The Five Hindrances

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 46:53

One night in northern India, about 2,540 years ago, a young man sat underneath a bodhi tree. He had left home six years earlier and for that time had pursued very single-pointedly and with great ardor the spiritual practices taught by the foremost teachers of his day. But in all those six years, he had not come upon an answer to the quest that he had set out on, which was to solve for himself the problem of human suffering.

So he took a seat under the tree, and he said to himself, "I'm going to find out the answer to the problem of human suffering while sitting under this tree, or I'm going to die trying." The next time that forty-five minute sit before tea seems kind of long, you might reflect on that—the incredible devotion from this young man.

As he took his seat with that firmness of resolve and intention, almost inevitably, as you might expect, the first part of the evening was not easy. He was besieged by what have been called in the descriptions the armies of Mara. Mara is the eternal antagonist in the Buddhist texts. He always brings forces that oppose the seekers of goodness and light and truth. In this evening, he sought to dissuade the young man from continuing his quest.

The first thing that he did was to cause to arise in front of the young man visions of armies of fierce warriors descending on him with spears pointed at him and arrows nocked in their bows ready to be fired at him. Through this, Mara hoped to scare the young man off his cushion and away from his quest. But the young man was unmoved. He'd already made the intention to die trying if need be. So fear didn't affect him. He sat unmoved, continued with his investigation.

Mara felt he was slightly foiled but not giving up, brought out his next weapon. He caused to appear before the young man images of three beautiful women, alluring and enticing, hoping to draw the young man off his quest by the force of wanting, by the force of desire. But the young man had experienced all the kinds of sensual pleasures when he was growing up, and he knew that they were limited in their own way, and so again he was unmoved.

Finally, Mara drew his final weapon. He said to the young man, "Hundreds of thousands of people through the ages have tried to solve this problem of human suffering. None of them have been able to. What makes you think you can? What makes you so arrogant that you can presume to solve this problem in one night?" Mara was trying to arouse the force of doubt.

At this point, the young man struck a pose which has been illustrated many times in statues depicting this

night's struggle. You can see it in the statue behind us tonight. He reached down with his right hand and placed it on the earth in that pose that's been called the gesture of touching the earth. And he said, "I ask the earth to bear witness. I ask the earth to witness how many lifetimes and how many years I have worked toward this understanding. Through countless lifetimes of generosity and giving and selfless service and purity of intention, the earth bears witness to my right to ask this question."

At that, Mara was truly vanquished. He gave up and went away. It's said that as the night wore on, the young man's insight and understanding continued to deepen until just before dawn he reached that ultimate realization that brought him the understanding that completely liberated him from suffering and became in that moment known, as he has been ever since, as the Buddha, the awakened one, the one who has awakened to the truth.

The life story of the Buddha not only functions as a beautiful and inspiring story of one human being, but it's really an archetype for all of our spiritual practices. The stage that you are at right now is the same stage that the young man was in when he took the seat under that tree and resolved to understand, despite the forces that might oppose him.

The forces that opposed him are also archetypal in their nature. These forces of Mara will rise up to obstruct anyone who tries to solve this question, who tries to make a journey to pierce the veil of ignorance and reach our true center, the center of freedom and understanding. Mara can be seen in this archetype as just the personification of the forces in our own minds and hearts that oppose our journey, that oppose our destination of wisdom.

The difficulties that you are experiencing now are actually an integral part of your spiritual life, and they will be with you for a while to come. The Buddha actually talked very specifically about five particular kinds of forces that obstruct us as we deepen in our practice. These are five energies of the mind that can act as obstacles to our practice when we're not aware of them, when we don't know how to work with them. But when we know how to work with them, they can be transformed into subjects for our meditation themselves and become sources of deep learning and wisdom and opening.

So I'd like to talk tonight about these five particular forces or energies that the Buddha spoke of many times in his life. They're classically known as the five hindrances. This terminology stresses their obstructive power, but they can also be five grounds for wisdom and understanding. So we want to talk about both aspects tonight.

The five, put very simply, are the forces of sense desire, of aversion or disliking, of sleepiness, of restlessness, and of doubt. These are forces that, as we begin to pay closer and closer attention in our meditation, we see are arising again and again. They arise very often in the course of our meditation practice. As we start to tune into them, we can see them more clearly. We also learn how to relate to them more skillfully.

