The Five Hindrances

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:34

The other day when I was at home, I had an experience that I wanted to share with you. It's a pretty ordinary experience, one that I imagine you have all had at different times.

I was working at my computer, typing up a proposal for a new program here at Spirit Rock. As I was working on it over a couple of hours, I found myself getting more involved in the subtleties of it. Without really noticing it, I was starting to get worried about how this person was going to feel about this, how that person was going to take it. Am I offending somebody if I say it this way? Am I not offending somebody if I don't say it this way? I was getting tied up in the details of the project I was writing about without really being aware of it.

Over time, my mind just got into that kind of tight, constricted, tense, narrow place that I often get into around computer work. Then I decided to step out and get a breath of fresh air, so I walked out my back door. I live in Woodacre, so I see some of the same things that you see here. Just stepping out into that scene, my mind changed totally.

There was the freshness of the air. The breeze was bringing all the grasses and the trees to life with their movement. In just a minute, my mind opened and filled with that beauty of nature, the majesty of the scene, and the great space of it. That change happened in probably less than a minute.

This is what I thought was significant: how quickly the mind was able to shift from that narrow, tense kind of small mind worrying about me and my relationships to this very big, spacious kind of nature mind that the physical openness touched off. What struck me was the contrast because those two came so close together.

I realized that this is really what we're learning to do in our meditation practice. We're learning to go from that small and narrow and self-centered point of view to a more spacious and open and allowing kind of mind that we all know and we all have access to, because it's an intrinsic part of who we are. It's not something special we have to fabricate through extraordinary techniques, but it's something that you know, something that I know.

What we do in meditation is start to learn better and better how we move from that narrow, constricted self place to a bigger, open, more spacious, natural place. There was a Tibetan teacher named Yeshe Khen Rinpoche who put it like this: "The purpose of dharma practice is to know the nature of the non-deluded mind and to understand the workings of the deluded mind."

The very purpose of what we're doing is to know the nature of the non-deluded mind—that is, this open

mind of wisdom and peace that we all have access to, that we all know. And then also to understand how the deluded mind works.

This is a pointer to our meditation. We have two tracks that we're learning in this retreat, in every retreat. One is to learn about this natural, open and free way of being. There are many ways to describe it, but one nice way is the set of qualities that James talked about last night: the five spiritual faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. The Buddha said that when those come together in our mind, when they grow into ripeness and maturity, they end in nibbana. They lead to nibbana. They merge into nibbana, the unconditioned, the state of complete release and freedom. This is a beautiful way of thinking about the qualities of the awakened mind: the five spiritual faculties.

The Buddha also had many pointers to the nature of the deluded mind—the ways that we get caught, the ways that we fall into seeing wrongly, and therefore the ways we fall into suffering. Lists you may have heard of include the taints, the defilements, the fetters. But the one that I want to talk about tonight is the list that he most often used for meditators.

He said that when you take up the practice of meditation in an active way, there are five forces that come up that oppose the deepening of practice. These are the forces he called the five hindrances. He named them as sense desire, aversion, dullness, restlessness, and doubt.

I want to talk about all of these in detail tonight. I also want to talk about them in general first. As we talk about some of the various facets of desire and aversion, I think you'll see that these are the forces that cause most of the suffering in our lives. They are not just meditators' problems. They are everybody's problems. They don't just happen in retreat. They also happen in daily life. But in retreat, we have the chance to really learn about them closely, to see how they work quite intimately.

The Buddha said that these are the forces that are the imperfections of the mind that weaken wisdom. So not only do they cause us pain and suffering, they also obstruct the development of our practice and the unfolding of our wisdom. They block us from going deeper until we learn how to work with them and relate to them.

In this teaching of the five hindrances, there's a good news and bad news scenario. I'll give you the bad news first: these things are no fun.

They're not easy to work with. They do plague us quite often. When you start to look closely at these forces, you'll see they're coming in again and again and again, moment after moment after moment, basically any time that you don't feel settled and peaceful. Did you have any moments of that today? Maybe one or two. So in those one or two moments, you were making acquaintances with the hindrances. Anytime the mind is unsettled or not at peace, one of the hindrances is active and at work. So they are very frequent visitors.

The good news is that all these states are workable. And because they're causes of suffering, in coming to

understand them, there's tremendous potential for liberation in our formal practice and in our daily life. Everywhere that we're caught by one of these forces of desire, aversion, confusion, we can learn how to free ourselves from it and extend that freedom anytime we meet that hindrance. This is one of the great strengths of our Vipassana practice.

