The Five Hindrances - Part 1

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:07

The subject of tonight's talk is the five hindrances. I'm actually only going to talk about three hindrances, though I figured calling the talk "the three hindrances" would really confuse people. You probably know this list fairly well, but especially at the start of a long retreat, it's beneficial for us all to remind ourselves what these qualities are, how to recognize them, and how to work with them.

Tonight I'll cover part of the list, and in a few days Joseph will talk about the rest. If you recall, the five are sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. I'll discuss sense desire, sleepiness, and restlessness. Joseph will cover aversion and doubt in a few days. Until he talks about those, you're not allowed to have them—they're not workable yet. But you can have the others.

These hindrances are forces in the mind that come very often to us, certainly in our life as meditators on retreat and in daily life as well. It's really important that we learn how to see them and clearly understand how to work with them.

When we use the word "mind," we're usually translating the Pali word citta, but it really refers to qualities of both heart and mind. If you ask someone in Thailand where their mind is—the word for mind in Thai is jit, which comes from citta after Thailand has been steeped in Buddhism for so many years—they'll point to their heart center. If you ask someone in the West where their mind is, they'll probably point to their head. In Buddhism, we understand that this word citta, which we usually translate as mind, encompasses both feeling qualities and cognitive qualities. I'll use the word "mind" for that, but it includes the whole range of emotions we have as well.

Bonnie was talking last night about the genius of the Buddha. One of the most incredible things about his understanding was the way he could see all the different forces that come into our hearts and minds and see clearly which ones were to be supported and developed and which ones were not going to be helpful and therefore were ultimately to be abandoned. As she said, it is possible to abandon the unwholesome, and that's why he asked us to do it.

Much of his teaching was about which states of mind lead us into suffering and which states of mind lead us to happiness and eventually liberation. He used different lists for these qualities. For the suffering states, you might read the list of the taints, the kilesas (usually translated as defilements, though I'm not fond of that word), the list of the fetters, or the list of the hindrances. For the beautiful states, you might read lists like the five spiritual faculties, the seven factors of awakening, the four brahmaviharas, or the four iddhipadas—the bases of spiritual power.

Each of these lists has a different purpose and connotation, so I want to talk about what the list of the hindrances is about. As I understand these lists of difficult states: the taints refer to the most deep-rooted tendencies of the human heart and mind that are present in all living beings—the fundamental building blocks of suffering. The kilesas—greed, aversion, delusion—are usually used to refer to action. They're called the roots of unwholesome action, influencing thoughts, speech, and bodily acts. They're seen as the fundamental influencers of action and are very related to karma. The fetters are the list of things that bind us, which get released at different stages of development until there's no more bondage at all.

What are the hindrances? The way I understand it, the hindrances are especially directed to meditators—to those of us who are developing the path through the Eightfold Path and particularly meditation. As we develop in our meditation on the journey to awakening, the hindrances are the forces in the mind that obstruct that journey, that block or oppose that development to awakening until we become aware of them and understand how to work with them, how to become mindful of them.

In one of the suttas, the Buddha said that the hindrances are forces that overcome mindfulness and weaken wisdom. That's a strong statement—they overcome mindfulness and weaken wisdom. In another sutta, he used an analogy for the hindrances. He said it's like there's a swift river flowing toward the ocean with a very strong current that will carry everything along in its path. But then someone comes along and opens some irrigation channels on both sides of the river, and big flows of water get carried off into those side channels. The main current going down the center of the river is no longer as big or powerful or fast as it was before.

What he was implying is that hindrances are like opening side channels on our stream to awakening. As we set in motion the Eightfold Path, we generate this strong current that's going to carry us to liberation. The hindrances open side pockets that take some of that energy off and drain it away. Basically, when the mind is overtaken by hindrances, our strong movement to awakening is getting diverted and weakened.

Another way the Buddha described the hindrances is he said they are makers of blindness. If we are overtaken by them and don't know how to work skillfully, they make us not see clearly what's going on. The Buddha used analogies for these five hindrances, comparing them to a bowl of water that's getting influenced in different ways.

For each of the hindrances, he used an analogy for some kind of disturbance in the clear water. So he basically said if the water was clear, a person could lean over it and see clearly their reflection in the water. But the hindrance puts another element in the water that makes the reflection not come through clearly. So he said if a person with good sight should look at their own reflection in the water, they would not see it as it really is. This is the misleading effect of the hindrances.

