Hindrances: Restlessness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 44:15

I will speak on the hindrance of restlessness this evening.

I'll start with a brief review of the hindrances, since I know you've been hearing about them. Restlessness is one of the five hindrances. I don't know how Shiloh has been translating them, but the translations I usually use are desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety (or restlessness and remorse), and doubt. These are states of mind that typically obstruct our concentration, our ability to stay present in the present moment. They're called the hindrances, but the Pali term, *nivarana*, is also sometimes translated as "covering." These hindrances are covering states. They cover the clarity of the mind. They cover the concentration of the mind.

The hindrance of restlessness is a very fundamental hindrance. It can underlie the other hindrances. A mind that is restless is one that's not settled or stable, so it's the antithesis of concentration. In that unsettled, unstable state, the mind is likely to go out and latch onto something it likes and start wanting it, desiring it—the hindrance of desire—or latch onto something that it doesn't like, that it wants to fix, that it wants to get rid of. That becomes the hindrance of aversion or ill will.

Restlessness can also underlie the state of doubt. If the mind is agitated and not able to settle, doubt can often manifest out of that state of the mind not being able to land on anything in particular. It can even underlie the hindrances of sloth and torpor. I'm sure many of you are familiar with how a baby, when it gets overstimulated, will just conk out. It receives so much stimulation that it gets exhausted and conks out. Sometimes that happens with restlessness also. We get so much energy going through our system that we go on overload, and then we get exhausted from being on overload.

The hindrance of restlessness is a fundamental hindrance to become familiar with. If we can become familiar with this restless state, we can sometimes start to see the mind in that restless, agitated state before it leaps into desire or before it leaps into ill will.

These hindrances of desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt tend to be some of the key ways that we suffer in our experience. The Buddha had some very good advice for us when we suffer. He didn't say to try to get rid of it. He said to try to understand it. That was his key instruction around suffering: that it should be understood.

This points us to what we should do with these hindrances. We should try to understand them when we experience them—not to get rid of them, but to understand them for the sake of understanding them. When we turn our attention to the hindrances and we're no longer caught by them, when our mind is no

longer running out after them, we are no longer hindered in our practice.

The hindrances have this interesting role for us. They do obscure our practice when we don't recognize that they are present. But as soon as we see they're present, they become our practice. They're not in the way of our practice. They simply are the grist for the mill—the compost of our experience.

In my experience with meditation practice, really understanding something has meant not understanding intellectually, but really understanding the experience itself. Understanding what the experience of ill will is, what the experience of restlessness is. Bringing mindfulness to our experience.

Mindfulness has this beautiful, counterintuitive quality. Sometimes when we're told to pay attention to states that seem so difficult or unpleasant, we wonder if it will just increase that state. We tend to think that when we pay attention to something, it makes it stronger. But mindfulness has a very interesting quality. When we pay attention to wholesome states of mind—kindness, generosity, compassion, equanimity, tranquility, loving-kindness—being mindful of them in a non-judgmental, alert way creates the conditions for them to appear more frequently in our experience. Mindfulness does create the conditions to enhance or increase the wholesome qualities of our mind.

But when we bring that same mindful, non-judgmental attention to ill will, to desire, to restlessness, to anxiety, to fear, to frustration, to aversion, it creates the conditions for these states to appear less frequently in our experience.

It is as if the wholesome qualities of mind bask in the light and warmth of mindfulness, while the unwholesome qualities shrink from its clarity and brightness. So there's no need to worry about bringing mindful attention to these unwholesome states of mind. As we do that, they become transforming. They transform. They become the path. They become the way that we walk out of suffering.

Another wonderful quality of mindfulness is that we can be mindful of anything. We can be mindful of sloth and torpor, we can be mindful of restlessness. So much of what I'll talk about tonight is how to work with this hindrance of restlessness, since this is the hindrance that is up for this week—how to get to know it, how to understand how it functions for us, and how to simply be with it.

