The Hindrances

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 30:20

I just want to say a few things about hindrances.

First of all, we mustn't confuse hindrances with the moral law—these precepts that we take which are basically guides to how to stop creating problems for ourselves through doing harm and lies and all that. These hindrances are the products of more than just our problem with moral behavior. They arise because of our past conditioning. So they arise because of what's called *saṅkhāra*. Saṅkhāra is translated as dispositions, attitudes. And they're actually created by our own will, by our own decision making.

So, these saṅkhāras are actually made by an act of will and what we've ended up with is a whole set of dispositions which put all together comes down to our personalities, our character, personalities and character. And when we sit in meditation, what we come across, most of the time anyway, is all the bad stuff, all the unfortunate conditionings that we've given ourselves.

So the Buddha split these up into five sections, which makes it fairly easy for us to discuss and to see what we can do about it. Remember the process of meditation—part of it, in a sense most of the work is concerned with purifying the saṅkhāra, purifying the heart. In fact the opening of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, the discourse on how to establish awareness, the first thing he says is for the purification of beings. That's the first reason for practicing this meditation—for the purification of beings. Only at the end of the line is it for attaining the end of suffering. So there's a recognition there that the process is one of purifying the heart of all these negativities, these turbulences.

So the first one is all to do with indulgence, all to do with our relationship to pleasure. So that normally comes out when we're sitting in all sorts of fantasies. Sex, drugs, rock and roll. Taking holidays. Making money. Becoming famous. Status. Power. And all those lovely dreams we have about power.

So those are the four worldly pursuits of getting the rich, the powerful and the famous. The rich, the powerful and the famous. And the fourth one is seeking pleasure. So our society is especially bent on that last one. That's why we have a general problem with obsession and addiction.

So now in meditation, when we sit, this conditioning, this wanting to enjoy life, this wanting to enjoy life in one of those categories—getting rich, getting powerful and all that—that desire of seeking happiness there booms up, doesn't it? Suddenly we're lost in all these dreams. All these fantasies come up, just take us away from the meditation, creating a virtual reality. While we're in there, it's great. It's only when we wake up and we realize it's not true that it hurts.

So, what can we do? Well, the first thing to really grasp is that you can't do anything. So once you

recognize that, once you recognize that we are having created this conditioning, we can't do anything about it. Once you recognize that, then that releases us from all effort to try and change the mind, to try and change the heart. Which is a relief, isn't it? In one sense. If you know you can't do anything about something, then you just accept it. This is the way it is.

So, having recognized that it's a conditioning in the heart, it's like you set the car in gear and you're off. You've created a momentum. It doesn't matter what you do, you can stomp on the brake as much as you want, but the car has a momentum. It has to, as it were, exhaust that momentum.

So, in meditation, when all these dreams come up and you recognize, well, I can't do anything about this turbulence, I can't do anything about this momentum, then the option is to jump out of that system. And when you jump out of the system, you become its observer. You become its knower. In which case, this turbulence—what can it do? It has to expend its energy.

So, just as we've created this energy, just as we've created this turbulence through our acts of will to indulge, by withdrawing that will, which is the empowerment of that, by withdrawing that will, it now is just left to itself, in which case it can't grow and it has to exhaust itself.

So, in our meditation, when we find ourselves wandering away, we just note what's happened and we come back. And that's the practice. We just know what's happened, and we come back. We don't know what's happened and say, oh, that's good, I'll get into that. In this case, we'd be off again. We'd be creating the wheel. We just know—off on dreaming, some sort of fantasy, whatever it is—acknowledge it, and we come back.

If you can actually come back to a feeling of a longing, of a real strong desire, then you're really at what's motivating all these dreams. And just by staying with the feeling, as you might feel it in the heart, in the chest especially, then you just stay with that and you can actually begin to feel that it's giving up, it's giving away. And that gives you confidence that in fact, by simply not doing anything, the system will find its own equilibrium.

So if you stir up water and you take the paddle out, what happens? It goes round a bit and then it stops. So it's exactly the same with the mind. It's only an energy system and it just needs that continual empowerment. So once you opt out of empowering that, then you'll see the mind just becomes more and more quiet. It takes a long time, that's all. There's a lot of conditioning there.

Even though we sometimes wander off on these fantasies, we can say that, unwittingly, there is a small act of will there, but it's not such an empowering one. And eventually, the system will quieten down.