He said, "When obsessed by a hindrance, one does not see as it really is one's own good, nor the good of others, nor the good of both." This is all to say that the hindrances are fairly important. I don't want you to get discouraged by this, but to recognize the magnitude of the situation in relating to them and to make a

real effort to understand and learn how to practice with them.

One of the things that's tricky about the hindrances is that they kind of fly under our mindfulness radar. You know, as you're practicing, you have your mindfulness antenna out and you're looking for anything that's going to arise from any of the six senses. And often you may be very clued in to the body or breath or sounds, but being aware of the mind is a little more subtle and a little harder. So these hindrances kind of get in under our early warning system and implant themselves in the mind, sneaking in on us like that.

I'll give you a simple example. This is one of the hindrances I'm not supposed to talk about tonight—it's just an example. So I was practicing here one three-month course, and it was a couple of weeks in, so I was getting pretty present. After the morning sit, I went out the back door to go down to my walking path, which was on the grass below the new building. That grass was still there a long time ago.

So I was heading down the steps out the back of the meditation hall, and I thought I was being pretty present—lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. And then I saw that there was somebody already walking in my walking path. Unpleasant sight. So I kept being very mindful: lifting, moving, placing. And I started thinking, "How could they be in my walking path? I've walked there every walking period for the last two weeks." Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. I thought, "They must not be very sensitive, or they would have noticed, and they wouldn't want to take it away from me." Lifting, moving, placing. "Did I cut in front of them at breakfast today? Is this some kind of head game?" Lifting, moving, placing.

So I kept walking. I found another patch of grass, which, much to my surprise, worked just as well for walking meditation. And I was doing my walking, and about thirty minutes in, I sort of realized, "Oh, I'm angry." I was annoyed at the person who was walking in my path, and all those thoughts could have clued me in to the fact that I was annoyed and resenting the person, but they didn't. I thought I was being really pretty continuously mindful, and I was missing the biggest thing that was going on, which was that I was getting angry.

While I was getting angry, all I was doing was blaming them and trying to cast doubt on their sensitivity, on their choice, etc. And while I was caught like that, there was no way to get free of the anger because I hadn't even recognized it. So that annoyance just crept in under my mindfulness, took a seat in my mind. I was totally captivated by it, and I thought I was being mindful.

So this is what the hindrances do. They sneak in with a seductive storyline. And my storyline was basically, "They shouldn't be in my walking path"—like it should have had "Guy Armstrong" emblazoned on it from day one. But as soon as I could recognize, "Oh, there's anger here," then I could start to relate to it. And then it was pretty easy to release it because I saw it was actually pretty petty. Sometimes it's not so easy to release even when we see it, but the first thing is we need to see it. We need to see what's there.

And the hindrances are fairly major events in our experience on retreat, so it's really important that we

start to tune in and recognize them and then work with them. The tricky thing about the hindrances generally is that they lead our attention into the external situation. So my attention was focused on the person and the path, and where it wasn't looking was my own inner experience. So that's what the hindrances tend to do—they tend to focus us outwardly, and we kind of dwell on that.

I sort of ran this storyline over and over with something the Buddha called unwise attention. It wasn't helping to run the storyline. I was giving attention to a story that wasn't going anywhere, except generating more annoyance. The only way to release was to direct the attention where the wise person would, which would be: what was I feeling?

When I did that, there was a possibility of releasing it.

You could say that every hindrance is an example of misplaced attention. We are generally seduced into putting our attention on an outside situation or a misleading situation. What we really need to do is turn the mindfulness on the hindrance itself—on our own state of mind. Then it becomes workable. Then it's not a big obstacle.

In fact, as we start to practice with these hindrances with mindfulness, they open up a lot of new areas of freedom. Generally, these are the habits of mind that catch us, the habits of mind that enmesh us in repeated suffering. As we start to be able to notice them, recognize them, and work with them, that has the potential for opening up many areas of freedom in our practice and in our life. So they're very rich for opening and for growth, these qualities.

One of the things I find really beautiful in the world today is this area of applied mindfulness that Bonnie mentioned last night. Mindfulness is becoming quite a buzzword in the whole culture, going out in so many different directions. One direction I think is really exciting is its movement into schools.

