The Five Hindrances

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:24

In the beginning of a retreat, as all students know and as new ones have surely discovered by now, there are several very strong, very familiar emotional energies that arise in our experience. Although they're impermanent, our experience doesn't always seem to indicate that—especially in the early days.

These five emotions or energies are what the Buddha called the five hindrances, and I want to talk about them tonight. I'll name them briefly and then put them in a larger context of our practice before speaking about each one specifically.

These five very powerful and very common energies can take over our experience, especially in the first days of a retreat. The first is the energy of wanting, of craving something. The flip side of that is aversion—anger, hatred, rage, or fear. The third one, which has been mentioned a lot already here, is sleepiness. The formal English name is sloth and torpor, which is just so perfect. The fourth energy is that of restlessness: physical restlessness and mental agitation or worry. And the fifth one, which usually comes along with any of the others, is doubt.

Before I go into them specifically, I'd like to talk about the larger context of why we are here. What's the purpose of meditation? And basically, why do we come and sit and walk in order, it seems, to experience the most unpleasant and difficult inner circumstances possible? What's the point?

The Dalai Lama said once, at a conference I attended, that it's crucial to investigate what the true nature of happiness is, what the true source of peace is, so that we can develop a peace that will last. Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. Peace must first be discovered within ourselves, and then gradually it will expand to include our family, our community, and the whole planet.

To me, that's the very real purpose of this practice of meditation: to discover the fact that peace is already here within ourselves, within our experience at the present moment. Peace is a manifestation of our true nature, from which we're never separated. But somehow, somewhere, we don't know how to recognize this. We seem to have lost touch with it. We don't know how to pay attention in the correct way to recognize what is true. We keep getting distracted, confused. We look in the wrong place, identify with the wrong things.

This is from Chinul, who was the person who brought Zen to Korea. He says: "It's tragic. People do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddhas. They do not recognize that their own natures are the true Dharma. They want to search for the Dharma, yet they still look far away for holy ones. They

want to search for the Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds. I hope that you who cultivate the path will never search outside. The nature of the mind of the heart is unstained. It is originally whole and complete in itself."

That's us he's talking about—that the original state of our mind and heart is unstained, whole and complete in itself.

There are many different ways to talk about how we lose sight of this completeness, why we don't recognize our unstained nature and instead feel like we're in an ongoing struggle with sleep or anger or desire. One simile for how this happens—it's rather simplistic, but it helps me put my experience in perspective—is to think of our original, unstained nature as the sun, which all day, every day, also at night, is shining brightly.

Various clouds at various times come over. Sometimes they're really wispy and we sort of see through them; they're no problem. Sometimes they're really thick and dark and strong, and we get so affected by the clouds, so involved in reacting to them, that we completely forget the sun is still shining. Even if we don't see the sun directly, there's still the evidence of it in the fact that there's light, that we can see things. But for us, it's just this struggle. We like the clouds. We don't like the clouds. We wish they were different. We're scared they'll never go away. That becomes the limit of our experience, and we get lost in that struggle.

In a way, that's how I can relate to the experience of these five hindrances—these five particular emotions, these mental and physical experiences that arise for us frequently in our life and in our practice. Sogyal Rinpoche refers to them as emotional and intellectual veils that obscure the nature of mind.

And so I see, in a large way, our practice here, our practice of meditation, as cultivating a non-distractability of mind so that we can recognize and understand these veils, these clouds, for just what they are. We don't have to hide from them. We don't have to fear them or get lost in them. And at the same time, because we see them as they are, we also don't lose sight of the fact that the sun is still shining—that our pure nature hasn't gone anywhere.

And it doesn't mean the clouds have to go away.

The other thing that I really like about the way this process of investigation—of learning to see what's really true—works is that quite literally for me, the actual presence of one of these torments of the mind or disturbances of the heart (I like those better than "hindrances" actually; they don't have to be hindrances) becomes our avenue into clarity, into understanding. When one of them is present and there is the interest, the curiosity, and the non-distractability of mind to really see it for what it is, it actually becomes our gateway. Often the presence of one of these difficult states can be the catalyst, so to speak, for a moment of awakening, of seeing clearly what's true.