In all the different kinds of spiritual work that I've looked at and all the different kinds of psychological work that I've explored, I don't know any practice that addresses this situation as effectively and as directly as our Vipassana practice. We can find the tools through mindfulness to get really pretty immediate results in learning to work with these troublesome states of mind, and then take those tools from our formal practice back into our daily life. This is really what I want to talk with you about tonight.

There are basically three main strategies in the world of Buddhist meditation for working with the hindrances. We're going to focus in this retreat primarily on the first one, but I just want to mention the other two.

The first is that we develop mindfulness in relation to these states of mind. As the Buddha said in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Sutta on Mindfulness: "A practitioner understands when there is sense desire in the mind—the practitioner knows there is sense desire in me. Or when there is no sense desire, she knows there is no sense desire in me." And so on for the other painful states of mind. The key is knowing when they're present and knowing when they're absent. We come to know them really well through meeting them again and again. And as we know them well, like knowing the personality of a neighbor next door who's a little hard to get along with, we find ways to relate that we don't get into so much conflict with them. And that's the growth of wisdom.

The second avenue through meditation is that we develop enough strength of concentration—this collectedness of mind around a subject like the breath, for instance—that we're so involved and connected with that experience, the mind is completely given over to that experience of relating with the breath. There's no room for the hindrances to arise. So in strong states of concentration, the hindrances simply do not come up moment to moment. This is a possibility. It's not that remote for you. Sally and I taught a concentration retreat here two weeks ago where we just did seven days of practice focused on the development of concentration alone, one of the five spiritual faculties. And it was pretty amazing how many people in those seven days were able to touch that kind of state where the concentration was strong enough that the hindrances simply weren't arising. So that is an avenue that's open. We're just not focusing on that this week, but it's another possibility.

The third avenue through Buddhist practice is that eventually, as we touch deeper and deeper states of awakening, the hindrances become uprooted through that awakening itself. Basically, through the realization—the direct realization of the unconditioned—those forces can be eliminated from the mind forever so that they don't arise again. It's unlikely that's going to happen this week. But if it does, please let us know. We will rejoice with you. But just to know, that is a long-term possibility. That is the place the

Buddha lived from. In the life of the Buddha, after his awakening, the hindrances were no more a factor. But that's a real human possibility through this practice. It takes a lot of dedication.

So the first step in working with the hindrances is mindfulness. That means basically to know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. This is not as easy as it sounds. So I'll just tell you a story from an earlier retreat.

I was on a six-week retreat a few years ago. I was fairly settled in—a couple of weeks into the retreat. I'd established my rhythm: sitting and walking, sitting and walking. I was getting pretty settled. I thought I was pretty continuously mindful. Sitting ended, it was time for a walking period, so I got up quite mindfully, walked to the back of the meditation hall, lifting, moving, placing with every step, and went to my walking path. Lifting, moving, placing, very steady, and I noticed somebody's in my walking path.

A reaction started. "How could they do that? I've been walking there every day for the last two weeks. What are they thinking?" Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. "Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line this morning? Is this their revenge?" Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. "Maybe they just haven't been paying much attention over these two weeks and they're really spacey and not very developed in their practice." Lifting, moving, placing.

So I walked to another place fairly near my old one. I wanted to show up and make sure they knew I was there. I did my walking, and about halfway through the period—twenty or thirty minutes in—suddenly I noticed: I'm irritated.

I thought I had been so continuously mindful, and the irritation had just snuck in. I didn't even know I was irritated. I was with lifting, moving, placing, but I completely missed what was going on in my mind, which happened to be the predominant experience I was having at the time.

This is the way the hindrances work. We may have our mindfulness radar up, and they fly in underneath. They slip in and we're so involved with the situation that we forget to see: this is actually what I'm feeling. They're sustained because we believe in the situation and our story about it.

My story was: I'm right, this is my walking path, they're wrong, they shouldn't be walking there. Because I never questioned that, I was just glued to the hindrance of irritation.

When I finally saw—oh, I'm irritated—then I could step back a little bit. I could see: oh, this is irritation. Now I can start to relate to it. As soon as I could relate to it, there was a little bit of space in the mind. In that little bit of space, I wasn't completely attached. I wasn't enmeshed. I could question the story and say: that walking path does not have my name on it. I did not buy that piece of land. It really is whoever gets there first. I could let go of the story and let go of the irritation.