Restlessness and remorse are related to an excess of energy. The sloth and torpor that you talked about last week are usually related to a lowering or reduction of energy. This is the opposite side of things—restlessness is the quality when the mind has a little too much energy going on. But there are two aspects of this hindrance: there's the restlessness, and then there's what's translated as remorse, sometimes also translated as worry or anxiety.

Restlessness can refer to either restlessness of body or restlessness of mind. Restlessness of body I'm sure you're all familiar with. It's just when the body does not feel like it can sit still. Sometimes in meditation this can get really unpleasant. It can feel like there are jumping beans under the skin, or like your whole body has this energy coursing through it. It can be a very unpleasant experience.

The mind can also be restless, unable to settle on any particular object. You try to bring it to the sensations of breathing, and it's just off to hearing and body sensations and thoughts, spinning off into thinking. The mind can have that restless quality, a kind of jumpy quality to it.

The quality of remorse usually has to do with when the mind is agitated or restless because of something we've done in the past, or something we've not done—something we regret either having done or not done. The mind in those situations tends to play the situation over and over again. That's the restless quality of mind, when it just keeps repeating about something from the past like that.

The translation around worry or anxiety points to the way we can be restless about things that might happen in the future—the way we're worried about how something is going to come out, what we're going to do, how we're going to plan to do something. Planning often has this quality of anxiety to it, and the mind just keeps spinning. How am I going to do this? How am I going to figure this out? This piece doesn't fit with that piece. I can't do that when I do this. How can I figure this out? The mind just keeps spinning in this kind of restlessness.

Restlessness can manifest in really obvious, hard-to-ignore forms, like the sensation of it being nearly impossible to stay seated in your chair, or the mind that's just spinning out into the future or reviewing the past. Or it can take much more subtle forms—just a very subtle stirring when the mind is pretty quiet and the body is pretty settled. Just a little tiny bit of "Oh, how can I make this continue?" or "How can I make this go a little deeper?" Just a little restlessness of mind to change things, even very subtly. That can be a very subtle kind of restlessness manifesting even when the mind is fairly stable and fairly settled.

The Buddha had a number of similes for all of the hindrances, but I'll just talk about the similes he used for restlessness tonight. He had a simile around a body of water for all the hindrances, and for restlessness he likened the mind to a pool of water that's blown by wind. Anyone who tries to lean over that pool and look is not going to be able to see their reflection because the surface of the pond is agitated. You can even sometimes feel that—the Buddha had a genius for creating similes. The quality of the ruffled waves on the pond, the body can actually sometimes feel like that. The mind can sometimes have that feeling of being ruffled.

The other analogy the Buddha used about restlessness is that it is like being enslaved—like you're a slave and you have a master that says, "You have to do this now, you have to do that now, you have to do this." That quality of mind, of the mind just going, "Oh, I've got to think about this now."

I've got to do that now. Our habitual patterns leap in and become like a master to us. The habit comes along and says, "We've got to do this now. I've got to fix this. I've got to figure out how to get rid of that." We become slaves to our habits, and that restlessness of mind is responding to those habitual patterns.

One way I like to think about stilling restlessness is through this image of rippling water—you can envision the stilling of the pond and then the pond becoming very clear. There's another analogy I also

find helpful, especially for the subtle kinds of restlessness. There's a restlessness that we sometimes don't even know is present until it disappears. We've become so habituated to a low level of restlessness that we don't notice it. Then suddenly, when we drop into a state of deeper calmness, it becomes really clear. It's like the experience you have in your house when the refrigerator is running and you don't notice it, but then when it goes off, there's that quietness and peace. That's the subtle distinction between subtle restlessness in the mind and the dropping into silence and stillness.

So how do we work with restlessness in our practice? It's a challenging one sometimes, because the body can be so coursed with energy that it's very difficult to stay in meditation practice. The first thing to do is simply recognize it. Recognize that it is happening at a very gross level. You can use naming or noting: noting "restlessness" or "agitation." I like the term agitation—it feels a little more neutral to me. There's just an agitation of mind.