I'll give a very simple example of how this can work. It's not big lights going off—it's just very ordinary experience. The other night, as I was in bed, not yet asleep, for some reason fear just arose in my experience. And that's one of the things about these energies: they're not personal. They arise due to conditions, they last for some time, and they go away. Every single one of these goes away. It really doesn't last so long when you pay attention.

So fear arose as I was lying there, and it was a really great chance, on reflection afterwards, to observe both how we get lost in these experiences—how they cloud our perception of reality—and also how the ability to be fully present with it as it is opens up a whole other possibility.

At first there was this sensation of fear, and I got lost in it. When we're lost in these emotions, they cloud how we perceive our reality until it kind of fills up the whole screen. So I was lying there with this fear, which I was aware of, and there was a sound. I jumped and immediately said, "My God, a gunshot! I wonder what's going on." It went into this hole. I didn't stop and rationally think that there wouldn't be a gunshot. It was just—and watching the waves of fear—another sound: "Oh, an explosion! What's going on?" And there would be this other big wave of fear. That's one way that we get blinded and distort what we think is true: just completely going with that energy, that emotion, and it fills up the whole world. It distorts everything we perceive. It defines our reality.

The other way that we get equally enmeshed is by resisting or denying. I could have laid there—which wasn't the way I went that time; we usually do one or the other—and said, "It's ridiculous to be afraid. There's nothing to be afraid of." Which is also taking it very personally. Someone of your age, at night, with all these people around her—and it could go on and on about what are you doing being afraid, you're just a big sissy, or it's due to my conditioning, or this happened when I was a child. We get into a whole analysis of it, which I've done at other times, and we're also equally in the grip of it. It's just as much filling up the screen.

Both of these ways of reacting—really going for it or denying and pushing it away—keep us identified. And also, incidentally, they empower the emotion so that it really starts rolling along. This is how we usually deal, because it's very deeply conditioned in us. It's a deep force of habit to either resist and deny, take it personally, or get really lost in it. And that's how we suffer. That's how we're blinded.

Now this experience was kind of going back and forth, because after the sound—"Oh, it's a gunshot! What's going on?"—I again recognized fear. And as I'll describe as we go along, what we do is take our mindful attention and simply turn it on the experience of fear itself, without analyzing, without questioning, without judging it—simply being with fear. Feel it in the body, explore the thoughts that come, but come back and just be with the fear.

And it's so interesting: just being directly with the bare experience itself, without expectation, it suddenly opens up into a really clear space. And without looking, my mind goes, "Oh, that sound was just a cabinet slamming in the next bathroom." Suddenly the mind would clear up: "Oh, that was just the bath water

running in the bathroom in that apartment behind me." In that space of directly being with the experience, clarity opens up by itself. It comes on its own. And it's so clear it's not personal.

There's one Indian teacher who describes it—and I think it's such a perfect description of how this distorts reality—"We miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination." It's kind of shocking how much this is what's going on.

In seeing things just as they are, in the willingness to simply be present in the midst of experience, a natural peace can emerge even though the experience might still be going on. For instance, the nature of fear is fearful.

I mean, fear is never going to feel happy. The nature of fear is fearful. But even in the midst of that, when there's a calm presence, there can be this opening into seeing that the picture is really much, much wider. Even though fears are rising, there's a huge space of emptiness and calmness around it or within it, however you might happen to experience it.

This is just a small example of how mindfulness—the power of the attitude of okayness and patience and curiosity that James spoke of last night—can transform what is a difficult or confusing experience into one that has the potential for opening us to reconnect with what is true.

I want to speak more specifically about each of these energies, mostly to help us recognize them. Which might sound silly—we all know these states all too well. But when we're in the middle of them, perhaps the most important piece that helps with not identifying, that helps with seeing what's true, is the simple recognition of what it is that's happening.