The art of relating with these forces that are called hindrances is one of the major pieces of the craft of meditation. It's a key area of learning. These hindrances are tricky. They're sneaky, much like Mara creeping up on the Buddha that night. These forces try to trick us too. They try to deceive us. They try to knock us off our seats of wisdom.

When the hindrances are present and we're not aware of them, they color the mind in a certain way. It's as if we have a colored filter in front of our eyes and can only see the world through that hindrance. We can't quite see it clearly.

In classical terms, the analogy is made that the mind—the wisdom mind, which we all naturally possess—is like a pool of clear water. When you peer into a pool of clear water, you can see right to the bottom, and everything is transparent, crystal clear. The hindrances are likened to forces that come in and obstruct this view.

Desire is said to be like a pool that's become tangled in weeds, choked in weeds, because the forces of desire become very intertwined and intricate, like a net. The force of aversion or disliking is like putting a certain dye or color in the water—perhaps the color red, often associated with anger. Sleepiness is said to be like water that's become very cloudy. It's there, but you can't quite see through it. There's a murkiness, an obstruction to your vision just from the cloudiness.

Restlessness is said to be water that's been stirred up by wind on the surface. It's not necessarily anything that goes very deep, but it whips the water into waves and breaks up the clarity. Doubt is said to be like a pond that has been stirred up from a muddy bottom so that it's in turmoil all the way through, blocking our view.

With each of these hindrances, our view has become clouded in some way or another. The cloudiness is not because of the hindrance itself—it's because we believe in its story. When we believe in the story of the hindrance and become identified with it, then we slip into ignorance. We actually lose our mindfulness and our wisdom and slip into the ignorance of the spell that the hindrance can cast if we're not aware.

You may have seen this happening a few times over the course of the retreat. You may be very mindful of your breathing, in the middle of a walking period, present with each step of each foot, and then all of a sudden some irritation comes up. How could that person do that to me in the food queue? How could they take so much when there was only a little bit left? And then we start running around on that.

Or you're in the middle of walking meditation and you immediately remember—as Christina mentioned this morning—how important it is to rearrange your socks at that particular time. And before you even have a chance to think about what's happening, you're on your way to your room, imagining the sock drawer being opened.

When we don't see these forces in operation, they slip underneath the radar of our mindfulness, and they

take us over before we even know what's happening. We react out of irritation, out of annoyance, out of anger, out of wanting, without even knowing that we're doing it. In doing that, we've lost our mindfulness. We're no longer in touch with what's happening in the present moment. We've surrendered the mindfulness and given our energy to a kind of blind obedience to the hindrance, whatever it might be. And this happens again and again.

This enchanting spell that the hindrances cast is why they can be such difficult subjects for our meditation. The key, clearly, is to take the mindfulness and turn it directly on the hindrance itself. That's how we fundamentally work with these energies.

If we give ourselves over and follow the story of the hindrance, we're led away from the present moment to something usually in the past or the future—the person who did something unskillful, the messy sock drawer—and all our energy is pointing in that direction. We can return to the present moment by just noticing that force of wanting or disliking or sleepiness or restlessness or doubt. In that noticing, we're right back in the present moment again. Our mindfulness has been recovered, restored to us.

So the first step in dealing with any of these hindrances is just to recognize that the hindrance is at work. In that step, it's very helpful to actually name the hindrance. Know for yourself whether it's the force of wanting, the force of disliking, or any of the others.

The next step is to turn the spotlight of awareness, turn that light of mindfulness, onto the energy itself. Let yourself feel the feeling directly. Feel how wanting feels. Feel how aversion feels. Feel sleepiness and restlessness and doubt. Let yourself experience it all the way through in the body and in the mind. Give yourself over to feeling these things just as they are.

That's the basic approach with each hindrance, and now I'd like to talk about each of them in turn, because there are specific ways to work with each one.

Sense-desire is defined as wanting some pleasant experience in any of the senses. In Buddhism, there are considered to be six senses. There are the five physical senses of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. In addition, there's the sixth sense of the mind. The objects of the mind as a sense door are thoughts, moods and emotions, states of mind, and images. So the hindrance of sense desire is wanting pleasant experiences in any of these areas.