One of my teachers, Sharon Salzberg, tells a story about when she found herself in this restless state. She simply didn't sit, because she figured it wasn't worthwhile—that there wasn't any point to sitting when the mind was restless. She could see that she wasn't able to be present. The mind would go off, then she'd come back for a split second, then the mind would go off again, then she'd come back for a moment, and then it would go off again. Well, what's the point of this? So when her mind was very settled and still, she would sit in meditation and have a lovely experience of quiet, of concentration, of calm, of peace. She thought that's what meditation was supposed to be like.

But at some point she went to her teacher—she was in India doing this practice—and his name was Munindraji. She reported this experience to him and said, "You know, when I'm restless, I just don't sit. I just get up." His advice to her was: when you're experiencing that restlessness, just put your body there. You don't have to try to be present all the time. Notice when you come back, and the mind will go off again. But just put your body there. There is some value to simply sitting through this experience, to knowing this is what the mind is doing, and coming back as best you can. Just keep coming back and coming back.

Sometimes my teacher Gil Fronsdal likes to say that a successful sitting is simply getting to the end of it. It doesn't have to be particularly mindful or clear, but just the fact that you have the determination and resolve to stay present—you're cultivating good qualities in this. You're cultivating the quality of determination. You're cultivating the quality of patience. And you're cultivating what mindfulness you can. So just put your body there. See what happens if you just put your body there.

The rest of what I'll talk about assumes pretty much that you will be able to put your body there and hang out with it a little bit. Although sometimes it is helpful, if you find yourself extremely restless in a sitting meditation, to get up and try walking meditation or standing meditation. Sometimes it can help to allow the body to be in a posture that consumes a little more energy so that the mind can be a little more present.

If you are able to just sit with it, to put your body there, the physical version of restlessness is usually pretty easy to recognize. It has that quality of coursing energy, or sometimes, like I mentioned before, jumping beans under the skin. It's just so unpleasant.

In working with physical restlessness, it's often really helpful to let the mind not try to focus on the specific sensations of restlessness—to not try to directly focus on the physical experience—but instead let the mind get really big. As I mentioned at the end of the guided meditation, when I pointed you to this quality, perhaps some of you might have been feeling a little bit of restlessness. Letting the mind get really big, allowing the restlessness to get as big as it wants to, encompassing the whole room so that it doesn't feel like it just has to stay in this body. The experience can get very large, and when you allow the mind to relax and just get large with the experience, sometimes it's a little easier to stay present.

At one point I was doing a self-retreat at home, and every night I had this incredible restlessness coursing through the body. It was so difficult to stay put, but I had a pretty strong determination to just stay with it for the period of time that I had set for my meditation, which was forty-five minutes. At some point one evening, partway through the retreat, I recognized that there was a resistance to the experience, a resistance to the feeling, and that there was some kind of way in which the body knew what it wanted to do with this experience. I was trying to do something with the restlessness, but really the body knew what it wanted to do with it.

So I just kind of let go and allowed the body to do what it wanted. At that point it felt like the energy just blew a hole in the top of my head. There was this energy streaming through the body out the top of my head, and it became much easier to just be with it, as it felt like the energy had a path through the body. It wasn't contained in the body anymore—it was moving through. And that became much easier.

Letting go as much as possible of resistance to restlessness is key. If there's any resistance to restlessness, that's a form of ill will, a form of aversion—one of the other hindrances. We sometimes call that a multiple hindrance attack, because there's more than one hindrance going on at the same time. What we do in that case is generally try to pay attention to whichever one is most obvious or primary.

So if you're experiencing this resistance to restlessness or aversion to restlessness, then allowing yourself to feel what that aversion is like, what that resistance is like—can you allow yourself to experience that? It's helpful in this process to come into the body, to allow yourself to just experience the bodily sensations, especially when there is aversion. Often the aversion will manifest as some kind of story: "I can't stand this. I've got to get rid of this. I'm never going to be able to sit through this." There's some kind of story going. And if we can let go of the story and just be with what it feels like to resist this restlessness—where is the tightness? where is the holding?—you might in moments see the resistance let go and then just feel the restlessness. And you'll see, actually, that it's easier to just experience the restlessness than it is to experience the resistance to the restlessness or the aversion to the restlessness.