One of the things I want to mention about the hindrances is that each one comes with a story. If we believe in it, it sustains the hindrance. When we take away that story, the hindrance basically can't

support itself for very long. These hindrances are really a combination of an emotion and a belief about a situation.

The key point is: rather than turn my attention to that other walking person, I needed to turn the attention back on my own emotion. Then mindfulness could become established. We name it, we know it's there, and then we go to feel it directly in the body and in the mind. This is the activity of mindfulness.

The first of the five hindrances the Buddha talked about is sense desire—the tendency of mind that wants a pleasant experience. It's natural enough throughout the day. If we're sitting, walking, eating, or lying down, we want the experience in our senses to be pleasant.

It shows up a lot on retreats, especially in the early days. We may miss our friends or partners or family, and when we think about them, there's a kind of longing that comes up. Or maybe in the middle of a very long sitting—somebody said they had a forty-five-minute sitting the other day that felt like an hour and a half—we might be fantasizing about a vacation we'd like to take or did take. Something pleasant comes in that offers relief from the uncomfortableness or boredom that's crept in.

Or there could be an attraction to someone on the retreat. You start to feel: there's somebody special here of the gender I'm attracted to. Every time they walk close, it's like confirmation that you're soulmates. This is a past life connection coming to fruition in this sacred spiritual setting. "I know it's meant to be." The attraction just gets stronger and stronger.

We have a name for that: the Vipassana Romance, or the VR. It can take up a lot of mindfulness cycles, believe me.

When we look at all these different kinds of desire and start to feel into how desire feels, there's always a kind of bittersweet quality to it. There's an element of comfort because the object is a desired one.

It's something beautiful. And bringing in that something beautiful, there's some kind of solace that the heart takes from that. But if we look a little closer, a little deeper, we also see that along with it, there's this element of not being fulfilled. Always with desire, there's a piece of frustration because we don't have the thing. If we had the thing, we wouldn't be wanting it. Do you ever find yourself wanting a hand at the end of your arm? Probably not, because we already have it. What we want are the things that we don't have. And so desire always comes with unfulfillment, a kind of frustration.

This came up really strongly on a retreat a few years ago. Sally and Franz and I and another friend were leading a retreat in Italy. We had a lot of fun because the Italian people, at least I found on that retreat—very much like the image we have of Italians—are very open about their emotions and quite fluent with their emotions. They're not afraid of emotions, really. So they would come into interviews and talk very openly about what they were feeling.

This one very nice looking young man came into an interview on about the third day of the retreat and

said, "I'm just not settling down into the retreat. Just not connecting. I've had other retreats. They've gone better. This one, I'm just really not getting into it." This was all through a translator, but the message was clear.

I said, "Well, tell me a little about what's going on. Why are you here?" He said, "Well, this is our vacation time. This is August. In Europe, everybody tends to go on vacation in August. Some friends asked me if I'd like to go to the Caribbean with them for a beach holiday. So I had to decide between that and this meditation retreat. Well, I actually wanted to go to the Caribbean, but all the flights were sold out. So I couldn't go to the Caribbean and I came on this meditation retreat instead."

He continued, "But now that I'm here, I'm wishing I were in the Caribbean. My friends told me there are so many beautiful girls in the Caribbean. I wish I were there."

So we talked about desire and how when desire is present, we can't really connect with what is present. It really blocks us from the moment. The interest in the breath is pretty low when the mind is on the beautiful women of the Caribbean.

I said, "I don't really think that the retreat is the problem, but maybe the problem is you're just thinking all the time about the Caribbean. What would it be like if you just dropped those thoughts for a little bit and just came into this present moment?"

He said, "I don't know, but I'll try."

A few days later, he came back for another interview and he'd completely turned that corner. In letting go of the thoughts of being somewhere else, he was able to just settle into the moment, which was not a problem. The present moment is usually not a problem, but desire makes something else look more attractive.

A friend of mine who is of a greedy temperament, a desirous temperament, says that he has this question that he asks himself often when he's feeling this kind of desire, longing to be out of the moment. He asks, "Is there anything truly lacking in this present moment? Is there anything truly lacking?" And when we come into this present moment, we usually see it's fine. It's complete. We can be happy here. We can be accepting here.

