Five Hindrances

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:48

And what's been your experience today? Probably not nothing, but maybe not what you think you came here for either. Perhaps some peaceful, happy moments, maybe some lovely moments, maybe some turmoil, maybe some boredom, maybe some aversion. Perhaps a lot of sleepiness, a lot of restlessness, maybe fear, maybe desire. Not nothing though—but maybe not what we're looking for.

I saw an ad recently. Actually, it was in the Northwest Dharma News, which really surprised me. The ad says, "Deepen your meditations"—which immediately would pull the eye. "Improve concentration and absorption. Dissolve distractions and inner chatter." It's an advertisement for a clinical hypnotherapist. This is in a Dharma newspaper.

That's one way to go. It's not this way.

Actually, in my opinion, a lot of us walk through our life as if we're hypnotized. We're hypnotized by the lure of pleasure, by the hope of the next thing making us happy and being better. We're hypnotized by our fear of the unpleasant, of things not turning out the way we want. And in this cycle of trying to maintain that dream, we actually hypnotize ourselves into a dream of separation and alienation—the sense of loneliness, the sense of needing something somewhere else to fulfill us and make us happy. It's not the truth of things. It's really almost as if we hypnotize ourselves into it.

So I'm here, and I hope you're all here, in some way to de-hypnotize ourselves, to wake us up to aliveness, to presence, to really being fully awake in whatever life brings us in the form of our mind and body experiences in this moment—because that's all we have.

Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche once said that the main purpose of these Dharma teachings is twofold: one, to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind, and two, how the deluded mind works.

So we're getting to see a lot of the second one. That's not a bad thing, because it serves as our tool. Exploring how the deluded mind works is actually our avenue into recognizing the nature of the non-deluded mind. And by mind in the big picture, I don't mean particularly thoughts and emotions so much as the nature of awareness or consciousness itself, or even beyond that—the sense of purity or radiance of our non-deluded mind, our innate wholeness or completion that we don't recognize when we're hypnotizing ourselves into thinking we need something somewhere else.

What's so amazing is this one line from a Tibetan text: the non-deluded mind is actually liberated by simply resting at ease in whatever arises. Resting at ease in whatever happens. That's our practice, and that's a huge challenge.

Because mostly, did you come here to rest at ease in restlessness? Was that your idea when you came? "Let me just find that place of harmony within intense sleepiness and grumpiness—that's the point of my practice." Well, guess what? That actually is our practice.

Now, if we put that in the brochure, we might not have 140 people here. But that's actually what we're given to work with. And it's not a mistake. It's not something we have to get rid of.

Early in a retreat, we get a lot of chance to explore how the deluded mind works. Our tool is mindfulness. And these things that are arising—these emotional storms, the sleepiness, the restlessness, the desire, the aversion, the boredom, the frustration, the doubt—these are our practicum in the Four Noble Truths that Gil was talking about last night. The Four Noble Truths make a lot of sense intellectually, but they don't do us much good until they become our visceral experience of life.

Tonight I want to talk about some of our friends that we might call the workings of the deluded mind—particular states of mind and heart that we always discuss early in a retreat because they visit just about all of us strongly in these first days. These are the states of mind of sense desire, aversion, anger, fear, sleepiness, tiredness, restlessness and worry, and doubt. You probably recognize at least one of these from sometime today, or maybe yesterday.

These are our friends. Rather than being a problem that we have to get rid of, our challenge is to bring the attitude of awareness and understanding that their presence is actually how we can experience the Four Noble Truths: suffering and the cause of suffering. And the cause of suffering is not the presence of any of these states. The cause of suffering is the relationship of our heart to the presence of these states—the thirst for it to be different. Aversion, or wanting it to go away, is similar. It's like the flip side of the thirst for it to be different.

The ending of suffering doesn't mean that state goes away. It means we find that place of resting at ease in whatever's happening. We let go of the thirst. And the practice we're doing here—the tool, the coming back over and over with clear, kind, non-judging attention—is the path that we're using to recognize over and over the qualities of the non-deluded mind.

So, and I really mean this: when sleepiness comes up, when sense desire comes up, if we can meet it with this attitude of willingness to fully be present and understand suffering and the end of suffering in this moment, it becomes our avenue of liberation in that moment. It really does. And don't just believe me—try it the next time it comes up.

In the early days of a retreat, these five particular states tend to arise in varying degrees of strength for most anyone. But what I say about working with these states is true for any difficult state of heart or mind, and also pleasant states of heart and mind. These tend to come up really strongly in a retreat, and not always just the first day. Sometimes as the retreat goes into the third, fourth, fifth day, sense desire or aversion or restlessness might actually seem to increase. And you can wonder, what's going wrong? I

thought it should be getting better, and instead it's getting worse. That's our value judgment based on the deluded mind.

