching that, not looking but feeling that pull. And then watching as that person walked up the stairs of the front door here and disappeared into the building—the wanting vanishes.

Seeing that wanting vanish in that moment was like being released from a vice grip, really giving me the understanding of just how potent and how actually painful wanting is. And that that wanting didn't need the satisfaction of knowing who that was in order to be released.

And so being curious about exploring wanting itself. Letting go of the thing that we want, stepping back, exploring the experience of wanting itself. Seeing if you can let go of thoughts around wanting that particular thing. Let go perhaps just means not putting so much attention in them. You may not be able to stop them, but see if you can connect with the experience, the understanding the Buddha was talking about—the experience of wanting.

In this exploration of meeting wanting, we need to have some discernment about when perhaps the wanting is stronger than our capacity to meet it with mindfulness. And then we need to learn some skillful means. This is true with all the hindrances. There are times in exploring them where the power of the hindrance is stronger than our capacity for mindfulness. It's almost like the hindrance is this swamping wave and our mindfulness is this trickle of a stream. We need to recognize that.

Sometimes we might see that in trying to be with a particular desire, we just get pulled into it over and over again. Maybe that's not the time to try to be present with that. Maybe that's the time to step back, to use another strategy—such as coming to your anchor, perhaps consciously putting your attention on something else, learning some skillful means. And also recognizing if the allowing is turning into indulging.

If we are looking at a fantasy arising and thinking, "I'm just going to explore being with this fantasy and watching the desire," it's possible. We can do that. But we can also just get into the fantasy. So we need some honesty in this exploration. Are we really exploring being with it, or are we indulging it?

The hindrance of ill will has many similarities to how desire functions. Ill will has a range—many states of mind are in this terrain, from irritation, resistance, anger, frustration, annoyance, hatred, rage, resentment, to dislike. A real range of states in this hindrance. It's basically an aversion, a dislike of what's

happening.

In this case, the story of aversion is that happiness depends on getting rid of this thing—either through some kind of lashing out, a movement of annihilation to get rid of something, or in the terrain of fear, getting myself out of the situation. Happiness will come if I get out of here. There are different flavors of this quality of ill will in our experience. Sometimes it has a quality of lashing out, sometimes a quality of withdrawing.

This pulls us away from the present moment when we're not aware of it, by being oriented around trying to fix, change, figure out how to get rid of things, figure out how to control something, figure out how to get myself out of a situation.

Very similarly to desire, as soon as ill will springs up, there's this feeling of necessity around following through on its energy. I need to control this thing, I need to fix it to change it in order to be happy. Whatever it is that we have that feeling of aversion about—maybe a pain in the body, maybe what somebody else is doing, maybe a sound, maybe a mind state, maybe just what's happening that feels like it's not right at this moment, that it should be something else—see if you can take the attention out of what you don't want or don't like, and put it into that energy of aversion itself. How does that feel? What is that experience? Again, perhaps feel it in the body. Does it feel like pushing away?

In my experience, the nature of aversion is to separate—whether that separation comes through getting rid of something, kind of annihilating it, or whether it comes through moving myself out of it. What is that state? What is this experience of wanting to separate?

Sometimes it feels like a contraction in the body, in the heart, around the heart—a closing down of the heart, a pressure. Sometimes it feels like heat and pressure pushing away, lashing out. Various flavors of what this experience feels like.

Often many thoughts come along with ill will—what somebody should have done, shouldn't have done, what I should have done, how I should have responded. See again if you can take your mind out of the thoughts and into the experience. What is the actual experience of aversion? The thoughts are often a kind of fuel.

And so if we're thinking about the thing we don't like, it's like our foot is on the gas pedal and we are revving up the emotion associated with those thoughts. We don't like something, and thinking about it—"I really hate that thing, that's just such an awful thing"—is going to increase the aversion and the ill will, the experience of ill will. And so, again, taking the attention out of the thoughts, away from the thing that we're averse to, and coming into the experience of aversion itself.

Now, aversion is an unpleasant experience, and sometimes we end up with aversion to aversion. Sometimes we may simply be able to recognize, "Oh yes, there's aversion, and I don't like it." That's what's happening. Sometimes it can be that simple. And sometimes it has a kind of snowball effect. We have

aversion to something, and then we're angry at that aversion, and then we get afraid of our anger, and then we're frustrated by our fear—it's just this incredible piling of reactivity, a multiple hindrance attack around aversion. Hindrance of hindrance of hindrance of hindrance.