It comes up often in the retreat setting, just around the things of the retreat. What do we want on a retreat? We want to be comfortable. We come in wanting the body to feel good. Maybe we've had one good sitting—a sitting where the thoughts quieted down a little bit and we could really connect with the breath and have a taste of the calm that's possible through the practice. Then we can't wait to get back into the next sitting after the walking because we know that's going to happen again. We really want that meditation again.

Or we want people to think we're a good meditator. Doing our walking practice, I used to have this fantasy

that sometime at the end of a retreat, somebody was going to come up and say, "You were such a great walker, I really enjoyed walking next to you." I waited for twenty years and it still hasn't happened. I had a friend who said that he was working with the noting practice in his walking. In the noting practice, you often notice the lifting, the moving forward, and the placing of the foot. He was feeling a little bit self-conscious, and the note transformed into "lifting, moving, looking good." Looking good.

So this force of wanting comes up in many subtle ways in the retreat. It's not that these things are so unreasonable—we want people to like us, we want people to appreciate us. The problem is if we hang on to those wants when they're not able to be satisfied. And pretty much, it's hard to find out in the middle of a retreat if anybody likes you or not. If we're hanging on to that, we'll suffer if it's not there.

There's this amazing image that appeared of the suffering of clinging. It came in the Bay Area newspapers. There was a man who owned a blimp and made his living by taking people up for rides in the blimp for commercial purposes or recreation. He came back down after a flight to the landing field and tethered the blimp, but it wasn't quite tethered. He turned his back on it and the blimp started to lift off again. He turned around and saw his whole livelihood vanishing up in the air. He didn't know what to do. He was panicked and grabbed for one of the tie ropes. And he couldn't let go. The force of attachment was such that he could not let go. The paper reported that he was then carried up into the air by the blimp. But after a certain time, he couldn't hold his grip anymore. He fell to his death. The really sad part of the story is a few hours later the blimp lost enough of its air and landed back on the ground safely. But the force of attachment was too strong in that moment and he could not let go.

This is kind of the essence of sense desire—not being able to let go.

How can we work with the force of wanting? How can we work with sense desire? We live in a culture that really glorifies desire. All the advertising messages on television basically tell us that if you have the right deodorant and you drink the right beer, then you'll also be able to play beach volleyball with all those really nice-looking people. Basically, that happiness comes from satisfying sense desires.

But it's very interesting to investigate that. The next time you want something really badly—whatever it is, whether it's a good sitting or a good walking or a relationship or a job or a car—let yourself feel that wanting energy and feel whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. That raw wanting energy, when it's not being satisfied, is not very pleasant.

The question is, does the unpleasantness come because we don't have the object? Or does it come just out of the nature of that wanting energy? Because you'll be sitting here in meditation and you may be very happy, very contented, connecting with your breath, peaceful and calm, and all of a sudden a desire will come up for something you don't have. "Oh, I want to see a friend. Oh, I want to take that vacation next month. Oh, I want to get that job that I've heard about."

And the next moment, turmoil, turmoil. So the moment before, you were peaceful. You didn't have the

object then either, and you were still peaceful. The wanting comes in, peace is gone. The disruption is there. That kind of agitated feeling of wanting is there.

So take a look at that. Is it the absence of the object or is it the wanting energy that is the source of the pain?

Our desires deceive us. They deceive us into thinking that our satisfaction lies outside of ourselves. The teaching of the Buddha was to take it back home. The teaching of the Buddha is that happiness lies in letting go of the desire itself. Then peace is there. Contentment is there.

So we need to see the desire clearly just for what it is. It's an urge. It's a longing. It's a force that arises in the mind. It lasts for a while. And then what do you know? It passes away.

This is also a revelation. All the hindrances are impermanent. If we allow them to come, they'll flower, they'll exist for a while, and by their very nature, they'll decay. In this retreat, we really have a beautiful opportunity to witness this again and again, to become really convinced that these forces aren't problematic because they'll go away on their own. You don't have to make them go away. They will go away. All you have to do is feel them, experience them.

One of the classical antidotes for desire, actually, is to reflect on impermanence—similar reflection, but this time in relation to the object. Say you get that object that's going to make you happy. Does the happiness last forever?

It's a curious thing, isn't it? If you look closely at the nature of this wanting, there is some wish that the next thing is going to provide a lasting happiness. But have any of them ever? Not really.