I have a teacher who used to say that mindfulness is like a light. We're shining the light of awareness without discriminating on whatever's arising. So for example, when we say in the instructions, "be present with sensory experiences," we didn't say pay attention to the ones you like and pretend the ones you don't like aren't happening, or go into a fantasy in order to avoid it. I don't recall that being the instruction. It's whatever arises, you meet it with full attention. You don't stop to check out first whether it's worth attention. You just go there.

This is the non-discriminating, vast quality of mindfulness that begins to break down our unconscious suppressions. And so, as one of my teachers said, as the light grows stronger, all the snakes start to come out of their holes. That starts to happen. And it's not that something's going wrong—it's actually that awareness is getting stronger. Another happy thing to know.

I know it seems like we just keep talking about suffering, but do you notice how happy it makes us? That's some of the paradox of this practice. The stuff comes up and we go, "Oh yeah, great, another snake. Let me meet it with mindfulness."

So the challenge of our hearts, of our practice, is to begin to notice not only what state of heart and mind is present, but how we're relating to it. Because without awareness, we relate out of old habit patterns. And that's where we get caught in the cycle of unnecessary suffering.

All of these are frequent visitors. Desire and aversion particularly are deeply, deeply ingrained habits of our conditioned mind. That's what I opened with in the beginning—it tends to be our default stance, how we're going to be happy in the world. So it's important to begin to notice them.

Notice overall how we react when any of these states—sense desire, aversion, sleepiness or sloth and torpor in the lingo, restlessness and worry, or doubt—arise. There are two sort of common ways we relate when we're asleep.

One is that we're so familiar with them, we think, well, this is really who I am. They belong here. It's like a friend of mine was telling this story. He was living in a pretty ritzy area of Hollywood, one of these houses with electronic gates and surveillance. And somehow somebody got through all that and just walked in the door—a guy who looked like a homeless person, or kind of an alcoholic or something. He just walked in the door. And my friend was really shocked and said, "What are you doing here?" And the guy said, "Well, I live here." And just for a moment, my friend said, "Oh, does he?"

We kind of do that. Sense desire, aversion—welcome, make yourself at home, run the show. This is really what it's all about.

Now, the other reaction, especially in meditation when we're a little more aware, I think is maybe the

most common, and it's a pretty suffering reaction.

I'll tell you a story to illustrate it. Recently, Franz and I were in southern India staying in a small ashram—a very quiet ashram, which is unusual in India. There were several rooms, maybe ten or fifteen, arranged around a central courtyard, with a few rooms just off the back.

In the central courtyard, a really old swami, an old man dressed in orange, a sadhu, was staying. They were sort of taking care of him. He spent most of the day lying on his bed or sitting on his bed in this courtyard. At some point late in the first day we were there, I was just walking by and he sat up. He had constructed for himself, out of all bits of cloth and twine and rope and I don't know what, a huge kind of—I don't know, it was sort of like a big piece of rope, about a meter long and at least as thick around as a thigh, really big and heavy. He'd constructed this out of all these bits of things, frayed on one end with a little handle on the other. I have to show you—so he would all of a sudden sit up in his bed, grab this thing, and just whack it on the floor with all his strength on this tile floor. It made an incredibly loud noise that reverberated through the whole ashram. Really, really loud. He would sit there and just whack about ten times, and then he'd lie down again. Half an hour later, he'd suddenly jump up, whack, whack, whack, and then he'd lie down again.

Finally I asked somebody who worked there, "What is he doing?" And he said, "Well, he sort of has inner visions. He thinks evil spirits are coming to disturb his meditation." I thought, I can relate to that.

That night, about every half hour all night—clearly there were a lot of evil spirits around that night—every half hour, whack, whack, whack. I was in the back. I couldn't imagine what it was like for the people who were right around the courtyard. It was incredibly loud.

So that's another way. I think a lot of us might engage in that. Sleepiness arrives—whack, whack. What's that doing here? Or maybe you actually turn it on yourself. Whack, whack. I'm so sleepy. We got really tickled. We had visions of everybody in the ashram picking up this thing at the start and just traveling from room to room, whack, whack, whack, all the way down.

I do not recommend that. That is not really the way of practice. But it is one we can easily fall into. The evil spirits have come to disturb my meditation, and if I can get rid of them, then it'll be hunky-dory. Then mindfulness can really get going. Then I can find some peace.