There's an organization in the Bay Area called Mindful Schools. I don't know if they're on the East Coast yet or not, but they've trained like a hundred people to go into public schools from elementary to middle school and teach children how to be aware of their emotions. The first step for anyone to develop empathy is to recognize what they're feeling and how that feels to them. So children are being taught from a really early age to notice their own feelings of sadness and fear and anger and joy and excitement and interest. They're getting a whole vocabulary that was never explained to me in my primary school.

This kind of learning is actually going on in tens of thousands of schools, if not a hundred thousand schools across the country now. And I just think, wow, what if a whole generation of children could grow up understanding their emotional world? That would be so good for the whole planet.

I'll tell one little story because it really touched me. One of our sangha members in California is leading groups where she's teaching this to children. But she said with the children she teaches who are pre-kindergarten, you can't really use formal concepts like mindfulness, awareness, and emotion—it's too abstract for the kids. So what she does is lead them in a relaxation exercise, get them to lie down on the

ground, and then tell them to imagine that their whole world is this lake that lots of different fishes are swimming through.

A sad fish can swim through the lake. A happy fish can swim through the lake. An angry fish can swim through the lake. But they don't have to worry so much about the fish. They should be the lake. That's her instruction: "You be the lake, and you let all the fish swim through."

After one time doing this, she asked the kids, "Well, how was that for you? What was that like?" This little boy raised his hand—he was four years old, I think—and he said, "I could let all the fishes swim through, but I couldn't let the mad fish swim through."

She said, "Why couldn't you let the mad fish swim through?"

He says, "Because when you don't remember you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt people."

From the mouth of a four-year-old. So it's beautiful. Children have this intuitive wisdom. They can get these concepts early if presented skillfully. I thought this was a really lovely example of that.

Of course, one of the difficulties when the hindrances come is we usually don't like them. Who wants sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt? Often when they arise, there's some resistance to them, and there can often be judgment: "This shouldn't be coming. I shouldn't be having this. If I was a good meditator, this wouldn't be happening." So we're putting up a wall that tends to block them. By adding judgment or resistance, we're just compounding the situation.

A really important thing to look at is what our relationship to the hindrance is when it comes. As far as possible, just be really open, allowing, and accepting that that energy is there.

Because truly these forces are in all of us. It's not like "your aversion" or "my desire." This is just a very impersonal human quality. All of them are going to come to all of us as we meditate, as we take the journey down that swift river. They're all going to appear. So we don't need to own it as "I" or "mine" or "who I really am." We don't need to resist it because just as they come, they'll also go, like the weather.

As these hindrances come, learning not only to recognize them—and I think it's most helpful to name them—but also to ask the question: how am I relating to it as it arises and as I'm feeling it? Am I resisting, judging, aversive, or can I really just allow it as a part of my humanity, just a part of my human experience?

This is hard to believe, but we say it often, and I think it's really important: what is happening in our meditation—that means a particular arising—is not really as important as how we're responding to it. I'm going to say that again because it's so important: what's arising in our meditation is not as important as how we're responding to it.

Generally what arises is what I would call old karma, old habit patterns that have been set in motion for maybe many years, maybe since childhood, maybe from before. They have a momentum that's just going to run and that we don't even have to put a lot of energy into sustaining. They're going to arise. But what's really important is: from our current understanding, our dharma wisdom, how can we respond in this moment? Can we respond with some acceptance, with some compassion, with some kindness for ourselves, with understanding the nature of these impermanent visitors that just come for a while and then pass on their own terms?

Make this an important part of looking at hindrances. Not only what is arising, but how are you relating when it's there? And not to judge that either, but just to realize that the response is really where we establish our dharma practice. These old karma things can come from nowhere, can come just from habit pattern. But our dharma practice is about: how do I meet this present moment? And that we have more choice in.

The first of the hindrances I want to talk about is called sense desire. The Pali term is kamachanda. These two words are significant. Kama means sensuality. You probably know it from that old Indian text, the Kama Sutra, which is not a Buddhist text, I might add. If you haven't heard of it, it's a manual for lovemaking. So kama is sensuality. Sometimes it's synonymous with sexuality. In that instance, it's the Sutra, which is considered a holy kind of text on sexuality. You wouldn't find that from the Buddha's teachings.

But in this case, it means desire in the realm of the physical senses, which includes sensuality and sexuality. So sometimes kama is translated as "sensual." Kamachanda could be "sensual pleasure" or "sense pleasure." We're translating it as "sense desire."