The fewer the hindrances, the easier it is. When you get hindrances piled on top of each other, it can get

kind of chaotic in the experience. So just noticing what is the primary hindrance and bringing your attention there, perhaps to where it manifests in your physical experience.

Another way to work with restlessness—and this is an interesting one, a subtle one, but I'm going to go ahead and mention it—is to become aware that you know that restlessness is happening. Every experience that we have, whether it's a physical sensation or a mental experience, with every experience there's the thing itself, the experience—restlessness in this case—and then there is the mind that knows the experience. So there's the knowing of the experience, and there is the experience. In this case there's restlessness, and there is the knowing of the restlessness.

If you can recognize that you know you're restless, sometimes all it takes is a shifting of the noting in your mind, if you're using noting. You move from a noting of "restless" to "knowing restlessness." Or sometimes people find it helpful to think "the mind is knowing restlessness" rather than "I am knowing restlessness." The mind is processing, doing this experience. The mind knows restlessness.

The knowing experience has some really interesting qualities to it. It's very clear, it's very nonjudgmental, and it's neutral. It's a neutral experience to be in the experience of knowing. One of the interesting aspects of playing with this knowing of restlessness is that it will be very clear to you when you actually land in the knowing versus being in the restlessness, because restlessness is a pretty unpleasant experience. It'll be really clear that you're in the restlessness if you're experiencing all these unpleasant physical sensations. If you can shift to the knowing, if your mind can be more aware of the knowing, there will be a shift, and the experience will become more neutral because the mind is more attending to the knowing of the restlessness than it is to the restlessness itself.

So it's very clear when you actually can touch into that knowing, because there's a shift of experience. It becomes, "Oh, this is just restlessness in the body." And the charge is taken out of it when we can land in the knowing.

The mental form of restlessness often manifests as a lot of thinking. You can tell when there's just this quality of mind that can't stop. And often in this case, there's something fueling the thinking—some kind of emotion perhaps, worry or fear, the mind spinning out and churning into the future.

Again, it's really helpful sometimes to allow the attention to go very wide, to kind of step back and ask, "What's going on? Why is the mind just spinning out?" Sometimes the mind will start spinning and we don't really know what it's spinning about. Other times it's very clear—we're angry about something or we're wanting something, and then the hindrance of ill will or the hindrance of desire is primary. But sometimes it's just spinning and we don't really know what it's spinning about or what emotion lies underneath it.

So opening up, stepping back and asking, "What is going on here?"—you can even just ask yourself that question directly—and sometimes it will become clear.

I had an experience of this at one point. I was driving and I noticed that the mind just kept projecting into the future. It would spin out into the future, and I kept noticing that and coming back, noticing the hands on the steering wheel, trying to stay present for the driving. But the mind just kept spinning out. And it wasn't a pleasant spinning. It was, "How am I going to do this? How am I going to figure this out?" A very unpleasant kind of experience.

At some point, after having come back and seen the mind spin out many times, I realized there's something going on here. So I stepped back and asked, "What is happening in the mind?" And what I realized was that I was really happy. The mind was trying to figure out how to stay happy—how can I keep this state of mind? And I hadn't even noticed the happiness. So that restlessness came from a kind of big energy that emerged out of the happiness. And it was like, "Oh, how is this going to happen in my life? I better make sure that person understands how this is going to work." It was ridiculous.

So sometimes we can be surprised when we open up like this. I would not have expected happiness to underlie that very unpleasant spinning in my mind. I was completely taken by surprise.

Opening up, taking a step back and asking what's going on here when there's restlessness—you can sometimes uncover something you hadn't seen before.