This first one, craving, this quality of wanting. It's not just a neutral need like knowing that you're hungry and needing to go eat. And it's not so much a desire that's skillful, that's associated with intentions such as compassion—for instance, the desire to save a sick bird, motivated simply out of compassion. We're talking here about real craving. And we experience it in our lives pretty continually. Whatever it is—a new car, a better job, the perfect place to live, the perfect relationship.

What's interesting is when we come on retreat, the same quality of craving, the same degree of energy can go into trying to find the perfect sitting position. The perfect chair or the perfect zafu. It can go into scouting through the whole desert to find the best walking place so that your walking period is really pristine and clear. And we can suffer enormously. It doesn't matter what the object is. It's this quality of obsessive craving.

Our tendency to get lost in this is so strong that usually what we do is project it out into the environment, into the object, so that we become completely absorbed in it. "If only the weather were different, everything would be okay." Well, the weather changed today. How long was everything okay? It just isn't where peace lies.

In our continuing to project the energy out and look to different objects to give us that peace, we just keep on going. Okay, now it's warm, but something else comes up. Perhaps it gets too warm, or perhaps the food wasn't right today, or perhaps you wish you'd brought some different kind of clothes. On and on and on. It's endless. This quality of craving is endless when we don't stop and look at the energy of desire itself.

It's really a kind of suffering because we feel so discontented, so much needing something that isn't here. And it's this constant looking outside for peace that keeps us from seeing that peace is right here all the time.

Craving is really a very key part of the Buddha's teaching. It's one of the linchpins of how our ignorance is perpetuated day to day. So I could talk on and on about this. I'm just introducing it very lightly here.

One yogi said at a retreat, commenting on the endless quality of craving—she got so fed up with just seeing it arise over and over—she said she decided she'd try and satisfy every craving that came up and see if that wore it out. She came in sheepishly a few days later and said, "Well, it only got worse. It didn't help at all."

When we are caught in it here, it might take us some time to recognize. But at some point, after we've gone through "if only I had this, if only I had that, if only this were different," suddenly—oh, this is desire. This is craving. This is a very key moment, this point of recognition, of being able to name what it is that's actually happening.

Craving is an actual experience in the moment. Being able to take the attention, the mindfulness, and turn it onto the craving itself—this is really the key tool of mindfulness, one of the key things we're learning how to cultivate here in this practice. It's really so for anything that's going on: learning how to give bare attention to the experience.

You're going desire after desire, and there's something subtly pleasant about desire when we're not paying attention. Notice how you can get into a food fantasy, say, and go on and on, and it feels really pleasant—much more pleasant than sitting here and being with the breath. But when you wake up and here you are again, what's the actual experience? Did that bring you ultimately more pleasure? Or does it make everything else more unsatisfactory?

So anyway, when you notice that desire is happening, naming is extremely helpful. Use this soft mental label: "desire, desire, desire," and keep on labeling very softly for as long as it's there. Most of the attention then being—you're not taking a sledgehammer and going, "DESIRE, DESIRE!" You're simply acknowledging in a very non-judgmental way that desire is what's present right now. That's all. There's no shame, there's no judgment. It's simply an arising energy. So it's very soft.

And then take your attention and explore the experience itself. For instance, there's a kind of quality of desire in the mind, the emotional quality. And then what I find for myself—by far the most helpful way to stay grounded in the actual experience of desire—is to turn the attention onto the physical manifestation

of it. Explore: what does desire feel like? Sitting here, not thinking about what I want, not getting into the story, but turning around and feeling desire. When I feel this, I feel a kind of tightness, a constriction, a pressure, a heaviness, almost a kind of leaning forward. You can change the note at that time from "desire" to "heaviness," "constriction," "tightness," "burning." Very simple. Very direct experience. It's not complicated. Really with an air of curiosity: Well, what is desire? If it runs so much of my life, why can't I explore it and see what this thing is?

One thing you might discover—actually, I'm pretty sure you'll discover it—is that the actual state of desire itself is not so pleasant. This kind of yearning is physically unpleasant for me, this yearning for something else. It's rather unpleasant. And we begin to see why it is that we get so intent on achieving the object of the desire. Because what happens when we get that? Ah, peace. Everything's okay.