The first thing I want to talk about is this word "desire." Desire has gotten a bad rap in Buddhism. It's kind of logical when you think it's the cause of suffering, right? If craving's the cause of suffering, that's not a person you want on your side. But there are many different words in the Buddha's language that get translated as desire, and it's important to understand the differences between them.

The word that's the cause of suffering is usually translated "craving," and that word in Pali is tanha. So tanha generally has an unwholesome connotation. Another word that comes in a lot, kamachanda, translated as "sense desire," is considered one of the hindrances, so also not something to blindly follow. Raga is a word that's often translated as "lust." It can mean lust for many different things. It also usually has an unwholesome connotation, as does lobha, which is usually translated as "greed" in that list of greed, aversion, delusion. These all have connotations that are leading to the unwholesome, although I'm going to qualify that in a minute.

But there are other words for desire which are not considered unwholesome. One of the key words you'll hear is chanda. Chanda means a desire, but it's not qualified as necessarily unwholesome. Chanda can be combined with wholesome qualities or it can be combined with unwholesome qualities. One could talk

about lustful desire using the word raga. One could talk about sense desire using the word kama. Then it takes on a questionable connotation. But chanda can be paired with the word dharma and talk about dhammachanda.

Then it's more like our zeal, our love, our enthusiasm for the Dharma and our practice of it. So if we didn't have dhammachanda, we wouldn't be walking this path together. If you didn't have a huge amount of enthusiasm and commitment and love for the Dharma, you wouldn't be here. So this quality of zeal or enthusiasm we talk about as dhammachanda, and it's the whole origin of the path.

I was thinking about that quotation that Joseph used, I think, on the opening night when he quoted Maya Angelou and said, "The ache for home lives in all of us." For me, that's kind of an expression of dhammachanda also. The ache for home, for me, is kind of a deep spiritual longing. I want to find a home that's beyond change, a home that's a real refuge beyond impermanence. And that's a way that I actually feel the call for the spiritual journey.

So sense desire in this context means desire for pleasant experiences in the five physical senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. These are huge areas of human pursuit. If you just sort of take a step back and think about the way the world works, there has always been this desire for more in the field of material goods. How many centuries has one country been fighting another for land or resources? How many centuries has one country been exploiting another, taking it over and colonizing or oppressing it for land and resources, essentially money, material goods? And to the extent that we do it today, how much are we harming our earth to carry out what seems like an endless kind of desire for more?

I just recently watched a video. You may have seen it. Joanna Macy took a plane flight over this part of Canada, which is called the Athabasca oil sands or the Alberta tar sands. What they've discovered is over this huge stretch of northeast Alberta, they think there's as much petroleum underground there as there are petroleum reserves in the whole rest of the world combined. But it's very hard to get out because it's under the ground in this very sticky, sandy mixture of petroleum and sand and clay and minerals.

So in order to get it out, they're having to go deep to dredge it up and then refine it and ship it. This area—quite a bit of it has been mined in what is essentially open pit strip mining. Quite a lot of the acreage has already been used in that way. Joanna Macy is an environmental activist and Buddhist, as you probably know, was flying over in an airplane and videoing what she was seeing. I know Canadians have heard about this for years, and probably many of you have heard about it, but I'd never seen the extent of it. I was shocked.

The area that this oil lies under is like 54,000 square miles, which is about the size of New York State. Joanna said that when they were flying, they flew for some hours in this small plane and didn't reach the end of it. And what she showed on the video just looked like that whole area had been strip mined. It was just raw and bare and opened up.

There's this kind of insatiable desire, hunger for more in the material realm. There don't seem to be any limits to what humans will do to acquire it. It's this huge force that's been with us for a long time.

In a lighter way, it's kind of fun to just think about in our capitalist society what industries are built up around satisfying these sense desires. I was just reflecting—this is not in any way a complete list, but I just will toss it out.

In the area of sight, think about the industries that are built on satisfying our desire for pretty sights. The first one that came to my mind was fashion. But it wasn't monastic fashion because you can't build much of an industry off monastic robes. But high fashion, you know, Dior and Lagerfeld and Prada and all that stuff—a lot of money there, and then the trickle-down effect. Anyway, I'll just go through these. Cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, hairstyles, bodybuilding, photography, movies, and there are probably a lot more.

In the area of sound, listening to pleasant sounds, the whole music business. So CDs and MP3s and iPods and iTunes, stereo systems, headphones, live concerts, symphonies, music festivals—all of that is so people can listen to pleasant sounds. Multi-billions of dollars.