Sometimes as the retreat goes on, the force of desire starts to turn itself to the retreat experience because this becomes our life. We sort of move out of our outer life, and to some extent, we forget about it during these days. Our being, our life, our daily routine really becomes focused here, and then what becomes important are things like what's going to happen for lunch, what's my next sitting going to be like, is somebody going to close the door really loudly in the middle of the night tonight or flush the toilet by my bed—things like that.

So desire often builds around the circumstances of the retreat. In particular, desire can attach really

strongly to a good sitting—what we call a good sitting.

We have a sitting where we're present, we feel at peace, connected, alive, awake, and calm. And that is such a pleasure, such a joy. That becomes the thing we most want to have. So we get very enthused. We go out for our walk and can't wait to come back in for the next sitting because we're going to have that experience again. Can't wait to get back to it.

Of course, what happens when we want it? Poof. Goes away. Maybe the next sitting is full of tension or wandering mind. And we're caught trying to get back. So start to notice if that kind of desire is coming in to repeat a meditation experience. Sometimes that's the only kind of desire that's really between us and the present moment. And if we can see that as a fairly subtle kind of desire and let go, we can be right back here again, right back in the calm and centeredness.

So I start to notice in myself if there's a kind of strain in my body, that's trying to lean forward to some kind of concentrated state or some kind of peaceful state. And I detect it in my body first, some kind of tension or strain that's like leaning forward, trying to make it happen, trying to make the meditation come back. And that becomes my cue. Oh, that's desire, that's wanting. Then if I can see it, it's a little easier to let go.

This is the force of wanting or desire.

The second of the hindrances is the force of aversion, sometimes called ill will, generally a state of negativity or of disliking. But there are many, many forms of aversion. We can discriminate between lots of different shades of this hindrance. There are states of anger, hatred, impatience, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, guilt, blame, resentment, depression, despair, resistance, and conflict that are all just forms of aversion. There's more, but I didn't want to bore you. It's a big one, isn't it? Occupies a significant portion of mental terrain, this force of aversion.

And we might say that the basic sense of it, when we're in this mind state of aversion, there's a kind of friction with everything that happens. And nothing is quite satisfying because it's not quite good enough. It's not quite right.

There's a story from the time of the Buddha. He was standing with a group of monks in a clearing in the forest. And he asked the monks, "Did you see that jackal? It ran out of the forest and it stood in the clearing for a minute. And then it ran out of the clearing and went into the underbrush. And it lay down in the underbrush, but it didn't stay long and it came out of the underbrush and walked into the hollow of a tree. And it stood in the hollow of a tree for a while, but it didn't stay long and it took off and it went into a cave. It lay down in the cave, but it didn't stay long and it ran off into the forest again. Wherever it went, the jackal wasn't comfortable and it blamed its discomfort on the forest, blamed it on the clearing, on the underbrush, on the tree hollow, on the cave. It blamed it on its sitting. It blamed it on its standing. It blamed it on its walking. It blamed it on lying down."

He said, "But monks, the problem was with none of these. The problem was that jackal has mange. The mange is the problem. And that's why the jackal was not comfortable anywhere."

The mind of aversion is like that. When we are caught in this sense of negativity and it's just a state of mind, nothing satisfies us. The meditation hall doesn't satisfy us, the walking path doesn't satisfy us, the lunch doesn't satisfy us, our fellow meditators don't, our teachers don't, everything doesn't work. But the real source is that mind state of aversion.

One of the ways that this often gets expressed in meditation retreat is with the sense of physical pain. We're sitting and a strong sensation develops in the knee or the back or the ankles or the shoulders. And in reaction to that pain, the mind becomes very averse. There can be different states of aversion and reaction. Sometimes we just get annoyed.

Sometimes we get fearful. Sometimes we simply dislike it. Sometimes we can become resentful. But in the instructions as James gave them today, we're guided that if there's discomfort, we should make that the object of meditation. We let mindfulness settle there and feel into that area of physical pain.

I'd also like to suggest that we examine how the mind is relating to that physical pain. Say there's simply physical sensation present. Can we be equanimous with that? Can there just be the experience of physical pain, or do we have to spiral into a reaction of aversion?

Take a look. If we go into the reaction of aversion—which is a kind of tightening of the mind—what happens in the body? When the mind gets tight, the body tends to get tight as well. And as the body tightens because of the aversion in the mind, what happens to the pain? It increases. As the pain grows stronger, what happens to our level of aversion? It cranks up another notch.