Our challenge is actually to shift our relationship from such total welcoming that we identify completely with the state—not into total hatred and pushing it away—but to shift the energy into the power of recognition, of full presence with it just as it is. Without hating, without identifying, without getting lost in all the stories and the past and the future, but simply recognizing what's happening in the moment. This is desire. This is aversion. What is the experience of it as it's happening right now? So that all the energy comes into awareness and presence rather than feeding reactivity, fear, and clinging.

I want to talk a little bit about helping us recognize and be present with each of these five energies.

Hindrances is the classical translation of this grouping of five, but I think it's a little bit unfortunate because it has such a negative connotation. If you hear "hindrances," the next thought is, well, if they're hindrances, let's get rid of them—and we're caught in the whacking again.

But I read a definition once that described them as emotional and intellectual veils that obscure the nature of mind when we're not aware of them. That's different from being intrinsically a hindrance. When we're not aware of the presence of these states, they function as veils that obscure the pure nature of mind, our intrinsic wholeness. When we are aware of them, they're just what they are. No problem. Really no problem. And that's something we can each experience over and over again until you really know and trust that for yourself.

So to talk a little bit about each one.

Sense desire—that's fairly obvious what it is. I want this. I want that. I want a better cushion. I want something different for lunch. I want the weather to change. I want the person next to me to stop moving. I want something different to happen in the sitting. I want the person leading metta not to be leading it. I want metta now instead of later. I want a new job—whatever, whatever.

As one friend of mine said very succinctly: I want, I need, therefore I am. It feels like that a lot of the time. Things are a little boring—let's go into a fantasy. Let's whip up desire, in fact, if things get peaceful. And this includes meditative experiences. It includes wanting your breath to be different, wanting to be concentrated, wanting anything at all.

It's really fascinating when we begin to shift our attention from being caught up in the content of desire, which is mostly what we do. We focus on what I want, how can I get it, how much better everything will be once I do get it. Isn't it amazing how, underneath each thing we want—unspoken, because if we really looked at it, it wouldn't make sense—there's a sense that if I get this, everything's going to be okay. I'm going to be happy. This is going to do it for me. Whether it's a rice cake or having a baby—whatever it is, in that moment, they're equally important. Because it's not the thing; it's the desire.

And it's so seductive. We get entranced by it. We think it's leading us into the happy, perfect world. But what is it actually leading us into? More desire. It feeds on itself. It seduces us into wanting more because, obviously, either we don't get the thing and we're miserable, or we do get it and the rice cake is gone—and then what? If only I would have put peanut butter. Oh, but there's apple butter and I already ate my rice cake. I could have had apple butter on it. Now what am I going to do? It's just endless.

So what we do with our attention is simply begin to notice the presence of desire itself. Take the attention off the object of the desire and put it onto the experience of desire in the moment you're experiencing it. This is the power of naming, of recognition—the power of mindfulness. It begins to break the spell, because somewhere in there, it's almost as if we unwittingly think desire is pleasant. But if you stop and really tune into desire, I personally don't find it so pleasant.

Try an experiment the next time strong desire comes up while you're sitting or walking. Just keep sitting or walking. The Buddha used to say he'd do this with fear, but you can do it with desire. When strong desire comes up, just stay in whatever posture you're in when it arises. Keep staying in that posture and keep paying attention to the experience of desire itself until it goes away. I promise it will go away. I don't promise how long it will take. I don't promise it won't come back. But it will go away, because everything goes away eventually.

And what do you begin to discover when you bring your attention to the experience of desire in the moment it's happening? I'm going to share some things, but I really want you to look for yourself. Don't believe me. Just take what I say as an incentive to explore it for yourself.

Notice what it's like in a moment when you're just present—sitting, walking, eating, whatever—no desire, and boom, desire arises. "I need seconds." There's that scraping of the spoons on the bottom of the pan, and what if there's no seconds? "I need seconds right now."

Notice the difference first. It's like the presence of desire shatters our essential peace. We're just at ease, present with whatever's happening, and suddenly, "I've got to have seconds." Don't focus on the seconds. Don't judge yourself for the desire. Just feel it. Tune into your body. Use your physical experiences, as Gil was saying this morning, to ground in the experience. What does it feel like?

For me, desire is really an unpleasant experience. It's almost as if internally I'm clutching, I'm tight, I'm clenching, I'm completely shut off in a way. So that's the thing desire does—it creates a sense of separation. Whereas before there was an essential peace, a feeling of wholeness that I wasn't really aware of, the moment there's desire, there's me separated from what I want, separated from everyone else who's actually become my enemy if they might get to the seconds before I do. There's a real strong sense of separation and neediness that's set up.