Tastes. Okay, we all need to eat. But there are a lot of really expensive restaurants that people don't really need to eat at because the simple foods at IMS will actually serve your nutritional needs, not to mention the delicious meals that we get every day. So special restaurants, fad restaurants, special foods, exotic foods, desserts, beer, wine, cocktails—all of that money going into these special tastes that people pursue.

Smells. This is kind of an interesting one until I started thinking about it. Perfumes was the obvious one that came to my mind. That's a big market.

And then scented cosmetics, deodorants, air fresheners, fabric softeners, scented detergent—the list continues from there.

And then touch. This might be less obvious, but massage, bodywork, chiropractics, pain medications, and sex workers all involve the pursuit of pleasant sensations through touch.

So there's a significant portion of the economy devoted to pursuing sense pleasures. It's fundamentally a movement of mind that seeks pleasant experience, and it can arise very frequently during retreat. You might find yourself thinking about being back in your comfortable home, in your own bed, sitting in your living room chair, watching a movie on your TV, enjoying some special food from your refrigerator. These fantasies can become quite compelling.

At the end of one retreat, after I had been here for quite a while, I started feeling homesick. I began imagining my living room. What was interesting was that I was fairly concentrated, and the level of detail with which I could visualize my living room was extraordinary. I could almost see every thread in the carpet and every book on the bookshelf. It was really amazing. I felt such a pull of homesickness to be back somewhere familiar and comfortable and homey. I wanted nothing more than to lie on my couch

eating from a box of chocolates. That looked like heaven at that point.

Sometimes it's about fantasies of places you'd like to visit. You hear people talk about Burma and imagine wanting to see the stupas and monasteries, the pleasant sights of travel. It might be someone you particularly miss, or someone here that you find attractive—the Vipassana romance that can develop on retreat.

All these different kinds of wanting can arise very easily in a retreat setting because our life here is pretty austere. It's quite natural for this to happen.

Take some time to explore this quality of desire. What does it feel like when sense desire is present? I often find there's a kind of soothing quality to it because it brings in something pleasurable and familiar. It's almost as though I want to add something sweet to counter the simplicity of this environment.

But when I feel into it more deeply, there's something about the experience that isn't quite satisfying. There's this sweet thing, but I don't actually have it. With any kind of desire, there's this gap between what we want and what we have—or in the moment, don't have. Tune into that. Desire has an essentially incomplete quality to it, and that's why it always comes with some dissatisfaction. If the desire is really strong, it could bring a lot of dissatisfaction.

Just observe this nature of wanting. We usually don't want what we already have. Have you ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? No, because it's already there. If you didn't have a hand at the end of your arm, you would really want it. But because we have it, we take it for granted.

I want to emphasize that there is nothing wrong with sense pleasures for laypeople. There is a path in Buddhism for those who want to go beyond sense pleasures altogether—the path that Bhante has chosen, which he spoke about the other night as the renunciant path with its 227 precepts for men or 254 precepts for women who take full ordination. That is a wonderful path, and essentially in the life of a renunciant—a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni—there is no real opportunity to pursue sense pleasures. They can't choose their own food, can't choose their lodging, can't really choose their dress, can't choose to travel for recreation, can't handle money, so they can't go out and buy what would be pleasant. There is an entire venerated path within Buddhism that specifically sets aside the pursuit of sense pleasures.

But the rest of us aren't on that path. As laypeople, sense pleasures are part of our life. Coming here, we give up many of them. If you take the eight precepts, you give up even more. But in our daily life, we're open to sense pleasures. We may be in a loving relationship that has sexuality as a very natural component. We may choose to eat foods that please us, to enjoy music, to make music, to be creative through our relationship with music. All of that is fine. There's no problem with any of that unless we become obsessed by it.

What's important for us as laypeople is to keep examining our relationship to sense pleasures and notice if addiction, obsession, or compulsion is arising. Then we may need to investigate further and discover

greater wisdom. But if we're moderate in our enjoyment of sense pleasures and we're not harming other people, sense pleasures in moderation are perfectly acceptable in lay life.

So don't interpret the presence of sense desires as something to judge yourself for.

It's a natural part of our life as lay people.