Now, you have to really make an effort on that, and what you find is, of course, is that you sit with good intent, but when something comes up—you want to set up a business or something, or you want to get on with this job, or you've got that shed to paint. And then you like to think about that, get it worked out, are you going to do it. And although you're saying to yourself, dreaming, dreaming, and before you know it,

you're off. Because you haven't made that really strong act of determination to withstand it.

So it's got to be stronger. And it's no excuse if after the meditation you say to yourself, well, that was absolutely useless. It's only useless because you didn't make the right decision. So if we're going to judge our meditation, and we can do to a certain level, we can actually say to ourselves, well, I should have been stronger there. I should have made that decision not to indulge in that particular dream or fantasy. And then recognizing that fault, one makes the determination—right, next time I'll stay with it.

So that's all you can do with desire, and we're up against it when we eat, so we can see the power of it, the power of desire. Remember that a lot of desire has a neurotic base. Meaning that it's not just a simple desire. It's not just a desire for pleasure. There's underneath it a desire for escape from the suffering that it's hiding.

Take a very simple one like boredom. You can't handle boredom. You can't handle loneliness. So off you go. Turn the TV on, call a friend up, tell them how bored you are. Things like that. You're always shooting off. So what seems to be on the surface a search for happiness is actually an escape. And hence we get into that neurotic area where what we're doing is actually a metaphor. It's actually a metaphor for that neurosis.

So food is a very obvious place where really we're just feeding ourselves with love. We need to be loved and nobody loves us and we can't handle it. So we've got to eat and feel better. Or you feel anxious. You feel anxious about life. It's in the stomach anxiety, isn't it? So you eat and it feels good.

Which doesn't mean to say that you can't turn out to be an enormously wonderful chef. You can still be a fantastic artist in cooking, but it's covering up this. And that's one of the reasons for renunciation. That's why the Buddha constantly asks us to renounce things, to renounce those pleasures, because often when we give something up we like, then we see this underbelly of dissatisfaction.

Which is not the same as self-mortification. These words, it depends how you define them, obviously, but self-mortification is a wrong understanding that in order to become saintly, we have to suffer. You beat yourself up and hang yourself by your fingers from a tree or something. So that really hurts. And this creates an enormous piety. All it does, it hurts. It doesn't do anything at all.

So renunciation is something different. Renunciation is giving something up in order to feel the attachment, see the attachment that we have to things. So that's the first hindrance.

The next one is all to do with aversion. It's all to do with anger. Boredom is part of it. Even parts of our depression can be that too. Now, the rather good thing about aversion is, of course, it doesn't like its object. And therefore, in a rather helpful way, it creates a distance for us immediately. So if you're sitting at home and somebody plays music next door that you don't like, then immediately you push it away. So you're right in contact with what it is that's annoying you.

Unlike indulgence, where you become it, you become the cornflakes, in this case you want to dissociate. So that's a great help for us, because at least that stops us indulging in the object. But we now indulge in this hatred, we now indulge in this anger, irritation, whatever it is.

So whenever that arises in the mind, because of a memory, etc., you have to be very careful to stay with the feeling of it. You have to allow that also to burn out. So it's always the same. It's always the same technique of coming off the mind with its imaginations and feeling the feeling. That's a tautology, to feel the feeling, but it's surprising how we don't actually feel things properly and fully in their real nature.

And the Buddha obviously had a hard time getting people to do this as well, because in the discourse on how to establish mindfulness, he also repeats it, *vedanā vedanānupassī*, to see feeling in feeling, or to see feeling as feeling. He's stretching the language to try and get people to see that they've got to go underneath the mind, underneath thought, underneath opinion and idea, and to get down to the raw feeling itself, which is felt as a feeling in the body, isn't it? Anger, it's a burning, or whatever.

The other side of that is fear, of course, and anxiety. That's also an aversion. That's running away. So again, it's the same thing. You've got to get into the body. You've got to feel it.

Now, when you get into these things, again, you find yourself in a relationship. When something is burning inside you, again, you don't like it. So there's an aversion to the aversion. So you've got to observe that too, you've got to observe the not wanting to feel anger, not wanting to feel boredom. So recognizing that, again you don't push it away, you just know that that's there, that's happening, and you just sit quietly with the feelings.

See it more as a process, something changing, become interested in it as a process. Same with anxiety. Instead of shooting off getting anxious about being anxious, being fearful of fear, and then we find ourselves off on some mental trip. Get used to feeling the feelings of fear. It doesn't take that much. Just to stay with them. Pass the mind around where you feel it. Pass the attention across it and up it. Penetrate it. Come in and out of it. See it as a process. Find a relationship with it where you can, as it were, just accept it just as it is.