And it seems to us that if we can satisfy the desire, then the neediness is gone. Again we're complete. Again we're whole. But it's tricky, because it's the desire itself that's setting up that sense of incompleteness, that sense of neediness, that sense of needing something to fill up the space so I can experience essential completeness.

So play with staying in the posture and notice. Just feel desire—tightness, burning, burning, tightness. Keep noting. Just hang with it. See what happens. Notice as it fades. And keep noticing after it fades, because often what you'll find is, "Ah, peace." And that's really so often what we wanted all along. If we get the thing, there's this sense of peace, this sense of presence, this sense of completeness again. But it's because the desire goes away, not so much that we get the thing. We're no longer caught in the desire.

Once we're just with the experience of desire as an experience, not something that has to drive us, then it's okay. We don't have to be afraid of it. It's going to come up. Sense desire comes. We don't have to let it run us.

So that's just beginning to tune in to sense desire, to craving—to see how, if we're not aware of it, it actually feeds and sustains itself and keeps us moving from this sense of inadequacy, of not-enoughness, of incompletion. Whereas all we have to do is bring our attention to it and we're home again.

It doesn't mean we never go eat. It doesn't mean we never go do anything. But it doesn't have to be from this thirst. As Gil translated *taṇhā* last night—this thirst, "I've got to have this or I'm going to die." So sure, the bell rings for lunch, you're hungry, you go to eat. That's normal. That's not the same kind of sense desire as this thirst. You're tired at night, you're sleepy, you want to go sleep. Fine. That's fine. It's not this thirst that runs us.

So that's the sense desire of the hindrance. And that's what we can really begin to tune into—the desire itself, rather than the object desires.

And it's the same for the opposite, so-called opposite—the second of these states of mind that obscure our intrinsic completeness when we're not aware of them. That's the one called aversion, which has a broad range of gradations of emotion that go along with it. There's your basic, "I don't like anything or anybody."

which can arise very easily at this stage of a retreat. And if you don't recognize it, you really get caught in the story about what's wrong with each person who happens to move through your field of perception. With this many people, you can really get into it.

So there's that basic irritability. But aversion can also extend to the level of murderous rage. It includes self-judgment. It's also slight irritation. It's also boredom. And it's also fear. The reason all of these can be grouped together under the big label of aversion is because the function of aversion in one moment of experience—the way it works, the way you can notice it when you're paying attention—is that it always arises in response to something unpleasant that's happening in your experience right now.

Take the cold, for example. The physical sensation of cold that you might experience as unpleasant—you may not even be aware of that. Aversion functions as the attention of the mind pulling back from that, disconnecting from it, so that the experience is one of disconnection. Literally, your awareness, your attention, is not meeting what's happening. We pull back from the cold, and into that space can rush all the forms of reactivity—from fear: "What's going to happen? This is only the third day and it's going to get worse. I've used up all my clothes. When are they going to do the laundry? Where am I going to get more blankets? What about the next retreat? There's even more people..." And it just goes on. Or it can turn outward into real anger and rage, usually at people, because we know getting angry at the weather is kind of useless. But if we get mad at somebody, maybe that would do something.

Even boredom is a slight pulling away. We're bored because we're not really connected with what's happening. If you've had the experience where sometimes the breath is just fascinating and other times it's really boring, do you think the breath is that different those different times? It's really the quality of connection of attention.

So all these forms of aversion are a pulling away. And because we really aren't alive, embodied, connected in our life, the experience of being separate, alienated, disconnected gets stronger. Irritation and anger and aversion have a way, when unrecognized, of really feeding on themselves. The cold is unpleasant, and we get irritated. Actually, the experience of irritation itself is unpleasant. So we don't really want to know that, and we get more irritated. Before we know it, sense experiences happen that we're not even aware are happening. We react to that, and it just goes in a really long chain.

Franz told me a story once about how we can get caught in this chain of reactivity and anger if we're not aware of it. He was at Universal Studios or some big theme park where it's always crowded, waiting in line at a fast food place for coffee. Everyone had been waiting for a while. The man in front of him was very impatient, had clearly been waiting and didn't want to be waiting. You know how that is—he was sort of hassling the clerk, who was harried and just trying to serve people their coffee. I don't know exactly what Franz said, but it was something meant to be soothing and relaxing. Now, you know how it is when you're irritated and some stranger comes up and says something soothing and relaxing. With what an open heart we tend to greet that kind of thing. And that's about how it was greeted. The guy stormed out.