I mentioned that the Buddha used an analogy of water with all the hindrances. The analogy for sense desire is that the bowl of water has been colored by different kinds of dyes. So you can imagine these different colors swirling around—beautiful blues and golds and reds—in a bowl of clear water. It's very attractive, but when you put your face over it and look in, it doesn't really reflect back so clearly because it's tinted with all these other colors. So it's not a clear seeing of things as they are.

We notice this when we become fixated on an object of desire. When we get fixated on something we want, we don't notice what else is there. We can't appreciate our current situation.

Let me share an example from a retreat I was teaching several years ago. Carol and I were teaching in Italy, which was a lot of fun. The Italian culture is different—there was an espresso machine right outside the meditation hall, so at the end of every sitting, boom, boom, boom, we're drinking shots. We were in a convent that rented its facility out to different groups. The first day we showed up for a meal, there were carafes of red wine out on the dinner table. So we had to go and talk to the servers and say, "We don't do this in a Buddhist retreat setting." They kindly took the red wine away.

One thing I found about the yogis is that they were very open and quite fluent about their emotions, willing to talk about what they were feeling. Early on in the retreat, a young man came into an interview and said, "I'm having a problem with the retreat."

"Oh, what's up? What's the problem?"

"Well, I don't really want to be here."

"Okay, why did you come?"

"Well, this is our holiday time, and I could have spent my holiday going to the Caribbean with my friends or coming on this meditation retreat."

"So why did you come here?"

"Because all the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

So I got it. We were second choice.

He was spending his retreat thinking about being in the Caribbean with his friends on a nice sandy beach with that beautiful blue water, swimming every day. So it was a little hard for him to adjust to the

atmosphere of the retreat, especially once we took the wine away.

I said, "Look, I think the problem is that you're thinking about the Caribbean. Maybe if you could let go of that, what's going on here is not so bad. Why don't you just see if it's really that problematic being here, or if the problem is just that you're thinking about this other thing and you can't really appreciate what's here."

So he went away, practiced, came back and saw me in a couple of days. He said, "Yeah, I've settled in. It's fine here. I'm enjoying the retreat. I let go of the Caribbean."

That's the way it is with desire. When desire is strong, we feel discontented. But the discontent isn't because the object is missing—the discontent is because the desire is present. So just letting go of the desire, then we can settle in and see what's really here. Life is usually not problematic in the moment. We come into the moment, it's more neutral, and then we can open to it.

So how do we work with desire? First, just be mindful of the feeling of desire and your relationship to it. One thing I notice about the feeling of desire is there's a straining forward quality. I feel it as a tension in my body, as though I'm leaning forward trying to get something else or somewhere else. That's often the first thing that lets me know desire is present.

It may be something you're looking for outside—some pleasure back home or some imaginary future. This is a little outside the realm of the five senses, but I often find on retreat that the straining is for a meditation experience. I want to recreate a sitting where I was comfortable, relaxed, present, concentrated. I want that feeling of ease in the body. That's what the straining forward is about.

What I'll try to do is pick up on the desire from the straining energy, some tension in the body, and then I'll ask, "What have I been thinking about?"

and the thoughts are usually a clue to what it is I'm wanting. Then if I can see that, it's a little easier to let go.

So let yourself just feel that. What does desire feel like in the body, in the mind, and how are you relating? Is it okay? Can you accept? Can you bear it?

If you've been with the mindfulness of the feeling for a while and it doesn't seem that anything's shifting—after being mindful for a while, maybe either the hindrance will weaken a little bit or your identification with it will weaken a little bit. The calling it "I" or "mine," the judgment, the taking it personally might weaken a little bit.

If you've been mindful of it for a while and neither of those has relaxed at all, then you might move—and this is kind of general for hindrances—to an antidote. There's an antidote for every hindrance. The first approach: be mindful for a while so you really explore it and get to know it. If nothing's shifting, then at some point you can try an antidote.

The antidote for desire, the classical antidote, is to reflect on the unattractive. And generally, this would be the unattractive aspect of the thing you want. So if you're thinking about a Caribbean vacation, you might think about how expensive it is, how much time it takes to fly there, sitting on a long plane flight for all those hours, getting sand in your shoes when you get to the beach. It's really a drag when you're on those sandy beaches. You could think about that.

If you're thinking about an attraction to a person, you might think about that person as they age. If you're in your twenties, you may not have seen this cycle long enough, but I'm in my sixties, and I know what happens when people age. That's a very effective reminder for me.