If there are a lot of thoughts going on with restlessness, it's really helpful, particularly in this kind of experience, to come into the body and see if you can notice where the restlessness is manifesting physically. Sometimes I find that when the mind is spinning out, it's actually more unpleasant than the body being jittery. If the body is jittery, you can sometimes stay present for it, but when the mind is spinning out, it's hard to stay mindful.

So if you can bring your attention into the body and notice where the physical manifestation of this mental spinning is happening—you might notice some energy through the body, a tension or tightness in your heart, a contraction in your stomach—just notice where in your physical experience this energy appears. This serves the purpose of keeping you mindful in the present moment, and it also helps to cut the attachment to the thinking. The thinking process tends to perpetuate the restlessness, so if you can cut the thinking by coming into the physical experience of the body, you'll have a chance then to allow it to wind itself out.

These hindrances, and restlessness in particular—it's kind of like your mind is rushing sixty or a hundred miles an hour down the freeway. It's just going so fast.

And when we come into mindfulness around it, it doesn't mean that it stops just like that. It's like putting a car into neutral. When you put a car into neutral that's going a hundred miles an hour down the freeway, it doesn't stop. It just stops going quite as fast. It begins to slow.

So when we stop feeding the momentum of the restlessness with thoughts, we have a chance to allow it to wind itself out in a natural way, as if that car is coming to rest by putting it into neutral. When we bring

mindfulness to our experience, to something like restlessness, it doesn't mean that it ends immediately, but it does mean it has a chance to kind of live out its life and then flow out almost like a breath flowing out.

It's also helpful in this to try the exercise of knowing restlessness when you're in mental restlessness as well. See if you can just recognize that the mind knows it's got this mental restlessness. You could use noting again: knowing restlessness, knowing agitation, knowing spinning.

The quality of remorse is sometimes difficult to be with. This is when the mind is going back over something that we wish we hadn't done. Often what seems to happen is that we're trying to figure out how to relive our past—how do we have a better past? And it's not really possible, so it's not terribly helpful.

The thing I found most helpful with remorse is to actually allow myself to feel the remorse. It's not an unskillful thing. It's like, this is the consequence of having done this thing. If we've done something that we legitimately have reason to feel bad about, if we've legitimately hurt somebody or caused someone harm in some way, the feeling of remorse around that is just the recognition of: it's like this. When I've behaved in that way, this is the consequence.

There's a way in which not resisting that feeling of remorse allows us to drop into the actual connection with the person that we've hurt. A way that we drop into a connection with the sadness. Sadness is really the place it drops into most for me when I allow myself to not resist the remorse, when it's just able to be with that sadness. And there may, out of that, also come some desire or wish, a wholesome wish, to make amends, to apologize, or to make some kind of redress.

So remorse is not something necessarily to run away from. It's something that can inform us about how we can more skillfully choose in the future. We can learn from it and move on. There's no need to beat ourselves up with guilt around it. Guilt and remorse are different things. Guilt is: I shouldn't have done that, that was so stupid. Remorse is more: this is the consequence. How can I move on from here? What can I do to make amends? What can I do to redress this action? There's no way to fix the past. We have to move on from here.

So often we have a feeling with the hindrances in general that they're in the way. I mean, after all, they're called hindrances. So we think they're in the way of our meditation practice. We think our task with them is to get rid of them so that we can then become concentrated and then be mindful. But wanting to get rid of them is just another form of ill will—so it's adding another hindrance to the situation, another multiple hindrance attack.

We can be mindful, we can be aware of these hindrances. And as I said before, when we're aware of them, they are no longer hindering our experience. They become our path when we are aware of them. And we can experience very clear, deep insights around these hindrances. I'm sure Shaila has talked about the understandings of impermanence, of suffering, of not-self. We can come to understanding of the

impermanence of hindrances. We can come to an understanding of the process nature of hindrances, that they are not me—I am not this hindrance. We can come to an understanding of the suffering nature, the unsatisfactory nature of the hindrance. And these are insights in our practice.

So the hindrances, when we bring our attention to them, can actually be the doorway. They are the path when they're happening. They're not something to get rid of in order that we can get on the path again. They are the path.