If it feels like, when you explore what it means to take up residence as the alien—what does it feel like to be a human being experiencing aversion?—and it feels like the aversion just runs out of control, sometimes I use this analogy of going down the rabbit hole. If that happens when you try to explore being present for aversion, that may not be the time to try to explore that. So again, there are strategies we can use to take our attention away from that and put it on something else.

One of my favorite approaches is this: when strong aversion arises and I recognize that right now is not the time to explore it—aversion is my favorite hindrance, one that I have spent a lot of time with—I would recognize it and bow to it. I'd say, "I see you, anger. And right now, you can stay in the room with me. You can walk next to me," because I was often walking. "I see you, and I'm not going to try to stop you, but right now I'm going to put my attention in my feet." And I would just pay attention to that. It was a kind of turning to something neutral, without aversion, without resistance to that state, but also without repression. A kind of meeting it, bowing to it. Not now. And I'm going to put my attention on something else—in a very friendly way. "I see you, and you can hang out with me, but I'm going to put my attention someplace else." Just redirecting the attention to something neutral.

If it's a strong aversion attack, the breath may not be the best neutral experience, because often with strong aversion the breath is involved. Have you noticed, when there's a lot of difficult emotion, how the breath can be ragged, how the breath can be caught up in that emotion? And so picking something outside of this core area of the body as a place to ground—hands, hearing, feet on the ground—something neutral and something simple can be really helpful as a strategy.

Sometimes I also find it helpful to consciously broaden the container. If something is magnetizing the attention, especially something unpleasant like a pain in the body, where the mindfulness feels magnetized to it, then that experience becomes your whole world. You're embedded in that place, and that's all there is. So we use some reminder that we know that isn't all there is. While the attention is magnetized to that right now, there are also thousands of other things happening in the present moment. We consciously broaden the container. Maybe we open our eyes if we're in the hall and just recognize, "Yes, there's that difficult state, the aversion, there's the pain—and seeing is happening, and hearing is happening." Going through the sense doors: seeing is happening, hearing is happening, body senses. "Oh, there's the aversion again. Okay, that's happening. And seeing is happening." Just keeping stretching the container to help the mind recognize that it doesn't have to be stuck to that. This can be an action that begins to balance the mind if it's not possible to just meet and be with the aversion as it is.

This does take some honesty to recognize when we are overwhelmed, and to use that wisdom to shift to a skillful means, a skillful strategy to balance the mind.

The third of the hindrances is sloth and torpor. This is in the terrain of sleepiness, dullness, low energy, thick mind. Often the mind is not clear because of the low energy, because of dullness. And often the mind gets agitated around this state—something like believing or thinking, "I can't meditate if I'm dull or sleepy."

I have to fix this. I have to change this.

So what I'd like to explore here with you—how many of you have had the thought, "I'm too sleepy to meditate"? When you have that thought, if you're thinking it and you know you're thinking it, what I'd like to propose is this: if you can recognize that you're thinking that thought, you actually have enough energy to know the experience of sleepiness itself, or dullness itself—maybe just for a few moments. But you've already recognized sleepiness. You've already been aware of it. There's been a moment of noticing it, to have that thought. So this is a possibility I'd like to encourage.

Often sleepiness and dullness feel unpleasant in meditation, partly because we're resisting them. Sleepiness is usually this way—if we're resisting it, it feels really unpleasant. But if you decide to explore what the actual experience is, what's the human experience of sleepiness, that reporting back to the mothership, you'll find it's actually very pleasant.

There was one sitting where I finally realized there was just so much sleepiness that this was all I could do—just be mindful of the sleepiness. So I would feel into it. I was sitting up straight, and I encourage this when you're sleepy: find a posture in which if you fall asleep, it will wake you up. If you're sitting in a chair slumped back, it may not wake you up. So I was sitting up straight, and I would feel into it, and not resisting it, the body got very heavy, lots of pleasant sensations. And then the mind went into this lovely vibrating, pulsing, and then... that woke me up. So I sat up and did it all over again. It looked like this—nodding, dropping, waking. But the mindfulness was there for all but those dropping moments. It actually was a very present sitting.

And by the end of that sitting, I had recognized, I had seen it enough, I had watched that process of dropping enough, that I knew in the mind the moment before I was going to fall asleep. And instead of dropping, I just sat up a little straighter, which gave a little bit of energy. Then I'd relax and do it all over again. So then it ended up looking something like this—a gentle rising and settling. And again, quite a bit of mindfulness.