Franz got his coffee, walked out. He said as he walked out—this was maybe five minutes later—the man was across the way at the tables, holding his cup of coffee. Just the sight of Franz... he got so agitated that he spilled his coffee.

That's the way it is when we're not aware. It's as if aversion—the same with desire—becomes a filter, a veil through which we're viewing all of our perceptions, so that just the sight of this person walking out is seen as an irritating perception.

So our practice is, rather than letting ourselves be caught in this and spending the day or the retreat judging everybody and everything—and then turning around and judging yourself for judging everybody else—to notice: "Oh, I think aversion might be arising in my mind and heart in this moment. Let me bring my attention to it."

This is really a powerful shift. This is what the practice is about. It's not necessarily pleasant, but this is the transformative movement—from being caught in the suffering to seeing that the cause of suffering is the way we're relating to the experience. We don't have to say that if we see it, the aversion goes away. But we can tune in, really look at what's happening, rather than believing the veil of aversion.

There are two ways I'd like to suggest for doing this. One is—and this is before you're in really murderous rage—

Because at that point, subtlety isn't going to cut it. But in the beginning, when you're in that state where you notice that everyone who comes by just seems a little schlumpy today, everyone just seems a little more rude and a little less mindful than usual—after a while, you start to notice aversion.

The first step is to bring your mindful awareness with wise attention. Recognize that aversion is present,

but come back to the immediate sense experience, because what's happening is we're not meeting it directly. If you meet the experience directly, then often that mindful awareness cuts through the field of aversion and we're just present again.

A really simple example. A couple of years ago, a woman was on a long retreat at IMS in Barre, where I was teaching. She was sitting in the front row. She told me this story after it was over. She said there was some repetitive noise in the hall—I think it was the ticking of the little clock we had. It's really quiet, but when everything gets very still, you can start to hear it. And she said this repetitive sound was driving her crazy. She was just getting lost in anger every sitting. It was ruining her concentration.

We kept talking about mindfulness, wise attention. When you hear a sound, bring your attention to the sound. When you feel a sensation, bring your attention to the sensation. You notice anger, bring your attention to the sensations of anger in your body. So after about four or five days, she said, "Oh! I get it. They're saying when you hear a sound, bring your attention to the sound. Let me try that."

Which she did, because what aversion does is prevent you from actually meeting the sound that's triggering the aversion. We hate it. We pull back. We think somehow we can keep ourselves separate from this unpleasant experience. And we get lost in it instead. So when she brought her attention right to the sound, there was hearing. There was the sound. That was it. It was like a light bulb going off. She said, "Oh. There was no problem. The sound wasn't bothering my concentration. My mind was bothering my concentration. The sound is just a sound."

As Ajahn Chah used to say, the sound doesn't disturb us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound. The sound is just happening. The sound could be a sight. It could be somebody walking by. It could be an unpleasant physical experience. It could be the cold.

So the first way of meeting the aversion head-on is to bring our attention into the actual sensory experience, see what it actually is, as distinct from all the hoo-ha about it. And this can be amazingly powerful.

This is from Phil Jackson, the coach of the Chicago Bulls basketball team. He's a meditator:

"Little by little, with regular practice, you start to discriminate the basic sensory events from your reactions to them. Eventually, you can begin to experience a point of stillness within. As the stillness becomes more stable, more accessible, you tend to identify less with fleeting thoughts and feelings, such as fear, anger, or pain, and experience a state of inner harmony regardless of changing circumstances. For me, meditation is a tool that allows me to stay calm and centered—well, most of the time—during the stressful highs and lows of basketball and life outside the arena."

This is just to show you don't have to be passive. He continues: "During games, I often get agitated by bad calls. But years of meditation practice have taught me how to find that still point within so that I can argue passionately with the refs without being overwhelmed by anger."

It's possible. That's what's so great about being able to bring mindfulness to the actual experiences. We have, in that point, a moment of choice of how to respond—with both desire and aversion.

Without being driven, you see the state, you come to the actual sense experience, and there's a moment of trust. Yes, I think I will go get that, but it's not out of thirst. Yes, I will argue passionately with a ref, but I don't hate his guts. There's a difference.

So that's the skillful means when we even have a clue what the sensory experience is that's eliciting our aversive response. Often, though, it's way down the road and you have no idea what triggered it. You just know that there's really strong irritation, anger, or fear. At that point, the practice becomes recognizing and bringing our awareness into—using the body again—the state of anger, fear, or irritation itself. As distinct from all the thoughts and stories and past and future and "what if." Feel it, just as with desire. Bring your attention into your body. Let yourself burn with anger if that's what's happening. Let yourself feel the contractions, the palpitations, the heat. Use the noting as a way to keep your attention moving into the actual experience.