Sometimes if you spice your looking, if you spice that investigation with a certain warmth, with a certain loving kindness towards the body, a certain loving kindness towards the mind, that also can be very helpful. So in the Mahāyāna they call one Buddha Avalokiteśvara, which means to look down upon with compassion. So you can do that to yourself. Give yourself a hug. Occasionally.

But the purpose is to see and to feel feelings as they really are, all these emotions around aversion and fear. Always the same technique, coming off the mind into the body, feeling feelings.

The next one is what my teacher used to call our two very good friends, sloth and torpor, because they're always telling us we need a rest. We ought to lie down a little bit, and it's all too tough for us.

So, we recognize that, having slept a wonderful sleep, we recognize that any doziness, any torpor in the mind, that heaviness in the head, or that heaviness in the body, all that is to be seen as turbulence. Now, normally we don't recognize it as that, but it's an energy form, isn't it? It's an energy form which is actually drawing us down into the pit. The pit of oblivion. It wants to squash us out. Doesn't it? You just want to lie down and disappear. Self-annihilate. It's a soft suicide. Just disappear for a while.

So these sloths and torpors, they hide a lot of worms and snakes down there, because we've learnt that one way that we can escape pain, whatever it is—we just get fed up with life or something—is just go to sleep for a while. And of course you wake up, you feel okay, you feel great, you feel better. But that sleep has been a suppressant. It's pushed all that stuff down. It's an actual force.

I'm sure that sometimes you've actually made the effort, I know I have, to actually go to sleep. Put your head in the pillow, go to sleep. Or force yourself into sleep. And that time when we don't have to get up to go to work or anything, when we don't have to get up, and you wake up and you turn over. Hours pass, hours pass. Sweet oblivion.

Well, of course, that is not the enlightenment. The nirvanic bliss is not annihilation or some total oblivion. So, recognizing that as a turbulence, our job is again to stay above it, to feel it as feelings, and by doing so, we're actually educating that energy to come upwards instead of downwards. And what you find, if you stay with it, and some of it can be very heavy, some of it can stay with you a long time—there's no rule about that. If you stay with it, you'll see it purifies, and to your surprise, you have more energy.

So many of you who've come on a longer retreat, you know that the first three days are horrible. But the energy lifts. The energy lifts as it purifies itself. And then suddenly, five hours a night—who wants any more than that?

The next one is restlessness. There's two actually. It's a catch-all in a sense. Restlessness and remorse. It's all that area to do with guilt, remorse, sorrow. Which makes you feel guilt, dread of consequences, shame, embarrassment. All those feelings which really are the product of immoral actions. But not only that, you can feel quite ashamed by just a social gaffe.

There's a lovely case of, I can't remember the name of the nobleman. It's gone out of my mind. But in the court of Queen Elizabeth I, he farted. And it was so embarrassing, he disappeared from court for three or four years. When he returned, the queen approached him and said, you are welcome to our court, we have forgot the fart. Wonderful. For three years the poor man was utterly embarrassed. But you can't call that immoral, it's just a social gaffe. Lovely story, isn't it?

So again, we have no option. You can't do anything about it. You have to suffer the consequences. And in so doing, of course, you undermine these attitudes which have caused those very states to arise in the first place.

Restlessness is the opposite of sloth, and it basically tells you to move.

You want to get up and get out, do something. Sometimes it has no reason. It doesn't tell you what it's restless about. You just feel restless. In which case, just like sloth and torpor, you've got to sit in the midst of that turbulence, go sit in the midst of the fire and just feel it.

Often it's a good thing to wander up and down the body, in which case this taking your attention up and down the body has a sort of relaxing effect. Just watching, just feeling the body going down as it were in a systematic way. Those of you who've done the U Ba Khin technique with people like the Goenka school will know that. And it can be very relaxing just to do that. But again, you're feeling it, you're observing it as a process, and you're just allowing it to be itself, and eventually the momentum just dies out of energy.

So a lot of this is to do with patience. And remember the Buddha said patience was the highest form of ascetic practice. Patience. It's the ability to suffer, isn't it? The ability to bear. And to recognize that this internal environment that we have, it's all been created by us. It's not as though our parents and whom we've met and the society hasn't helped to create it. It's been a catalyst. But it's ourselves who've made these internal decisions that have caused the mind to be like this.