One thing that happens with dullness and sleepiness is that we often have some idea about what we want to be paying attention to. We want to be with our breath. We want to be noticing sound. We want that clarity where everything is sharp and delightful and we know every single moment of experience. Having fogginess or dullness in the mind is kind of like having a mirror coated by steam. The job of a mirror is to reflect experience, much as mindfulness reflects whatever is happening. The job of a mirror is to reflect what's in the room. And if we're standing in front of that mirror and there's fog on it, maybe we can kind of see our shape, our outline. We may feel like the mirror's not doing its job. But the mirror is doing its job

perfectly. It's reflecting every drop of water on that mirror. It's just not doing the job we want it to do.

Very similarly with sleepiness and dullness. Often our resistance to these states is because when the mind is thick, when it's low energy, it's hard to direct the attention and pay attention to the breath. It's hard to notice other experience. But can you come in closer? Can you notice just the low energy, reflecting those drops of water on the mirror? That's what the mind is most naturally doing in that moment. And that's what I'd like to propose is possible for us when we think, "Oh, I'm too sleepy to be mindful, too sleepy to meditate." See if you can know the experience of sleepiness or dullness or thickness of mind, low energy.

These states of fogginess, of dullness, of sleepiness—they're kind of vague. There was a question this morning about vague experience, and exploring things like sleepiness and dullness begins to give us a sense of what it means to meet vague experience. Another way to explore this: if it's really foggy outside—there was some fog here the other day—and you're looking out at the fog, you're not going to be able to see the trees clearly, or maybe even at all if it's a really thick fog. But the fog is there. You can know the fog; we can know that. It's not precise. We can't point at it and say, "That's the fog."

It's more vague, more diffuse. This might be similar to the experience of hearing a kind of static noise in the background—you can't just point at it and say, "Oh, that's that noise." It's more of a diffuse sound. And then sometimes there are specific sounds like a cough or a sneeze. But that vague, diffuse sound, even the sound of the amplifier—it's a broader kind of sound. And so sleepiness and dullness are a more vague kind of experience. We know them, but we can't point at them and say, "That's what it is."

This exploration of recognizing vague states is a very helpful direction in our practice. There's a lot of experience that happens as our practice deepens and unfolds that's not very precise and not very specific. And if we are constantly wanting things to be precise and specific, we are going to miss huge areas of our experience. In my own practice, this exploration around low energy and dull mind has been a great learning ground for being with these broad or vague states of mind.

Restlessness is also a vague or broader state of body or mind. There can be both physical restlessness, which can be experienced as jumpiness in the body, almost like there are jumping beans under the skin—a state of agitation. And there's a mental side of it too, the experience of a mind that just feels like it's swirling or spinning, not particularly wanting to land anywhere, or just landing on one thing and then another and then another.

So again, we can open to what the experience of restlessness itself is. One exploration, much like with sleepiness, is broadening to the vaguer side of it rather than trying to pin it down and say, "What are all these sensations in the body?" Just let the awareness get broad. Don't try to be so precise about knowing the restlessness. Don't try to know every little thing the mind is landing on. Just have a sense of the spinning energy or the experience of restlessness in the body. Just stepping back.

I sometimes have the feeling with restlessness of almost allowing the awareness to expand rather than

feeling like I'm holding it in here. It feels like a pressure cooker with restlessness if we're trying to just observe inside the body. But if we allow the awareness to get as big as the room, or to expand into space, into the vastness—let the restlessness get as big as that. It can be a little scary to think about. But when the restlessness has more room, it's kind of like the analogy some people use of giving a wild horse a bigger pasture to run in rather than this tiny little pasture where it's running up against the fence every two steps. Give it a larger pasture. A sense of giving the mind space when there's restlessness.

It can also be helpful, if it's not so easy to be with the restlessness, to use some antidotes. Find some ways to work with it—sometimes a faster walk can be helpful, or opening the eyes, or getting into nature, feeling the breeze, just putting yourself in a different situation. Being outside can often support the mind when it's restless.

And then there's doubt, the fifth of the hindrances. Two nights ago, Greg talked about faith quite a bit, and doubt is kind of the flip side of faith. We have doubts in ourselves and our ability to do the practice. We have doubts in the teachings, doubts in the practice itself, doubts about the teachers.

The description of doubt in the suttas is one of wavering. The Buddha says doubt is kind of like being lost in a desert. You take a couple of steps this way and think, "That can't be right," and go back, take a couple of steps that way, "Oh, that can't be right." It's got that quality of wavering—a feeling of wavering. The mind can't decide what to do. It spins often in logical arguments about what we should do, or think about what would be the best thing to do. Sometimes doubt can sound very wise. "Oh, I should do this. Oh, this isn't a good thing to do right now."