The hindrance of restlessness in particular is not one that we will lose anytime soon. The Buddhist path talks about four stages of awakening, and perhaps Shaila has discussed this. The hindrance of doubt disappears at the first stage of awakening. At the second stage of awakening, along with some other developments, there's just an attenuation of greed and aversion, of the hindrances of ill will and desire. They don't go away at the second stage of awakening. So even after the second stage of awakening, after you've gained very clear, deep understanding of the truth of the end of suffering, the hindrances of aversion and desire are still present. It's only at the third stage of awakening that those hindrances drop away. And it's only at the fourth stage, the very end of the path, that restlessness drops away.

So restlessness is something that underlies a lot of the movement of mind. It can be very subtle, this movement of restlessness. Get to know it. It will be with us for a very long time. But as we learn to work with it, it can become our path, observing the restlessness—when we're restless, when the restlessness disappears, it shows us how we walk the path. It points our way forward.

Question and Answer Period

A student asked whether acceptance of restlessness could itself become sloth. Yes, it could be. You could just get dull, sitting and thinking for the whole meditation session, accepting the restlessness without ever making an effort to work with it. It really depends on how that acceptance is manifesting. All of these hindrances weave through each other. We can get restless out of being aversive, or we can fall into sloth and torpor as a response to restlessness. They can all become intertwined. So we really have to be very honest with ourselves about what the actual experience is. Is it just a dullness setting in that allows us to sit through the session while we space out? Or are we actually making an effort to come back? We have to be honest with ourselves.

Another student raised a question about remorse and the pattern of trying to edit the past, noting that while I had focused primarily on situations where one may have unskillfully injured someone, there seems to be another source of that editing—when we have acted in ways that are inconsistent with our self-concept. Perhaps it's about wanting to have been more clever, less forgetful, or more efficient.

This is a different kind of remorse, I think. It's not necessarily about having done something wrong. Though it can be—I can imagine if you have an image of yourself as a green person, someone who doesn't waste energy, and you neglect to combine your errands into one trip, there may be a sense of having

injured the planet. So there could be a feeling of wanting to be more careful in the future around that.

But I think the key is letting go of trying to edit the past and simply experiencing whatever the feeling is now, because that will give you some clue as to what aspect of your self-image is in contest here. Is this actually a part of your self-image that you want to cultivate, or is it a part of your self-image that you want to let go of? It's really about coming into the experience of the moment, and you'll see something about what the tension is about.

That's a kind of form of ill will towards yourself. So that's what you pay attention to. You notice that feeling, and that's a hard thing to feel. So that's what you bring your attention to. What does it feel like to be beating myself up like this?

And again, can you let go of the thoughts and come into the body? It's really helpful to use the body as a tool, particularly for this kind of experience. What does it feel like in the body to have this feeling of self-recrimination? You'll probably feel both the remorse and the self-recrimination at the same time. And you may find, as you come into the body, that you come down to just the remorse as the thoughts begin to dissipate, as you stay with the body more.

Now, you're going to end up leaping back out. What happens is you touch the feelings and then it's like, "Oh, I don't want to feel this. I'd rather figure out how I can change my past." Our minds do that kind of thing. So you just have to keep trying to come back into the body as much as possible. And at some point, you may notice a slight shift, at which point you can just touch into the pure remorse.

I've found it's actually interesting—when I can just touch the remorse, it's like, "Oh right, this is what it feels like." And it's no longer the recrimination. The recrimination is far worse than the remorse. It's interesting. It's almost like what we're trying to do is punish ourselves because we think we need to suffer for having done something wrong, so we punish ourselves that way. But we find, I think, that once we actually touch the remorse, we can find a more skillful way to deal with it. We find a more skillful way to approach it rather than beating ourselves up and trying to figure out how to fix the past.

So we should stop. Thank you all for your attention and your participation. I'd like to wish that the practice we've shared here this evening be offered to be of benefit to all beings everywhere.

May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be safe. May all beings live with ease. May all beings be free from suffering.

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