We find ourselves caught in this feedback loop. The physical pain intensifies, then aversion arises. That makes the physical pain more intense, which makes the aversion more intense. How do we escape? How do we find freedom in relation to that?

It's not so easy to change the physical experience. You've probably tried. I certainly did for a long time. But can we start to influence our mental reaction? Suppose instead of tightening with aversion, we were able to soften the mind. We were able to simply accept, stay calm, and recognize that physical pain is present without getting freaked out about it.

In the softening of the mind, that can lead to a softening of the body. This doesn't necessarily mean the pain will disappear, but if anything will help the pain to ease, that softening attitude will. So we work with seeing the reaction of the mind in relation to the pain as much as with the pain itself.

Here's where the meditation can establish itself. Can we be with the pain from a place of softness, acceptance, and allowing? This is tremendously helpful with unpleasant circumstances—to work directly with softening and allowing.

A classical antidote for the mind state of aversion is loving-kindness. As Sally led the meditation today, developing that heart of friendliness—even when you generate it with yourself or a benefactor—when the heart is in that place of friendliness, everything looks a little softer. Everything appears a little rosier. That friendliness spills over to the knee pain or the difficult person in our life, creating a softness of mind that can hold difficult experience with greater ease.

Within the retreat setting, another way that aversion manifests is through our tendency to judge. We may notice that we judge other people when we walk into the dining hall, or we observe how somebody's sitting or walking and find ourselves judging them. But often one of the most painful forms of judgment is the one we direct against ourselves.

I think we're especially vulnerable to this as retreatants. We've let go of our friendships. We've let go of our family. There's nobody around to tell us every day, "I love you. I care about you. You're important to me." We've entered into a solitude that is important and significant. But in doing that, we become vulnerable through this loss of affirmation—this loss of love, really. Then it becomes much easier to be hard on ourselves or to feel isolated, as though people don't care for us.

This hit me very strongly during one of my early retreats. I was practicing in England on a month-long retreat, and I was starting to have all these doubts about myself and harsh judgments about my personality. I went to see my teacher for an interview that day, feeling quite embarrassed about this. When he asked how I was doing, I said, "Oh, I'm just having some difficult thoughts," hoping we could let it go at that.

Okay, that was pretty honest—I'm having difficult thoughts—but he didn't let it go. He said, "What kinds of thoughts?"

Oh, I said, well, kind of aversive thoughts. And I thought I'd get out of it that way. He said, "What kinds of aversive thoughts?"

So I had to be honest. I said, "Well, I'm feeling like I don't like myself very much and like nobody else likes me either." I felt very vulnerable in saying that.

And he just stood up very straight and he looked at me and he said, "You're not seeing things the way they are. Your problem is you don't accept yourself. You need to work on self-acceptance."

That became my theme then for a few years in practice—this seeing of the self-judgment and the pain it was causing me made me want to find a way to work with it. And I took the direction, a more positive direction, of working to accept myself. It became an important practice for a few years.

After I had ordained in Thailand—I ordained as a monk—and I was going from the city monastery where I ordained out into the country to a forest monastery to do a three-month retreat period, I stopped over in another city in a monastery where there was a Western monk who'd been in robes for quite a while. I

kind of appreciated his having been down the road before me. He was a great guy. I really came to admire him a lot. I thought his lifestyle was very sane.

He'd take his mornings for his own practice and he had a really nice hut in this monastery. He looked out on a little pond. It was very peaceful. He'd been in robes for ten or eleven or twelve years at that point. His meditation was well developed and he had a lot of peace, also a lot of loving-kindness. People just liked hanging out with him.

So in the afternoon, he would be open to visitors. And people would come and talk with him. Thai people would come and talk to him about their family situation, difficulties with their sons and daughters, questions about their meditation practice, and he spoke fluent Thai. Westerners would come who were passing through Chiang Mai—was the city where he lived—and he'd give them instructions and get them started on the path of meditation practice. And everybody just liked hanging out with him.

The next morning we got to go out on alms round together. You know probably that the way Buddhist monks collect their food is by going with a bowl and basically begging. They show up and in cultures where it's understood, people come out onto the streets and put food in their bowls.

So I got to go out with this monk on his usual alms round. The first thing I noticed was how big his bowl was. I mean, I had a modest little bowl that my preceptor had given me, and it held what I needed to eat. His bowl was not much smaller than our meditation bell, and he had a girth to match. He was what we call a well-supported monk.