So we can reflect on the fact that whatever we gain, eventually it will cease to satisfy us. Either it will pass or the satisfaction will pass.

Manindraji, one of the early teachers of both Joseph and Sharon in India, had a real sweet tooth. And he used to reflect a lot on his desires for sweets. And so he worked with it in meditation in this way. He'd be sitting and be wanting something sweet and he'd say, "Okay, the mind wants ice cream. Let the mind go get ice cream. The body's staying right here." You can work with that one.

One of the other forces of desire that comes up is around sexual imagery. And sometimes on retreat this can be quite powerful. One of the things that's really helpful with sensual or sexual imagery is to note the pleasant quality of the image itself. Notice what it is that the desire is around. Just note that pleasant feeling in the images that are coming, and that can kind of undercut the attachment or clinging to it.

The second of the hindrances is called aversion, classically, sometimes translated as negativity. It's a basic force of disliking. Desire is wanting pleasant experience. Aversion is wanting to push away the unpleasant in life.

There's this one root stem of disliking, but it's a stem that has many, many types of blooms. This flowers as straight disliking, as anger, as fear, as sadness, as grief, depression, shame, guilt, boredom. There are a whole lot of variations on this basic state of aversion. I won't talk about them all tonight.

But I'll just hit a few of the high points or low points, as the case may be.

The primary antidote classically to aversion is the force of loving kindness, or metta as it's known in Pali. Later this week we'll be doing some guided meditations on the theme of loving kindness. You'll have some experience with this kind of practice. It's basically developing a mind that is friendly and loving toward ourselves, toward others, and in doing that, toward all of life, toward all of our experience.

This friendly mind obstructs aversion. When that sense of friendliness or love is there, the sense of anger or disliking really can't arise. So it's a very powerful antidote. What was not acceptable before in the light of love becomes acceptable. We can open to things in life that we couldn't open to before.

That's a long-term strategy. It's a very powerful strategy, and I speak as an aversive type. This is where my temperament tends—toward aversion. When I began to do metta practice intensively a couple of years ago, I found it very transforming. It has made a real difference in my life. I had been doing vipassana practice for eighteen years, and the aversive quality was shifted significantly after just a couple of years of metta practice. So for my fellow aversive types out there, it's highly recommended.

In working with disliking—again, disliking comes in many different flavors: irritation and frustration, impatience and judgment. You can feel the irritating quality when we're in a state of disliking. It colors the whole world. We may have just gotten irritated or frustrated about one thing, but when we're in that state, everything takes on the color of not being very appealing.

In addition, we tend to think that we're suffering because of some outside condition. It was the word that someone said to me that's making me feel bad. It was the fact that I couldn't quite accept the food that was offered today that's making me feel bad, or whatever.

There's a story from the time of the Buddha. The Buddha was talking with some of his monks. As they were talking, standing out by a forest, they saw a jackal run out of the forest. The jackal stood for a minute and then ran into the underbrush. It stayed in the underbrush a minute. Then it ran out again and ran into the hollow of a tree. It stayed there only a minute. Then it ran out again and dashed into a cave. And then it ran out of the cave.

The Buddha observed that the jackal had mange, was suffering from mange in its coat. The Buddha said, "Monks, did you see that jackal? Standing, it suffered. Running, it suffered. Lying down, it suffered. Sitting still, it suffered. In the forest, underbrush, tree, or cave, it suffered. It blamed standing for its suffering. It blamed running for its suffering. It blamed sitting, lying down for its suffering. It blamed the forest, the underbrush, the tree, and the cave for its suffering. In fact, the problem was with none of those. The discomfort was with none of those. The problem was the jackal had mange."

This is our condition when we're in a state of aversion. We tend to blame the conditions outside ourselves, but the problem is we're in a state of disliking. The mind has gotten locked into this feeling of negativity. So feel how the mind feels when you're in a state of disliking. Feel that kind of contraction that happens, the tightness, the tension, the kind of burning quality of it.

Another aspect of disliking is sadness—some form of disliking of loss, of change, of things that we've lost in the past. Sometimes as the mind gets quiet, we start to feel the sadness creep in a little. It's as though for some, the activities of life are a way of moving away from some underlying sadness.