When you're noticing and being mindful of desire, just staying with it, staying with it, letting it do whatever it does without suppressing it but without feeding it by going and getting something—what do we find? Suddenly, at some point, without doing anything other than being with it, the desire goes away. And it might be ever so briefly, but notice the experience: when the desire is gone, it's just the same as if you'd gotten what you wanted. It's "ah, peace." The desire is not present.

It's kind of a clue that we see that what we're really desiring isn't so much whatever it is out there, because that can keep being replaced with something else. It's somehow the sense of completeness that we yearn for. The sense of peace. The sense of unity, of oneness. And that's already here. That's already here. Turning our attention onto the process of desire—it's really the process of desire that is one of the things that fools us. One of the things that keeps us looking away from what's already here and always true.

Part of why we cultivate attention to the breath is simply to develop enough focus and non-distractibility of mind and heart, of attention, to be able to stay with a more complicated and difficult experience like desire and see it for just what it is. It's really fascinating, the process. And it might sound complex, but we'll all have plenty of time to explore it and to see how it works and just what the experience of desire is for you. Don't take my word for it. Really look and see for yourself.

The second torment of the heart, or hindrance so to speak, is the flip side of desire. It runs a whole range. It stems from wanting to be separated from what is unpleasant, just as desire is wanting to come together with what we experience as pleasant. Aversion has a whole range from mild dislike, a kind of irritation or annoyance, to real anger, to uncontrollable rage. It also includes boredom, which is a sort of slight aversion to what's going on and an out-of-touchness with what's going on. And it also includes fear, which is a kind of retreating aversion—whereas anger is going outward, fear is pulling back.

When we begin to see how aversion manifests, or anger or fear, in our experience, it's pretty obvious that it's unpleasant. Anger especially is a kind of burning for me in the heart, and it leaves an impression, a sort of physical impression in my being, even long after it's passed on.

Again, when we're not noticing the presence of the energy of anger or fear or aversion itself, it tends—one moment of aversion tends to condition the next—so that it starts really spiraling in a way that it can get out of control, really just seems so huge. Or again, we can project it outwards onto our experience. Where what's really happening is just the arising of aversion in the mind, what we experience is that everything that comes into our awareness is disgusting and aversive.

And if we really think that's true, it leads to a lot of suffering.

I know one retreat I was on, I saw this very clearly. I was sitting in the dining room, and this is what's so tricky—I thought I was really calm and clear. And yet somehow everyone who walked by was sloppy or unmindful or making a lot of noise or wearing a stupid outfit or showing off their slow walking or something. And these were friends of mine. I knew all these people. It took ten or fifteen minutes of this before I saw, "Oh, I guess this is aversion."

At that point, the willingness to shift attention from what was wrong with everybody who came by to the experience of aversion itself—in some ways it's a huge relief just to know what's really going on. It isn't pleasant. Again, as with desire, the experience of anger and aversion in our own mental and physical process isn't pleasant. And it's easy to see why we tend to go with the outer projections of it. This is not to deny that things can happen that are really off, or that people do things that are genuinely harmful. But it's still important to know in ourselves what the experience of aversion is, what the experience of anger or fear is.

So again, it's the same—that ability to name is so powerful. It takes this experience of anger, fear, or aversion out of the realm of the magical, where it's kind of controlling everything. Like this fear I was in the other night—it could have seemed like a magical experience that turned the most mundane into the most horrific things. The naming of it as fear has a huge effect of helping us not identify with it and being in the actuality of the moment. And not take it so personally.

So when you're aware, whether it's just as anger, aversion, or fear is arising, or whether it's three days into it, it doesn't matter. The moment that you can name it is very important. And continue just naming: "This is aversion. Aversion. Anger. Anger. Anger." It doesn't matter how long. Most likely, if you're just present with it, it's not going to go on all day. It'll pass. It might come back again, but it'll pass. And it's really important to see that discontinuity—that also takes away a sense of power we can give to these states of mind.