So we head off down the tracks near the monastery. And as soon as we get near some shops, a lot of people are out on the streets. And I found out it's because they know he's coming. He has very close connections with the people around, and they support him really well. So they were out there putting a lot of food in his bowl. And because I was behind, they put a lot of food in my bowl.

And then we also—it was his custom—there were two novice monks, younger men who had not yet reached the age where they could ordain fully, who were traveling along behind us. And I was going, what are they here for? Because the novice monks don't go on the alms round. They're fed by the monastery.

So we'd walked down this block and up the next block. My bowl was overflowing. His bowl even was full. And then we duck into an alley. He calls the novice monks over. They open their robe, and each of them has a big plastic bag hanging off their shoulder. So we take our packets of food, put them in the plastic bags.

They fold up their robes, and we go on another block of alms round. We fill the bowls again. So we had way more than we could eat. We took it back to the monastery and shared it with the other monks, nuns, novice monks, and lay people who were there to eat. Everybody had a great feast that basically came about because this monk was so well-loved. He had so much metta and connection to the people that everybody just wanted to give to him.

When we were back at his hut just chatting and getting to know each other a little bit, he told me something that really surprised me. He said, "You know, it wasn't always so easy for me, my meditation practice. I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working on my self-hatred. Nine years."

But out of that, he had developed this huge loving heart that touched everybody he came in contact with—a great spirit of generosity, giving, kindness, and availability for people. All of this emerged out of nine years of practice working with his own self-hatred. So he had a strong case of it, but what I really want to emphasize is that it's workable. It's possible to transform these very deep personality patterns through the openness of the practice, through the skillful use of meditation.

In working with self-judging, don't feel like you have to get rid of the judging thoughts. The big part of it is seeing them clearly and not having to believe in them. Most of them are rubbish, frankly. Most of those judging thoughts, if you look at them closely, are rubbish. They'll say things like, "Nobody loves me, nobody's ever loved me." The basic storyline is "I'm not a lovable person. No one could ever love me." It's just not true. You can look in your life and see people who have cared for you. That story is simply not true. But we can just let the thought be there and take it more lightly.

Joseph Goldstein, one of our teachers, says that what he does when he hears a judging thought is add the phrase "and the sky is blue." So it becomes: "Nobody will ever love me, and the sky is blue." That just lightens it up so he doesn't have to take it so seriously. That's a nice way to work.

Over time, what offsets this sense of self-judgment is feeling our own goodness and trusting in our own goodness. In loving kindness practice, the proximate cause for metta to arise is seeing what's good in someone. When you can tune in to the good in somebody, that feeling of metta comes spontaneously, comes naturally. When you can see the good in yourself, that feeling of loving kindness for yourself comes naturally.

The more we gain that conviction that James was talking about in our own essential goodness—which is no different from the goodness of one another, no different from the goodness of nature, no different from the goodness of the Dharma—then we know we can trust. Then we know the judgments aren't really true. This conviction grows more and more with the practice of loving kindness.

The other three hindrances I'll be briefer with. The third is one we've referred to a few times already: dullness and drowsiness. The old Victorian phrase that was first used to translate it was sloth and torpor. I like it. It kind of conveys the massiveness of it, the weight of it. I also like that phrase because it reminds me of the first meditation center I lived at, IMS on the East Coast. In the early days, we had a maintenance crew who were not exactly known for their work ethic, and we gave them the names McSloth and McTorpor. It reminds me of the innocent days of retreat centers.

So this is the third day of the retreat. I'm pretty confident you all have had a good, healthy exposure to sloth and torpor at this point. Often in the first few days of retreat, there's a lot of sleepiness, a lot of

drowsiness, a lot of dullness. You can't really connect with the object, can't connect with the breath. There's a fog surrounding you. The storyline in sloth and torpor is not so critical, but if there is one, it's something like, "Nothing's worth doing. I can't be bothered to do anything." We just kind of get bowed under the weight of the heaviness of mind and body.

So the antidote is energy. Whatever will pick up your energy at that time—that's what will break through the drowsiness.

So we often recommend the usual things: sit up a bit straighter, open your eyes, take a few deep breaths. All those things will bring in more energy. If you're still feeling sleepy, stand up right where you are. Do the meditation in the standing posture. It's harder to fall asleep standing up—still may be possible, but usually the good news is that after about the third day, that fog starts to lift a little bit. We get a new source of energy, and usually it's not nearly as much of a problem.