You can reflect on the unbeautiful aspect. You can reflect on the impermanent nature of what you're thinking of. Because even if it's a beautiful thing, the satisfaction we get from beautiful things diminishes. Whether it's a new car or a new house or a new partner, that initial glow does wear off and then things become routine. I'm sorry to say.

So that's the antidote approach with desire.

With sleepiness—and I want to assure my colleagues, we only have another thirty minutes to go in the talks. They'd fall off their chair if they thought I was serious.

So sleepiness. I know you all know what this feels like because you've just started a long retreat. I like the old Victorian formulation, which is sloth and torpor. I like that language because the sloth is kind of physical and the torpor is kind of mental. And the other reason I like it is in the early years on staff, we had a maintenance crew who were not really known for their work ethic. And so they were nicknamed McSloth and McTorpor. Kind of brings them back to me.

So, you know, drowsiness, sleepiness, dullness, lethargy, apathy, sluggishness—all these great evocative terms for this kind of foggy cloud that can descend on us at any point during the day, especially early in the retreat. It can come from a lot of different causes, actually.

Coming into a retreat, almost everybody goes through it. And I think it's coming out of a life that is usually fairly full, fairly busy. The mind has relied on stimulation in the outside life—of interaction and conversation and activity and movement—to kind of pick up its energy. And then we come into this setting, which is so tranquil and uneventful, and nothing is happening, and the mind just kind of goes... it kind of collapses because it's not getting stimulated anymore.

And then a few days later, what's interesting is it kind of settles into that non-stimulation and starts to wake up and find its energy from a different source, which is kind of its native interest in its own experience. It's really a beautiful quality. And then you know at the end of retreat how energized you are, because the mind has found a different source of energy that isn't dependent on outside stimulation. And then you take that into the outside world, and you meet with stimulation, you can get really tripped out, right? The integration period—you can get really kind of spinning. But it is beautiful. The energy comes up

from a new source, and then it really sustains us more or less through the retreat.

Sleepiness can come back in after the first four or five days. If sleepiness is coming in often, there are a couple of things to check out. One is, are you really getting enough rest? And sometimes people have trouble sleeping in this environment, adjusting to a new situation. So lack of sleep can obviously be a cause. But there are a couple of other causes.

And one is that we may have learned how to use sleepiness to avoid feelings. So sleepiness can be a defense mechanism, a kind of denial or escape from something that's going on inside that's a little unsettling or threatening.

So we might find that that habit occurs here, and it can arise when things get a little uncomfortable. Just take a look. See if it feels like this is a habit that you've also seen in your outer life - of shutting down or dissociating or not wanting to feel some of what's going on for you.

Then sometimes, even if it's not like a groove in the mind or a big habit, something might come in that is a little bit disturbing. It could be just a body sensation. It could be a mood. It could be a little twinkle of a memory that just doesn't feel so comfortable. And sometimes that fog will come down like a curtain so that you don't have to look more closely at it. So if you have the experience where you're sleeping well, you don't have this long-established habit, generally your body feels good during the day, but from time to time you get this blanket of fog descending, just take a look and inquire: what was the last thing you noticed before the fog came down? Sometimes that could be a clue to an experience that is being guarded against, is being defended.

So how to work with sleepiness when it arises? First thing again is to notice it and name it if you can. Sometimes the sleepiness is so thick you can't even get out the word. That's about all you can get out. Sometimes these dreamy images are going by and you really can't even fight your way back to the present moment. So sometimes that's not possible. But as it's descending, maybe just notice: sleepiness, sleepiness.

And then notice if there's aversion or not. Often we resist being sleepy, but in fact, I think the aversion strengthens the dull quality. At times when I've been able to accept the sleepiness, it's brought more energy. So again, check your relationship. Practice mindfully with it for a while.

In the Buddha's analogy of the bowl of water, sleepiness is when the bowl of water is covered over with algae and water plants. You can't see through because there's just this thick mass that's covered it over. The antidote to sleepiness is to arouse energy. That's what's lacking. It's just a state of low energy. So whatever you can do to arouse energy will be helpful. And you've probably heard the traditional list: open your eyes, sit up, take a few deep breaths, stand up, go for a fast walk the next time you go out for walking. And then be moderate with sleep because dullness can come from oversleeping, and moderate with food.