As you're naming, turn the mindful attention onto the actual experience itself. It's very helpful to notice how it's manifesting in the body as well as in the mind. And this is a very delicate line that we're walking, a very delicate balance of not suppressing it—"I'm not angry. There's no aversion. There's no need to have aversion. Everything's fine." That doesn't help. And not really getting lost in it, indulging it, as I was when I was just blaming everybody that walked by and taking that to be true.

A very delicate line of allowing the full manifestation of the fear, the aversion, the anger in the body. "Anger. Tightness. Burning. Burning. Burning. Burning. Burning." It's okay if it's burning for fifteen minutes. It's unpleasant, but that's just what's happening. That's where we bring in the patience, the okayness, the equanimity. At some point, we start to see its true nature—that it does pass, and it isn't personal.

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh on being with anger, this line of balance: "The Buddhist attitude is to take care of anger. We don't suppress it and we don't run away from it. We just breathe and hold our anger in our arms with utmost tenderness. Becoming angry at your anger only doubles it and makes you suffer more. But on the other hand, if you just leave it alone, it'll become destructive and run wild. You can say and do angry things. Or if you don't say or do angry things, it will continue to destroy you inwardly. So the Buddhist practice is to recognize your anger as anger."

I like that image—we recognize it, but the recognition is a holding it in our arms with care. We don't hate it either.

This is hard for us. It's not an easy thing to do, and we'll all get lost one way or the other many, many times. This is fine. This is how we learn. Please don't set up some ideal of perfection, thinking, "I notice anger the moment it comes up and then it's all clear."

It's not like that. It's a practice. But that image of recognizing anger and cradling it in your arms really helps give me a sense of the balance involved.

When we're exploring anger, fear, desire—any of these emotions in this way—what I find is that it begins to open up a huge space around them, so that we no longer need to fear their arising. I know there have been times when I've been sitting under a tree, living in dread that aversion is going to come back. It's so pleasant now that it's gone. But learning to simply be with these energies as they are can open up a vast space where we don't have to be so controlled by them. We don't have to fear their presence so much. Instead, they can become a signal for us to pay attention and wake up.

Without this capacity, these energies really do tend to control our experience, even in small ways. A friend of mine was telling me the other day that he'd been in a fast food restaurant and had a little interaction with the man in front of him—pretty mild, but the man clearly got very irritated at him. Later, as my friend walked out past one of those stations where you put in the ketchup and cream for your coffee, he passed at a distance. This man caught sight of him, and just the sight of my friend got him so upset that he spilled his coffee. Just so irritated. What's really going on there? If we have the ability at the time of that first irritation to simply be with the anger, we don't have to keep letting it be re-energized by every sight, every sound. It might be unpleasant, but it's workable.

Sloth and torpor is the third hindrance. I know a lot of you are quite familiar with this by now. It's the falling asleep syndrome, whether you're on the zafu or walking. It's also a kind of dreamy, hypnagogic

state that you can slip into—sometimes very pleasant and seductive. Often it's much easier to dream your way through the sitting, or it can even feel like a sort of clear space, much more pleasant than coming back to the breath or the body. One of our teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, describes sloth and torpor as being like congealed butter—the mind is like congealed butter, with no flexibility whatsoever. Someone said today that the experience of trying to practice with sloth and torpor is like walking through mud.

Again, recognizing its presence is the first important step. The second one that has been most helpful for me is not taking it personally. It took me years and years not to take sloth and torpor personally—as if it was somehow a sign of deep personal failing that sleepiness arose in meditation and the mind wasn't crystal clear. Saying it aloud, it sounds crazy, but I know from talking to people that I'm not the only one. I know practitioners who've gone through literally weeks of deep inner torment during a three-month course because sleepiness was arising.

So it's really interesting to look at how much we get caught by our reactions to a particular energy. What is sloth and torpor? It's an imbalance of energy. The energy we have is always going to fluctuate. We come into a retreat having been really buzzy, really tired—what do we expect? That we're going to sit down and be incredibly crystal clear? Everything is a result of conditions. Nothing exists on its own. And the conditions of most of our lives mean that in the first few days of retreat, it's almost inevitable that at some point the body is going to be really tired or the mind really sluggish. Once in a while that doesn't happen, but it's a common experience, and it's not personal.