If sloth and torpor continue to be a real problem after three days, then I start to get curious. Is something being covered over with that dullness? Because sometimes dullness can come down like a curtain because there's something we don't quite want to see. So then I get interested: what was there before the dullness came? But it may not be so heavy from tomorrow onward. That's my wish.

The fourth hindrance is called restlessness and agitation. Often it feels like the first days of the retreat just alternate—sloth and torpor one sitting, restlessness and agitation the next. So here the mind is too stirred up. There's an abundance of energy. We can't focus because there are too many thoughts, too many bodily sensations, too many feelings. Everything's all stirred up. The breath gets lost. It's kind of like trying to pick a straw out of a hurricane—you can't find it.

In restlessness and agitation, again, we want to simply open to feel what that feels like. It's not a pleasant experience. And sometimes the storyline is maybe something like, "I can't stand this. I can't stand it. I have to get up and run away." But in fact, you can stand it. And we do stand it, if you notice. We'll be sitting there thinking, "I can't stand this. I can't stand it another minute." But we keep sitting and we do stand it. So that's helpful, just to know that we can endure this restlessness and agitation. Just feel it. The body feels stirred up, the mind feels stirred up, the emotions feel stirred up, but we can know that for an experience. It's okay.

We might think that the way back to calm is through getting really narrow with the breath again. "When I was narrow with the breath, I was calm. Let me get narrow with the breath again." But sometimes that's just too tight. It's like trying to take this hurricane and put it into a really small box—the box gets really rattled.

So maybe what's more skillful at that point is to let the mind get really, really wide and have the sense that you just want to enfold all this energy in a very broad attention. So sounds can be a really good object here. The sense that you want to let the mind get really wide and let the wideness bring in the calm so that

the hurricane is held within a really big space. So try working with that really wide mind, working with sounds as an object when you feel really stirred up. When you go out to a walking period, you may want to take a little bit brisker walk and kind of use up some of that energy. Paradoxically, that may calm some of the energy down in the next sitting.

And the last of the hindrances is the hindrance of doubt. James talked about this quite a lot last night, about how we doubt our ability to do the practice, we doubt if it's the right practice, we doubt the teachings, and how faith is really the antidote to doubt. In the long term, that's really true. The storyline in doubt is maybe something like, "I can't do it. I can't do it." There's actually a really deep spiritual truth in this particular storyline.

The acronym RAIN offers us a profound shift in how we relate to difficult states. Rather than the futile attempt to banish our hindrances, RAIN invites us to meet them with the very awareness we seek to cultivate.

The A in RAIN stands for acceptance. This doesn't mean that we like what's happening or that we think it's good. It means that we allow it to be present without adding the extra layer of resistance. We don't fight with what's already here. There's a quality of non-violence in this acceptance, a recognition that what's arising has already arisen, and our resistance to it only creates more suffering.

This acceptance requires tremendous courage. It asks us to stay present with discomfort, to not immediately reach for our habitual strategies of escape or control. In this allowing, something remarkable begins to happen. The grip of the hindrance starts to loosen naturally, not because we've forced it away, but because we've stopped feeding it with our resistance.

The I stands for investigation. Having recognized and accepted what's present, we now turn toward it with curiosity. What does this anger actually feel like in the body? Where do I sense this anxiety most clearly? What thoughts arise with this doubt? We investigate not to analyze or figure out why we're experiencing this, but to know it more intimately, to understand its texture and quality.

This investigation is infused with kindness. We're not interrogating ourselves harshly, but approaching our experience the way a loving friend might—with genuine interest and care. We might notice the temperature, the density, the movement or stillness of the emotion. We might observe how it changes as we pay attention to it.

The N represents non-identification. This is perhaps the most liberating aspect of the practice. We learn to see that we are not our anger, we are not our doubt, we are not our restlessness. These are temporary visitors in the vast space of awareness. They arise, they're known, and they pass away. We are the knowing awareness in which they appear and disappear.

This non-identification doesn't happen overnight. It's a gradual recognition that what we are is much larger and more stable than any temporary state of mind or emotion. We begin to taste the freedom that

comes from not taking everything so personally, from not believing that every thought and feeling defines who we are.