The last of the hindrances that I'll talk about this evening is restlessness and worry. Restlessness is the other side of the spectrum from sleepiness. Instead of too little energy, it's too much energy. So it feels like

the body and the mind are kind of on overdrive. There's a lot of energy in the body, a lot of thoughts, lots of emotions, and it can feel like kind of just a swirl is going on inside - of agitation and some confusion and too much happening.

So if one has the idea that in the middle of this one should be able to find, let's say, the breath very clearly or a detailed body sensation very precisely, you can get really frustrated. Because when the swirl takes over, you're lucky to be able to stay in your seat. Sometimes when restlessness is strong, it's all we can do to keep from jumping up and running out of the meditation hall because restlessness can be really uncomfortable.

So just naming it as restlessness is very helpful. That is the step of mindfulness in relation to it. So it's not a precise mindfulness like you might have with your breath, of noting clearly each in-breath and out-breath. It's kind of like stepping back and looking at a bigger frame. But we step back and we say, "Oh, what's going on is restlessness or agitation or just a swirl." And maybe that's as precise as we can get, but that's precise enough for mindfulness to be established. So that's a skillful thing to do.

How to work with the restlessness from that point? If it's fairly mild, you may be able to resolve it by going to an anchor like the breath, using the breath's calming quality to bring calm in the mind to balance that energy, and you'll feel settled, balanced, and collected. If the energy is stronger than that, the restless energy is stronger than that, then trying to be precise again is going to feel too much like bottling it up. You're going to feel like you're bottling a genie up in a very tight package, and it's going to feel more explosive.

If it starts to feel like that, then it's much more skillful to go really wide. Sounds are a really good focus if the experience is of a lot of restlessness. So make your awareness really wide and open. You can let sounds lead you that way. If it's very quiet, you can just be with the extent of silence or just the sense of space - big sense of space - and let that space just hold the swirl and the stirring and the agitation. This is the advice that Suzuki Roshi gave when he said to give your cow a big pasture.

Give your cow a big pasture. Give your mind a big field to roam around in when it's very restless, and that will help it to quiet down.

The analogy of the water bowl in this situation is the bowl of water stirred by the wind, rippling, swirling, and churned into wavelets. You know how when a lake or pond is really stirred by wind, you can't get a clear reflection looking into it. You can't see things as they really are if you're looking for a reflection.

The antidote is calm. First, establish mindfulness, noticing the restlessness is present, seeing if there's aversion to it, and just working to accept the experience, allowing this combination of factors to unfold. If you've done that for a while and it doesn't feel like the restlessness is shifting or the identification is shifting, then work with calm. You can use the breath for some calm. You can use space. Walking meditation can help. You can try it two ways. If the energy is really high, you might want to walk it

out—walk quickly, and that can use up some of the energy. If the energy is just middling, then you might want to walk at a moderate pace and use that moderate pace to work toward calming.

What's so painful about the quality of restlessness, which by the way doesn't go away until full awakening—it's one of the last fetters to be dropped—is that it blocks our access to peace. It is the opposite of peace. It's the absence of peace. The mind is jumping from one moment to the next, and that's why it's also tiring. Sometimes you can go through periods of restlessness, get very tired, and then move into periods of sleepiness.

I want to read this quote from a Tibetan teacher, Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche, that offers the antidote: "Rest in natural great peace, this exhausted mind, beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thought, like the relentless fury of the pounding waves in the infinite ocean of samsara." Especially remember that first line: rest in natural great peace.

The foundation of our experience is peace. You could call it emptiness, but more simply, it is peace. It's natural, it's always available, and it's always possible to rest if we can connect with that. Remember that possibility of resting in this natural great peace.

As practice unfolds, the work with the hindrances takes on a few different levels. First, mindfulness leads us to understand them, open to them, and be much less in conflict with them, and that creates a lot of ease. As the quality of concentration develops, concentration has the power to suspend the hindrances temporarily. We can feel periods when the hindrances are not arising at all. The Buddha said that experience is like being released from prison or recovering health after a long illness. Finally, with different stages of awakening, the hindrances are completely uprooted not to appear again.

I would like to close with this quotation from the Anguttara Nikaya where the Buddha talks about the course of practice and the way this river to awakening works: "All those who have been liberated or who are being liberated or who will be liberated first surmount the five hindrances that weaken wisdom, and then, with their minds well established in the four establishments of mindfulness, develop correctly the seven factors of enlightenment. It is in this way that they all have been liberated, or are being liberated, or will be liberated."

Let's just sit together for a minute, please.

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