At other times in retreat, this sleepiness or dullness of mind arises because there's an imbalance between concentration and energy. It's possible to be really concentrated, but if there's not enough energy in your system, you think you're concentrated—and you are—but the next thing you know, you're waking up, and you don't know how that happened. So it's not personal when you start to see that it's simply the way different mental factors come together in our experience.

Sometimes a real dullness or sleepiness of mind will also come about as a sort of unconscious resistance to some difficult experience that's about to surface. You can't do much about that. You don't know what it is, and you can't make it hurry along. That's not helpful.

In all of these cases, the only obvious thing to do is recognize it: "Oh yes, sleepiness, dullness." Name it with kindness, without judgment, with affection—simply noticing its presence. Then, as skillful means, there are different ways we can bring up the energy, balance the system. These methods won't always make us more alert. And if we're using skillful means but with a motivation of aversion—"I hate this sleepiness, so I'm going to really note it until it goes away"—well, once in a while that might work, because anger and aversion are actually quite energizing.

But you've just moved then from sloth and torpor to aversion, and some people actually prefer that one. We all have our favorites.

But if you can just notice the tone with which you're labeling, you can pretty soon catch on if that's your motivation. And then, as a skillful means without aversion, you can really begin to note and label and explore the experience of sleepiness itself, or dullness itself. It can actually get really interesting. How do you know that you're sleepy? What are the physical sensations of sleepiness? Try to be really accurate in labeling it and in noticing it, because that takes a little energy to do. And instead of using up your last vestiges of energy by doing it, what actually happens is it brings on more energy.

But again, Sayadaw U Pandita says that sloth and torpor hates effort. You know, the mind says, "No, if I really note this it'll just make me so much more tired." It's not like that. So when you notice you're sleepy, if you really investigate—what is it? Is this kind of heaviness? Heaviness, heaviness. You notice a kind of grittiness in the eyes maybe. Grittiness, grittiness. Dropping. Nodding, nodding. And then when you can't note anymore, you know that the mindfulness has slipped away again. That's okay. So when you wake up, even if you're only awake for two minutes of that sitting, that's still two minutes of presence. That's better than if you were sleeping the whole time. You have to kind of look at the positive side. You can tell I've spent a lot of time in sloth and torpor.

I'm being a bit silly, but actually this real investigation at times brings a real energy into the mind. The mind kind of opens up and the energy comes back. It's really quite amazing, because one of our problems with these states is that we think they're going to last forever. When you're in sloth and torpor, if you knew it was going to go away in fifteen minutes, you wouldn't really be so upset. But somehow if you look at what's the assumption underneath the aversion, the assumption is usually, "This is how I'm going to spend the rest of my life"—or at least the rest of this retreat, or even just the rest of this sitting. How about just taking things moment to moment? In this moment, exploring the actual experience of tiredness, of sleepiness—it's not so bad. It might be a little unpleasant but it's kind of interesting, just seeing it for what it is.

Now, I know that there are times when this is way beyond the pale, and the ability to even make a label of sleepiness is not there because it's way too far gone. Again, without aversion to it but simply as a way to balance the energy, all the things we've mentioned before can help. You can focus a little bit on your posture—just sit erect, not in a forced way, as someone else said today, but more subtly, feeling your spine, tuning in inside. You can open the eyes, focus them down, not looking around. I've found that light, bringing in light, somehow energizes the system. Standing up can help. Something that the Buddha spoke of in one of his discourses, although it hasn't worked for me, is pinching your earlobes. But if the Buddha said it, it must work for some people. If I'm having a long wave of real dullness, I might tend to walk longer because it's often easier to be present in the walking.

And again, noticing how and when this state of dullness and sloth and torpor dissipates. Because it will. There's no way it's going to last forever. Often we don't notice the endings of things, or we forget, and like six hours later we remember, "Oh yeah, I was so sleepy this morning. I wonder what happened to that." So simply noticing that things end also helps us experience the fact that it's not ourselves, that it's really quite

an impersonal energy.