This is the middle way of our Buddhist practice. We're not suppressing—"Oh no, I shouldn't feel anger, I shouldn't feel desire, those are bad." We really let ourselves feel it, but with awareness. And we're not jumping on the train and letting it carry us—"Yeah, I am angry, and I have a right to be angry, and that person is really wrong." Maybe they are. At this moment, as far as practice goes, that's not the point. The point is to learn that we can be in the midst of anger, boredom, desire, and find that place of resting at ease that does not have to deny or fear the experience. It's wonderful to know that you don't have to be afraid of anger because you don't have to be driven by it.

It's not always neat and tidy here in the meditation. I've done plenty of what I call stomping meditation when I'm really angry. It's not "lifting, moving, placing... anger." It's not "in, out... anger." It's truly stomping—anger, anger! I'm so angry! I hate everything and everybody! Just let it move. But there's still mindfulness there. It's not that I'm going out and telling everybody why I hate them and what's wrong with them. I'm just letting myself be with the anger. And it shifts. It moves. You just see that it's strong energy. We don't have to suppress that energy. It can actually transform through the power of awareness and become available for our practice.

It's also nice to begin to experience the presence of aversion, judgment, irritation, frustration—rather than as a problem—as a signal. When I start to experience that as a signal: "Ah, what's going on right now that I'm actually trying not to acknowledge?" And the anger says that it's unpleasant, and what I'm trying not to acknowledge is for sure going to be unpleasant. But once I really meet it with awareness, there's this sense of relief. "Oh, okay. It's loneliness. It's this aching emptiness." But touching it with awareness, I can be here. Once again, I'm whole. I don't have to build up the structure of fear and avoidance in order not to feel something. That's actually much more exhausting.

So desire, sense desire, aversion in all its phases—recognizing, not being afraid of it, but coming into

feeling it as it's manifesting here and now. Use your body to ground yourself rather than getting into the stories. Come into the sense experience that's eliciting the desire, that's eliciting the aversion. And again, you're present in that moment, just resting at ease in whatever's arising.

I talk the most about those two because they're much more than just states that arise early in a retreat. Desire and aversion—along with confusion, delusion, not knowing what's what—are really the underpinnings of our continuing to cycle in states of suffering. So they're really important to explore. And they're not going to just go away once you see them. Don't worry about that.

Make friends with them. Not like a friend of mine—oh, I should say this. This is from a friend from Massachusetts who likes to talk about this kind of, you could call it, deluded compassion. You know, "I should be nice to myself," or sort of massaging the defilements. That's not what I mean.

So when I say make friends with anger, it's not like, "Yeah, come on, let's just be angry whenever we want." Make friends in the sense that Thich Nhat Hanh talks about: sponsor your anger with mindfulness. It's really lovely. The important thing is to bring out awareness of your anger in order to sponsor it. Then the anger is no longer alone—it is with your mindfulness.

"Anger is like a closed flower in the morning. As the sun shines on the flower, the flower will bloom because the sunlight penetrates deeply into the flower. Mindfulness is like that. If you keep breathing and being mindful and sponsoring your anger, mindfulness particles will infiltrate your anger." You didn't know it was little particles, photons. "When sunshine penetrates a flower, the flower cannot resist. It has to open itself and show its heart to the sun. If you keep breathing in your anger, shining your compassion and understanding on it, your anger will soon crack and you will be able to look into its depths and see its roots."

And once we begin to see the roots of a particular anger, it shifts. It doesn't have power over us anymore, but we don't have to hate it and fear it. The power, the transformative power of mindfulness.

So just a word about the other three: sloth and torpor—sleepiness—and worry and restlessness, and doubt. The trick is working with skillful means. Skillful means is really a way of discovering what helps us bring a kind and balanced awareness to these states, not getting lost in them but also not hating them and trying to get rid of them.

With sleepiness, I find this particularly challenging and delicate because we have all kinds of ways to help us be more aware when sleepiness arises. Skillful means really comes from your intention. For example, as I said the other day, if you're really sleepy, stand up. If that comes from the intention to be as aware as possible and feel the state of sleepiness, fine. But the same action can come from the intention of, "I really hate this. It shows how bad I am. I better stand up and get rid of it." It looks the same, but you're really cultivating aversion. So skillful means is something we all play with—how to bring in the most skillful way to be present, not out of aversion, but out of a commitment to being awake.