This fear that sadness might be limitless if we open to it is only a projection, only a future thought. Please let yourself open to that sadness if it's there—it is, after all, a part of life.

The Buddha once asked his monks: "Which do you think are greater, the tears that you have cried through all your lifetimes or the waters in all the oceans of the earth?" He answered that the tears we have cried through all our lifetimes are greater than the waters in all the oceans of the earth. This sadness is an integral part of life. So in our practice, we open to both the beauty and joy of life as well as its difficulties. As the heart becomes more available, as that tender heart starts to emerge, we can feel what has been sad in our lives. Let yourself feel that.

One of the other ways that negativity manifests in this culture—it seems almost epidemic—is that we don't have a very good way of liking ourselves in the West these days. There's a sense that we don't value ourselves very highly. For many people, there's an almost pervasive feeling of worthlessness.

A few years ago, some Western dharma teachers were meeting in India with the Dalai Lama. They raised this issue: how can we help people work with this feeling of not valuing themselves, of not feeling worthwhile? The Dalai Lama couldn't understand it. He could not grasp what they were talking about. He had no idea what this feeling was. Apparently, it's not very common in Tibetan culture because by and large, Tibetan children are truly valued. It's understood that they're all capable of great wisdom and liberation, and they're widely loved by their extended families.

So he went around to each of the Western teachers asking, "Do you know what this means? Have you had this feeling?" All the Western teachers said yes, they could relate to this feeling—they knew what it was to not value themselves very much.

I was practicing in my early years and went through a phase of having many self-judging thoughts. I happened to have an interview on one of these difficult days. When I went in to see the teacher, they asked how the retreat was going. I said, "Oh, well, I'm having a hard day today," hoping they'd leave it at that. But of course they didn't.

"Well, what's going on?"

"Oh, I'm just having some aversive thoughts," I said, certain they would leave it at that. I'd confessed it was

a hindrance—I thought that should be enough.

"What kind of thoughts?"

"Well, I'm feeling like I don't like myself very well. Nobody likes me. I'm feeling really lonely and that nobody likes me."

The teacher said, "You're not seeing things the way they are. The problem is you don't accept yourself. You need to accept yourself."

So this theme of accepting myself—or valuing myself, put another way—became central in my practice for years after that. I had to struggle with this theme because what did it mean to accept myself? I thought in Buddhism there wasn't a self to accept or reject. What did that mean? Was I going to find some little guy inside and then wrap my arms around him and say, "You're okay after all"? That didn't sound right either.

What I came to understand as I worked with this theme over time was that accepting myself really meant accepting every moment of my life just the way it was—accepting what was beautiful, accepting what was difficult. When I could really do that, accept each moment as it was, then I could accept myself fully.

I'm still working in that direction. There are still things that stump me. But over the years, I've gathered in many more of the lost brothers and sisters that make up my personality, and it's gotten much easier.

That issue has gotten much more comfortable for me. So watch the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves. You know, we tell ourselves these stories about we're not good enough or we're not well loved or this or that. And be aware that it's just a story. And the story is never as much as the storyteller. No story can ever define the storyteller. That's a hopeless pursuit.

One last aspect of aversion that I'll mention is fear. Fear is a sense of aversion about something that is a future thought, something that might happen to us in the future. Take a look when fear arises. What is usually your reaction to it? When you feel fear in your meditation, how do you feel about that fear? For most people, when fear arises, we usually become more afraid. And then because it's a bigger fear, we get more afraid, and more afraid.

Again, the key in working with fear is to open to it. If we can accept the feeling of fear itself, that raw emotion in its very bare quality, then there's no problem with fearful situations. We can go into a fearful situation. It may still bring up the emotion of fear. But if I can experience that fear and don't have a problem with that, the situation is no longer a barrier. The fear is not a barrier.

As we open to our fear, we actually start taking its power away. Fear holds its grip of power because we're afraid to confront it, because we won't let ourselves experience it. As we open more and more, feel how it is in the body, feel how it is in the mind, see the thoughts that arise about fear, it starts to lose its charge.

Those are a few of the aspects of aversion that I wanted to mention.