The flip side of this is restlessness in the body—that you just can't sit still, you just want to jump out of your skin and run screaming out of the hall. Or the corollary in the mind: a spinning, circling kind of thinking that's clearly not going anywhere, but the mind is just running at the speed of light. You can't really focus on anything, can't really settle on anything. It's the most uncomfortable experience.

And again, to recognize it for what it is. It doesn't make it go away. It doesn't make it more pleasant. But it really helps us to just be with what is. In the physical realm, you might notice you're changing posture, changing posture—this is wrong and that is wrong. Suddenly to notice, "Oh, this is restlessness." What it does is really widen the frame. So instead of focusing on this particular little pain, that particular little nudge, and this particular discomfort, there's a whole wide sky of consciousness, and within it is all the experience of restlessness—coming and going, coming and going, coming and going.

If you really widen—it's almost, you can imagine doing this—widening your consciousness so that it's as wide as the sky. Within that, the restlessness can arise and pass, arise and pass. It's uncomfortable, but it can come and go. If you try to really focus down physically, you find it can increase the restlessness. Just as you find if you move and keep moving when you're restless, what happens is you get more restless. You think, "If I don't move this leg, I'm going to die." But once you move this leg, then suddenly you have to move that toe, and suddenly you have to move your shoulder, and it just kind of escalates. So sometimes just play with it. This is for physical restlessness—widening the scope and just letting it all come and go. As Jack likes to say, you know, die of restlessness. Be the first person to die of it and just see what happens. Chances are you won't die.

Now for mental agitation, this just spinning, spinning, spinning of mind—sometimes it's very helpful to simplify. Don't try and follow every thought and note every thought and get to the root of things. You're just exacerbating the restless energy of mind. It can be very helpful to simplify. Just go back to the breath. I know all these thoughts are running around. We know they're there. Just let them run around. Go back to the breath, sometimes even counting the breath, just from one to ten, one to ten. Get very simple. This can sort of calm us down enough to be there, at least to know that that's what's going on.

Again, restlessness is another imbalance of energy. It's like way, way a lot of energy and not enough balanced with concentration and calm. This coming back to the breath, and just being simple, just counting one to ten, is bringing in focus, one-pointedness of mind, and this can help to balance this out-of-balance energy.

And the last one, a very interesting quality of mind, is that of doubt. Doubt can be experienced usually as thinking, and it often arises from too much thinking, and it leads to more thinking, and so it just escalates itself endlessly. Usually it's not that hard to recognize. We often get so caught up in the analyzing that we forget to recognize it. And it manifests just very simply as: "I can't do this. It's impossible. This is the stupidest thing. This is the wrong time. This is the wrong meditation. These are the wrong people. My back

hurts too much. The weather's bad. It's just impossible." Just like that. So it's self-doubt, doubt in the meditation, doubt in whatever.

What's so insidious about doubt is that when it's present and we're caught in it, when we don't recognize it, it makes it impossible for us to actually wholeheartedly pay attention to what's happening right now. Because it just starts escalating. We don't believe in the efficacy of that. So we start trying to figure out, "Well, gee, maybe this is the wrong time. Maybe it would be better if I came next year. And it's the wrong time because I was sick two weeks ago and my energy's kind of low. Or maybe it's not. I don't know. How would I know that?" And you just start going on and on. Meanwhile, any sense of mindfulness or presence is out the window. It's very tricky.

Doubt, you'll also notice, tends to arise almost always when any one of the other hindrances is present in a strong way. So we get lost in aversion. We're having a lot of aversion, a lot of sleepiness. Almost always: "Oh, it's too much sleepiness. I can't do this. I should go home. I should never have come."

And then we're into what we call a "multiple hindrance attack." And that's usually how they come—it's rarely just one.

So with doubt, it's very important to recognize it, to name it as doubt, and to continue naming it and not get caught or sucked off into the content. And mind you, the content will be very enticing. It'll really be quite seductive.