When we practice RAIN, something beautiful occurs. We discover that the very qualities we're seeking—awareness, compassion, equanimity—can be present even in the midst of difficulty. We don't have to wait for the perfect conditions to be awake. We can be awake right here, right now, with whatever is present.

This is the true transformation that meditation offers us. Not the ability to live a life free from challenges, but the capacity to meet whatever arises with the full presence of our awakened heart and mind.

So as we practice this, we're practicing wisdom, which is the fifth spiritual faculty that James talked about last night. We're bringing that awake quality into the moment.

The A stands for acceptance. We want to drop any idea that this shouldn't be happening—"I'm going to resist this. I don't want to feel it. It freaks me out. I shouldn't be feeling it." And we shift instead to an attitude of allowing and acceptance. It's okay. It's happening. It's part of our human nature. We move into a model of allowing it to be.

This is hard to do. It's a real challenge within the practice. Fear comes, our first reaction is more fear: "I can't handle this. I don't know what will happen to me if I open to it." But we just find more and more trust to allow it. And this is developing the first factor of the spiritual faculties, the quality of faith or trust or confidence.

And then we stay in contact with that allowing attitude. We keep feeling it. We feel it in the body, we feel it in the mind, and it takes a steadiness of attention to stay in contact. This is the quality of concentration, the fourth of the spiritual faculties that we're strengthening and developing.

The I stands for interest or investigation. It's a factor of curiosity that I think Sally talked about and James also mentioned. What is this thing called fear? Have we ever really gone into it? What is this phenomenon? It's so powerful, but have we ever taken time to really observe it? What does it feel like in the body? What does it feel like in the mind? What kind of thoughts come along with it? How does it make us act? How does it make us speak when we're in an afraid space?

We can learn about all of that. It's really the learning of these states that takes the mystery out of them. When we take the mystery out, they don't have the power over us. We establish the power of understanding. They no longer have that kind of power. So this is the quality of mindfulness, this going into and experiencing, and also of energetic effort. This is a very good use of effort. So these are the third and second spiritual factors. How do I investigate? How can I turn my attention to get curious about it?

The last part of the acronym, the N in RAIN, is non-identification. We don't claim this as I or mine. So think about it. When you're feeling angry, normally we'll talk about it as "I am angry." What would happen if

you turned that around and just said, "Anger is arising, anger is present now"? There's a lighter kind of quality to that because the I and all that story doesn't get so hooked in.

This is an interesting one to practice with. If we can leave out the words I and my, then we see it's just an emotion arising. It'll last a while and it'll pass away. This is an emotion that is shared by everyone in this room. Everybody knows fear. Everybody knows longing. Everybody knows self-judgment or blame. So it's not a personal thing. It's not my fear or your fear.

It's just fear. We all share it, so we don't have to claim it. And then it can just do its own thing. It arises, persists, and it passes away. It's part of the whole human package, which we all have.

Then we start to see that we're waking up in the middle of these most difficult parts of our life. The most difficult areas of our hearts and minds, we don't have to close down around. We can have the strength, we can have the courage to open up and feel them and just let them be the way they are. And in that, we find there's a tremendous new freedom that comes.

We don't have to stay away from any corner of our mind, but we find we can go into every part of the mind and understand it. And then wisdom becomes, you could say, the master of the situation, the mistress of the situation. Not that we're the victim so much anymore, but wisdom becomes the master or the mistress of the house.

And we see that these are just forms of energy arising, persisting and passing. And if we don't invest in them, if we don't resist, if we don't cling, if we don't fight, they have their own lifespan.

Look at children. Kids can be playing happily away, laughing and delighting and totally into a game and the companionship. Then they'll squabble about who got the prize or who didn't get their turn on the board. And they'll get really angry and fight. And then the anger will just take them over. But they're not afraid of it. They'll just kind of go into it and act it out. And then, boom, it's over. And then they're back and laughing and playing and having fun again.

Kids have this openness to their emotional life, a trust in it, no reason to be afraid that we can also refine. So we just let these emotions come. We learn to feel them. We learn we don't have to act on them. So this gives us the confidence to let anything happen in our meditation. We don't have to hold back from any corner of our minds, of our hearts, of our practice.

I just want to close with a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. This is from a book called The Book of Hours. The image in this poem is before each of us comes into the world, the Creator takes us by the hand and says a few words to us before launching us on the journey of life.

"God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear: Go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let

yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Now, give me your hand."

Let's just sit for a minute. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

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