In terms of familiarity with doubt—doubt often comes about, or we recognize it, because of the kinds of thoughts happening in our minds. It can manifest as thoughts about the practice: "I can't do this. What good is this? I should do another practice. What do these teachers know?"

"How does what the Buddha said 2,600 years ago have anything to do with my life now?" Those kinds of thoughts—if you find yourself thinking about the practice in ways that take you away from the practice, that may well be doubt. Sometimes practice thoughts arise and actually bring us into the present moment. But if thoughts about the practice are things like "I can't do this" or "What good is this practice?" or perhaps "Maybe I should try this practice... no, not that one... maybe this one... no, maybe that one would be better"—if we find ourselves caught in that kind of thinking, it might be doubt.

Recognizing doubt is the most powerful tool we have with this hindrance, because doubt basically takes us pretty far from presence of mind. Often with the other hindrances, there's some measure of awareness involved. We know we're averse. We know that we want something. There's some measure of awareness possible even in sleepiness—"I know I'm too sleepy to meditate." But with doubt, we are often removed from even the possibility of awareness because we are so caught in the story. And so the recognition that doubt is happening is the biggest support for us.

When we can notice, "Oh yes, these are doubting thoughts," that's a first step. What I've found helpful next is not just to recognize that doubt is happening—which can be very helpful in itself. Sometimes when doubt is seen, it simply goes away. Sometimes that's all that's needed: turning the light of awareness and mindfulness onto doubt, and it withers in that clarity.

But sometimes doubt is related to deeper questions, deeper feelings of worthiness. I've had doubt related to feelings of vulnerability, feelings of inadequacy, feelings of failure, fear of failure, fear of the unknown—different emotional tones underneath thoughts like "I can't do this" or "I'm a failure" or "What do the teachers know?" So when I recognize those thoughts, it's like, "Okay, doubt is happening. What does doubt feel like?" Sometimes doubt feels like grief. Sometimes doubt feels like fear. And when we can be present for that, we're back. We're mindful again. We can explore what it means to be present with grief, what it means to be present with fear.

Mostly I hope this exploration of the hindrances has given you some interest and curiosity about investigating these states of mind. When the hindrances are arising, they are our path. Meeting them, being with them, opening to what's there—wisdom can grow, can arise.

I used to believe that being mindful of the hindrances was second-class practice, that the real practice would begin when I was completely free of hindrances. At one point, on one long retreat, I was looking at self-hatred quite a bit. I call it my self-hatred retreat. It was a three-month course, and I spent a lot of time with self-hatred. At first there was this feeling of it being a lesser practice. But at some point I thought, "Okay, well, I guess this is my self-hatred retreat." There was a little bit of surrendering to it—still some judgment, but at least I started to be more interested in investigating it, more curious about it, willing to witness it.

I learned so much during that retreat about the conditions that put it together, the beliefs that were operating in the mind. And then at one moment, during a late-night sitting, just watching very rapid little flits of self-hatred coming up in the mind, simply noticing them—

Oh, there it is. And I was using a practice that Joseph had suggested. As soon as I noticed it, I would recognize it and know: contact, unpleasant. Contact, unpleasant. I was just recognizing the very moment of the arising of self-hatred.

Watching that, in one moment the mind saw the arising and recognized in that moment very clearly—not as a reflection but seeing in the moment—this is just a thought. It has no basis in anything. It's constructed in the mind. It is a construct.

And in that moment, seeing that self-hatred was a construct, the mind flipped from self-hatred to bliss. For a split second, the mind went to, "Oh, I'll never feel self-hatred again." And then there was a recognition: no, actually that moment of understanding was that moment's understanding. And so the mind moved into more of a balance, into equanimity after that.

That moment of understanding didn't get rid of the self-hatred forever. But it was a deep understanding into the nature of self-hatred as a belief in the mind. And that belief was undermined very deeply in that moment. Not only seeing something about how self-hatred works, but how belief works, how the mind congeals a sense of self around it—right in the midst of watching self-hatred, there was very deep understanding of anicca, impermanence; dukkha, suffering; and anatta, not-self.

That moment was important for me because I realized: it doesn't have to be that the self-hatred is gone for the practice to really have deepening, for there to be deep understanding.

And so these hindrances are the path when they're arising. It's not lesser practice. So much of our minds are caught by these kinds of states in our lives. And learning skills to be curious about them will serve you not only here, but in your life.

So let's sit for a moment.

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