I think one of the reasons that it can be so seductive is because noticing doubt and naming doubt and not giving into it as a hindrance is not the same thing as having to accept everything on blind faith. We are a very skeptical culture, and most of us are so taught that we're going to come to understanding through reasoning. I know for me this is very deeply engrained in an unconscious way. And so to be able to wholeheartedly say, "This is just doubt, doubt, doubt," and not somewhere get seduced into the "yeah, but"—it goes against so much of my conditioning that it's easy to get caught up.

I do want to say that recognizing doubt, continuing to note it, not getting sucked into the content is important. And it doesn't mean that you're giving up your own initiative. It doesn't mean that you have to accept everything we say, or the Buddha said, or anyone says on blind faith. One of the basic teachings of the Buddha was: don't believe anything just because I say it, or just because you hear it, but try it and see for yourself if it leads you to less suffering, if it leads you to peace.

So that's very important. But again, he said, "Try it and see for yourself." If we're spinning in analyzing, we'll never have the chance to try it. So when I'm really hooked on a particularly seductive doubt in retreat, I'll acknowledge it and say, "Okay, not now. At the end of this retreat there'll be plenty of time for reflection and for seeing how this is affecting my life." It certainly is not putting aside our own understanding. But if every time something's difficult we get caught up in analyzing it, it's just going to be tremendous suffering, and we'll never be able to simply see what's going on now.

The antidote to doubt in meditation is sustained attention. Because when doubt is going, you just can't focus. So keep on noting: doubt, doubt, doubt, doubt. And then really connect with something that's happening—your breath, a sensation in the body, another emotion, whatever else is arising next. Really notice it. Connect with it. And you might find you forgot that doubt was going on.

So these are these five energies. I know it's a lot, talking about them all like this, but the way of working with them all—aside from a few little tricks for each one—is basically this naming, this affectionate curiosity, just exploring the actual experience of it. And they really do lead us into an opening that helps us see what's true.

Mindfulness is a huge ally in this. Thich Nhat Hanh likes to talk about how a rose becomes garbage when you throw it away, but then we use the garbage to make compost and that turns into another rose. And how can you separate any of it out? I really feel in just this way, any of these energies can become a vehicle in that moment for our greater understanding, can become a vehicle for awakening to what is true—when we can name them, explore them, have some balance of equanimity with them, and let them come and go and open into what's really happening right now.

Often they'll be overwhelming. We'll get really lost and the mindfulness is not there. This is okay. These are strong habits of our mind. But more and more often you'll find that it's not so. You'll be in the middle of some kind of mental rampage of restlessness, and suddenly out of nowhere: "Oh, restlessness!" And there's a sense of just releasing—these physical sensations, mental reactions, emotional overtone, coming and going—and it changes.

Even within that, there can be the realization that this is not who we are. That there's something much vaster and always present that is not in the least bit affected, that actually is not even separate from the restlessness. We don't have to hate it so much.

I really feel like it's not a mistake that these energies come up so strongly in the beginning of practice. Because if they didn't come up, if we just came and sat in bliss the whole time—well, if it stayed like that for the rest of our life, that would be okay. Since most likely it doesn't, or won't, then the fact that these difficult energies come up is really a gift. Because how else are we going to be able to discover what they really are and that it's not who we are? How else can we discover how we get blinded by desire, by aversion, by restlessness or doubt or sleepiness? How do we get so caught in them that we get so busy fighting them that we forget that peace is accessible right now? That the sun is always shining in our heart, and that we can

contact that, that we can recognize that more and more when we don't have to fear difficult or unpleasant experiences that are arising.

I'd like to close by reading my favorite quotation from Ajahn Sumedho about working with these hindrances:

In life, wisdom arises within us when we understand the things we are experiencing here and now. You don't have to do anything special. You don't have to experience all kinds of extreme pain in order to transcend pain. The pain of your ordinary life is enough to be enlightened with.

So let's just sit together for a couple of minutes. Whatever is arising right now in your experience can be the gateway to truth—if we can simply trust that enough.

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