Being awake sometimes means being awake to the experience of sleepiness. I personally have spent uncounted hours of my life working with being aware in the state of sleepiness. It's not easy, but it is possible. And I've actually come to have a deep knowing that it's worth it.

For years, every night on retreat at eight o'clock, I'd be just falling out of the chair, falling off the cushion, and the mind goes, "What is the use of this? This is totally stupid. If I would just go sleep, then I'd feel better." At some point there definitely is a point at night when you're really tired and need to go to sleep. But eight o'clock wasn't really it—that was a little early.

It took me years to see that actually, through that period, there would be moments of sleepiness and moments I could bring my attention there, that the mindfulness and the concentration and the equanimity were strengthening through that, that each day it was growing stronger. Even though in the sleepiness you don't get the goodies—you don't feel like it's so clear, it's not fulfilling—still those things are developing. So it's really important just to notice that, to be willing to at least open to exploring the state of sleepiness before you just check out.

Now, early in a retreat it's true that most of us come in from being busy. This is such a change that in the early days, for many people, there's a real physical and emotional exhaustion when a little extra sleep or an occasional nap really helps. You don't have to torment yourself.

But if I pay attention when I take the nap and when I wake up—if I wake up and I'm really feeling refreshed, present, alert, more balanced—then it was helpful. And suddenly there comes a day when I wake up from the nap and I'm actually feeling worse, more out of it, more spaced out. I realize, "Oh, I need more sleep." No, I don't need more sleep. I need *less* sleep. I was actually just sleeping out of fear rather than out of tiredness.

One thing on retreat: don't worry about "I better sleep now in case I'm sleepy later." What do you have to do later? Any time of day or night, we're not going to come looking for you. You can go take a nap. So it's really about paying attention to what's happening right now.

With sleepiness, one thing about it is we take it so personally. Gil was saying in his story last night—that was perfect. He's such a horrible yogi because he got up at two and was sleepy at four in the afternoon. And it's pathetic how long it takes us to say, "Oh yeah, duh, it's normal I would be sleepy now." It's taken me years to accept that my particular energy field runs low and the first three weeks of a retreat I'm going to have a lot of sloth and torpor. It's just how it is. This is for me—I'm lower than any of you, energetically. And then all of a sudden it goes. For you it's probably only two days. But the sleepiness isn't personal.

Sometimes it's actually an imbalance of energy. For some people, the sitting is very calming and concentrating—these are calming factors—while walking brings up energy. Sometimes people get the feeling that the sitting is really nice, really calm, they feel really present, really tuned into the breath, and suddenly they're asleep. They don't know how that happened because they were really concentrated. It's

because there's an imbalance of concentration and energy. At that point, we would say, "I don't care how nice and calm your sitting is. Get up and walk." Because we need to balance the calming factors with energy. Walking, or using the noting a little more clearly—these take effort, but they bring energy.

Now, one thing about sloth and torpor: if you think you're not in sloth and torpor and the idea comes into your mind, "Maybe I could stand up, maybe I could note more vigorously," and your mind goes, "No, I don't need to do that"—our teacher Sayadaw U Pandita used to say sloth and torpor hates effort. So that's a sign. Something like, "I could stand up." "Nah, I don't need to do that. I'll just watch it." Stand up.

But you can get interested in the experience of sleepiness itself rather than hating it. That's another thing I've done. I spent years actually not nodding when I'm really sleepy because I was completely filled with the tension of trying not to be sleepy, of hating the sleepiness. This is tremendous suffering and completely unnecessary. It's just a state of body and mind that comes and goes. Recognize it. Bring your attention, maybe not to the breath, but to the sensations of sleepiness itself with awareness. And when that's not possible, open your eyes. Stand up. Do more walking. If you're having real sleepiness, do more walking than sitting for a while until the energy comes into balance.

But don't take it personally. Even sometimes later in a retreat, sleepiness comes up and you know you're not really tired. It can function as a kind of resistance to something that's about to emerge. But even then, don't take it personally, because we're not doing it on purpose. And you still treat the sleepiness in the same kind but attentive way.

The flip side of sleepiness—and what's so strange is sometimes you can be sleepy one minute and then restless the next—is restlessness and worry. Restlessness is the physical opposite of sleepiness: too much energy and not enough calm and concentration, where you just want to jump out of your skin, changing position every two seconds. And worry is the mental component of that.

cyclical thinking, over and over—what about this, and what about this, and what's going to happen—and then it starts over again. It's an extremely unpleasant state. Recognizing it rather than going down the road of trying to figure it out every time is very helpful.