The third of the hindrances we've talked about a bit already on the retreat. It has to do with sleepiness. Classically, it's called in English sloth and torpor. I love this phrasing, sloth and torpor. When was the last time you told somebody you were feeling particularly slothful today? A lot of these Dharma terms got translated when Victoria was still Queen of England, and they have some of that era of terminology still. But I like this particular one.

There was an early maintenance crew around this center. I was on staff here in the early days. It's an early maintenance crew that were not exactly known for their work ethic—and totally unlike the current maintenance staff, I want to stress that. But in the old days, they acquired the nicknames of McSloth and McTorpor. I like this hindrance for its historical relevance.

With sloth or torpor, one is a physical manifestation, one's more a mental manifestation, and dullness and drowsiness manifest in both. The basic effect is the mind is cloudy, and you just can't see clearly. There's a lack of energy. You can't connect to the breath. You can't connect with the body. Everything's seen through a fog or through a haze.

And sometimes it's not very unpleasant. I mean, I've spent many a pleasant hour on the cushion, sort of lost in this fog, as I imagine some of you may have over the last couple of days, too. But while we're lost in that fog, we're not deepening the awareness. The meditation is not really developing because the mindfulness is not really present. It's not strong.

This is very common in the first days of retreat. Continue to work with it with the antidote of energy, as I think we've talked about a couple of times. When you're feeling this dullness of mind or body, do something to arouse energy. That's what counters it. So you can sit up straighter, you can open your eyes, you can stand up in a meditation. That's perfectly good etiquette in the meditation hall. Next walking period, go for a brisk walk, splash some water on your face, make sure you get enough sleep at night.

Whatever you can do to pick up the physical energy will help with this particular hindrance. Usually after the first three, maybe four days of a retreat, this really decreases for people. We've made the adjustment to the retreat setting, the energy starts to come in from another source, and there's not so much problem with this particular hindrance.

If, however, the dullness and drowsiness continue to be there a lot for you after the first three or four days, then I'd get curious. And I'd start to investigate. Because sometimes this dullness comes down as a kind of shield to keep you from feeling something. So it's as though we'll be sitting in meditation, things are fairly clear, and out of the corner of our eye we get a little glimpse of something that we're not very comfortable with. Some memory, some emotion, some little glimmer starts to come through and then, boom, down comes the veil as a way of not experiencing it. So sleepiness sometimes manifests as a device to keep us from feeling. If it continues a lot after the first three or four days, get curious about that and start to see just before the sleepiness comes what was going on, what was your experience, what was happening.

With restlessness and agitation, it's just the opposite of sleepiness. There's too much energy. So you'll come into the hall and you'll feel like the body's just on fire with this energy. The thoughts are very active. They're racing. The emotions are in high gear. And you'll feel like you just can't sit still for another minute on your zafu or you'll go crazy. And yet somehow you manage to keep doing it.

Let yourself again just feel what this restlessness feels like. Give yourself to it. Let yourself just embrace that feeling of agitation or restlessness. As Jack Kornfield says, let yourself become the first meditator to die on your cushion from restlessness. See if it happens.

In working with restlessness, the antidote to restlessness is calm. So, for instance, at the start of the sitting where you're starting to feel restless, you might just take a few deep breaths, just deep in the sense of calm and relaxation. Often we think that if I'm restless, it's because I've lost concentration. I need to bring back a focus on the breath and we'll try to concentrate more. But that actually increases the energy and can just increase the restlessness.

So often with restlessness it's more helpful to give the mind a big, big box. Give that energy a big space to kind of roam around in. And one of the things I recommend if you're feeling restless is to meditate for a while on sounds. Let your awareness become very broad and take in all the sounds. And that gives the energy a big field to roam around in. It can also be helpful to ground the attention lower in the body. Because restless energy has a way of rising up into the head. Put the attention lower down and really have that sense of connecting with the earth.

Again, with restlessness, take a look. Is there something that the restlessness is masking? Was there some unpleasant feeling just before you became very restless, for instance, and wanted to leave the hall? Take a look.

Doubt is the last of the hindrances, and you know when doubt has arrived because you start hearing in your mind the words, "What on earth am I doing here?" Also very common in the first days of a retreat. It may be doubts about the practice. Does this mindfulness stuff really go anywhere? It might be doubts about the teachings. You know, what are those people talking about up front anyway? About the teachers, about the other people, about ourselves. You know, we may feel other people can do this. I open my eyes, they're all sitting like Buddhas or Buddhinis. But I can't do this. I can't do this practice.