Now, at first, people might think, well, that's a bit much blaming myself. I should blame all these other people. They make me suffer. But if you do that, then you're caught in this idea that you've got to change the world before you can change yourself, because they're the ones who are causing it. But when you recognize that you're the sole cause of your states, then it empowers you to do something about it.

So finally, there's this whole tricky area of doubt. And doubt's a funny thing. It's the opposite of faith. Faith is, in Buddhism, a trust, a confidence. It comes from a sort of intellectual thing, an intellectual assent. So you've read about Buddhism, you've read about meditation, you've heard about it, you've discussed it and all that, and there comes a faith, a trust in it, and then you practice, and the practice supports that, and eventually the faith grows, the confidence grows. It's not just confidence in the teaching, in the *vipassanā* and all that, it's also confidence in yourself to do it.

And sometimes you find yourself undermining yourself by saying, well, I can't do it. I can't do this and I can't do that. You have to watch that thought very carefully. Where's it leading? It's more in the sense of we should be aware of the way we talk to ourselves and say the opposite. Yeah, I can. Who in my head is telling me I can't do it? We don't have to believe the mind. For the most part, it's a liar. It's always telling us things which don't turn out to be true. So, when it says, you can't do this, who said that? You don't have to join in. You don't have to say, this is the same me. You can be the listener of your own mind. And so when it's trying to undermine you, you have to listen to it and just let go of it.

Skeptical doubt is the inability for a person to commit themselves. You can't do it, there's a fear there. And this is probably the greatest hindrance to the whole spiritual practice. Because you never get down to sit, you never get down to doing it, because you can't leap beyond the fear of committing yourself. So again, when that happens, we have to go into the feelings that are surrounding the doubt. Feelings that are surrounding it, supporting it.

That's not to be confused with what you might call honest doubt. A wonder. Because that's what the Buddha actually wants us to cultivate. He doesn't want us to take his word as fact. It's not a blind faith. He wants us to say, ah, okay, well let's see if that's true. And then to investigate. Because the process of enlightenment isn't one of belief. If you could believe in *Nibbāna* and you then experience Nibbāna, it would be simple, wouldn't it? It's one of direct experience, so to have that direct experience then you've got to have the confidence to actually undergo the training.

Sometimes we transfer that onto another person. What's the word? Projected. And we start having doubt in the teacher. Heaven forbid. Now, that doesn't mean that the teacher might not be wrong. But you can't believe it just because the mind puts a doubt onto it. You have to investigate that as well. So doubt is quite insidious actually. Be really careful with it. It slips up on you.

And sometimes you can undermine your own confidence by setting yourself standards which you can't maintain. So if you say to yourself after this retreat, then of course you'll be all enormously inspired. You say to yourself, I'm going to now meditate for two hours every morning and two hours in the evening. And with great intent and real resolution, you're determined to do that. And tomorrow morning, you feel a bit down. And you let go of it. And you say to yourself, I can't do it. See, I can't do it. In which case, you've created this huge doubt. Because you've overstretched. You've had too much expectation. And you undermine yourself. You have to be careful of that too. It's better to start low and build up than to try and start high and just flop.

So now those are the five hindrances. And when I say at the end of a sitting, you see, recollect what you're doing or review what you're doing, well, you can take one or two of those things. For instance, supposing sloth hit you during that sitting. Well, then you can ask yourself, what did I do? So there are various things we can do. But as soon as we feel that sort of heaviness come on, we can put more energy in the posture. Did we do that? And when it gets a bit too heavy, you can open your eyes, just let a bit of light in. Did we do that, or did we sort of forget about it and go into sleep? And then at some point did we have a feeling, well, no, this is getting the better of me, should I stand up?

So it's a case of also developing these skills of how to stay above these hindrances and not get caught up in them. And that's part of this reflection at the end of a sitting. And then what happens is you become wise about yourself. It's not as though the trick that you employed in the last sitting will work in the next one. The mind's slippery, yeah? You can't catch it that easy. But at least we get to know ourselves and we get to know that fundament, usually what's wrong is that we haven't actually committed ourselves. We haven't actually given a full commitment to the practice.

And that's why it's so important when you begin any sitting, even if it's only just five minutes in the morning, that just that thought comes to the mind: right. From now until the end of the sitting, I'm going to maintain a real effort to stay mindful. And that's why I like to stress this business of sometime in the early morning to make that determination to remain mindful during the day. Not to compartmentalize the day.

Not to think that sitting meditation is the only practice.

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