With energetic restlessness, sometimes it's helpful to get really big with your attention. Rather than trying to focus in on little sensations—that's like taking all this big energy and trying to put it in a little box. It feels like it's going to explode. Let your awareness get bigger than the room, as big as the desert. In fact, walk out in the desert and let that be your awareness, and just let all the energy move in that big space. It's not such a problem. If you're sitting and it's unbearable, stand up again and let your awareness get really big.

With the worrying mind, sometimes the opposite helps. Just don't pay attention to those thoughts. They're there—don't try to make them go away. But really see if you can get interested in your breath, sometimes counting one to ten, and whenever you lose track, starting over again at one. You're not trying to get

anywhere; it's just a way to corral the energy. What that does is raise the level of concentration and calm, which can then balance the energy. So that might be helpful. And again, recognizing, not taking it personally.

The last, and perhaps most interesting and elusive, is doubt. Now, doubt is obvious when it takes the form of: "What am I doing here? These guys up there don't know what they're talking about. This is the stupidest thing I ever did in my life." Or: "I can't do this. Everyone else is doing so great, and I am failing miserably." All those thoughts.

Doubt, though, almost always arises when we don't like what's happening. Let's just notice that. Have you ever felt doubt in the moments when you're taking a step and the world is beautiful and you're so present? Do you doubt at that moment? Not usually. Usually it arises with one or more of the other hindrances. And that's kind of the downside—they can come together. We don't always get them one at a time.

So doubt is obvious in those forms of thoughts: I can't do this, they can't do this, nobody can do this, the Buddha couldn't even do it. But another form of doubt that we sometimes don't recognize is analytical thinking. "Well, Gil said this, Carol said this, Jack said this—they're all a little different. Now I wonder if I tried this, would that be better? If I tried that? What about that Tibetan teaching? Let me really think, maybe I can figure out how this works and then I could apply it." And it seems like we're really thinking about practice in a useful way. But if you notice what's happening after a while, you haven't felt the breath, you haven't felt your body, it's been forty-five minutes and you're getting completely disconnected from experience. It feels like you're thinking about practice, but it's just spinning. This is also doubt, and this is a way we can get fooled.

I want to say also about doubt: it doesn't mean suspending our discriminating wisdom. Because the antidote to doubt is to just do it—connect your attention to something that's happening now. Sustained attention is the antidote to doubt. So when you're spinning in all these thoughts—"I can't do it, no, no, no"—just feel the breath. Just feel a sensation in your body. And then notice the next sensation. Notice the next breath. And pretty soon, as the attention continues to be sustained, the doubt is gone.

Now, I want to say that doesn't mean we don't have discriminating wisdom, because it's something we could get up here and say: "Just do it. Don't have any conflicting thoughts about it."

You've got to believe everything we say. You don't. As the Buddha says—and I think there was a quote on the first night that was so beautiful—he said, don't believe everything I say. Try it and see for yourself.

Now, the trick is we've got to try it. And thinking about it is not the same as trying it. So really bring your attention, connect, do the practice. And at the end of the retreat, yes, give yourself space to really evaluate. Notice how it affects your life. See if it's useful for you. See if it's appropriate for you. Don't just believe it—but you'll never know if you don't do it.

You might in the middle need to take a few moments to evaluate, but I can tell you that in the middle of a retreat, you really can't tell what's going on. Even in the middle of our own retreat, we can't tell what's going on, because you don't really have the whole picture. Each thing that's happening is looming so large that you can't really evaluate in the big picture. If you're really filled with doubt, come talk to one of us. We won't say "just do it." We'll let you talk about it. But the antidote is sustained attention. Try that, noticing you can evaluate later.

So these are the five: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness and worry, doubt. Recognize them, bring kind attention, be willing to be in the midst of them without fear and without needing to jump on the train. And each one, really, in the moment that we can meet it that way, becomes in that moment the avenue to liberating understanding.

From Pema Chödrön: Without the hindrances, would the Buddha have awakened? Would he have attained enlightenment without them? Weren't they his best friends, since they showed him who he was and what was true? Meaning he wasn't them, and he had to really look at them to see that. All the hindrances point the way to being completely awake and alive by letting go. When we wake up, we can live fully without seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. We can let ourselves feel our emotions as hot or cold, vibrating or smooth, instead of using our emotions to keep ourselves ignorant and confused. We can give up on being perfect and instead experience each moment to its fullest.

And as Dōgen said, if you cannot find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?

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