There's a profound spiritual truth actually in that phrase—I can't do this—but we'll leave that for another talk.

The fact is this practice works by a law that is as unavoidable as the law of gravity. If you do mindfulness, it leads to freedom. There are no two ways about that. But doubt is a particularly insidious hindrance. Because when doubt is there, if we believe it, it saps our energy to practice. We stop looking.

As William Blake said about the sun, if the sun would doubt, it would immediately go out. And that's what happens to our practice when we doubt—our practice goes out.

So please, when you catch this factor of doubt, do something to work with it. The antidote to doubt is faith. Do something that re-strengthens your faith. Find that faith that you came in with. You all came in from your outside lives with this determination and conviction to give yourself to this process for nine days with the hope of finding peace or clarity, understanding and compassion. Remember what you came here for. Remember what motivated you. It was a good reason then and it's a good reason now.

Reflect on the Dharma. What could be more important than developing in wisdom and understanding and love and compassion? How could you possibly spend your time more fruitfully?

And then talk to one of us in a group interview or individual interview. Please bring out your doubt and please bring out your questions. It's not something to be ashamed of or want to hide away. Really, part of being a student is bringing out the deep questions that you have about the practice and opening those up for discussion and another perspective.

So just to summarize, there are a few steps in relating to the hindrances. The very first and most important one is to know that the hindrance is at work. And in that naming, it can be helpful. Know whether you're experiencing wanting or disliking or sleepiness or restlessness or doubt.

Then if you can, open to it and just let yourself feel it. Get familiar with it. We're not trying to make these states go away. Like the Aitken Roshi quote last night was pointing to, it's not that these forces will go away from our mind, but if we can understand them thoroughly, we can be free of them even as they arise. That's the direction of freedom. So open to them, let them come, experience them, get to know them.

But sometimes these hindrances can still overwhelm our mindfulness. We can try to be with them, but sometimes the storyline is just too strong. The story they're painting just sweeps us away into the fantasy, into the story. We lose our mindfulness. If your mindfulness is being overwhelmed, you can't stay with the direct experience, then apply an antidote. Not out of aversion, not because you want the hindrance to go away, but out of wisdom so that you restore mindfulness.

The basic antidotes, as I mentioned: for desire, you can reflect on the impermanence of gratification. For aversion, the classic antidote is metta. For sleepiness, it's energy. For restlessness, it's calm. And for doubt, it's faith. Let's see if you can just tap back into those energies.

And finally, if all else fails, don't think about letting it go. Just think about letting it be. Just let it be and surrender to it. And sometimes it'll just hang around for a while. That's okay, because the other thing is it'll also pass away. Let it come, let it be, and then let it go. It's this opening with real acceptance that really transforms us in our practice.

Freedom is not about getting rid of the states. It's about opening and accepting them. Then we take the conflict out of our life. Then we take this lack of self-acceptance out. If we can open to these states, we no longer have to fight them. And ultimately, when we understand them, they're not even disturbing.

And we find that we can more and more bring into these energies a kind of friendly attention. Even when they come, they may not have been the guests we invited to the party, but they're the guests that showed up. And if we can open to them with friendliness, we'll have a great party.

This is really the miracle of our practice, because originally these guests show up and we hate them. We're caught in that mind of hating. But if we can bring forth in that moment a heart of friendliness and clear seeing, then we've transformed that moment from a moment of hatred to a moment of friendliness and clarity. This is pure magic.

This is really the alchemy of our practice—that moment of transformation. There's no technique that can show you how to do this. Sometimes you have to dig deep into your hearts to be able to open to these energies. But that potential is there in each of us. It's the challenge of our practice. And as we do it more and more, it comes easier and easier. We get very good at it. And this is what really transforms our lives.

One of my Tibetan teachers, a young lama named Sogyal Rinpoche, put it this way: "The sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusion." The liberation of confusion. And that's what you're doing in a moment when you open to one of these difficult energies. You're liberating the confusion and replacing it with a truly awakened energy and awakened nature.

I'd like to close with a quotation from Rumi—a poem called "The Guest House":

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness.
Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all.
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows
who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice—
meet them at the door laughing
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Let's sit for just a minute together.

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