Uncovering Ego: Renunciation and the Hindrances

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 53:56

The talk tonight is on Uncovering Ego, Renunciation and the Hindrances.

I was on the staff of Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts in the late seventies when we had a visit from one of the most renowned meditation masters of the world, Mahasi Sayadaw. He was quite old at that time, and I think it was his first trip to the West. But in the Theravadan countries of Southeast Asia, particularly Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, he may have been the most influential monk of this century, because he revived a meditation technique founded in the *Visuddhimagga*, one of the ancient texts from the fifth century Christian era, and built a meditation technique around it that generated hundreds of centers throughout Southeast Asia.

This is the practice that we teach here of the continuity of awareness through sitting and walking and with the employment of the soft mental notes to label what our experience is. That was basically the contribution of Mahasi Sayadaw in this century, and it became enormously popular.

So it was his first visit to the West and I had actually, as a manager of the center, written the letter inviting him to come, and I was very excited about his arrival. We went down to the Boston airport to pick him up. We waited at the gate where his plane was coming in from Asia, and everybody else got off the plane. You can't miss bald men in orange robes, and we hadn't seen any of those yet. We thought the plane was empty and we were wondering if they'd missed the flight out of Thailand or something.

And then as we were standing there at the gate, out they came marching, out through the gate, slowly, mindfully—the senior Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, in front, and all five of them were carrying fans, brown cloth fans that were embroidered with the writing "Mahasi Sayadaw, 1979 World Tour." It may not have been the Rolling Stones, but it was just as exciting for us.

Actually, the fan is a very significant symbol in Asian Dharma because the monks often speak behind it. They will sometimes give whole Dharma talks holding a fan in front of them. And by the end of the evening, you may never have known who was speaking. This points to the important truth that the words of the Dharma are really what's important and not the personality of the speaker. We thought about doing that here, but we knew you'd recognize Sylvia, so we gave it up.

Mahasi Sayadaw came to our center and gave a two-week retreat that was open to the public, and I had the good fortune to sit it. It was very interesting. It was my first real exposure to a traditional Asian

teacher, and I found out that they teach quite differently than my teachers at that time—Joseph and Jack and Sharon and Christopher—had been teaching. They don't tell Sufi stories. They don't quote Mary Oliver poems. And they don't give many descriptions of embarrassing things that happened to them in second grade. Basically what the monks did was to repeat the words of the Buddha.

I was young in my practice then, and I didn't fully appreciate what they had to offer, because they were repeating the words with a deep understanding from their own personal experience of the meaning and the profundity of that message. And I was looking for Mary Oliver poems. So it was sometimes a frustrating experience for me at that point in my development.

The visit was enlivened by a little bit of controversy. At one point, somebody in the hall asked Mahasi Sayadaw a question about sexuality. Going to an eighty-year-old celibate monk for questions about sexuality is like coming to me for financial advice. But he did answer, and his response was that sex is gross, base, and disgusting. So that caused a few ripples. It caused a few ripples until one of the staff members figured out the solution. They said, "Oh, actually what happened was the translator just misstated it. What he actually said is that it's engrossing, basic, and worth discussing." Then everybody felt better about the Sayadaw.

So there was a little collision of cultures in my early encounters with Asian Buddhism and the Asian traditions. Over the years, I feel I've bridged that a lot and feel very close in spirit now to those teachers that I spent time with in the early years.

But one of the things that struck me at the time was just the power of their being—the power of their presence. Mahasi Sayadaw came over with about four of his senior monks, including Usi Lananda, who's still living in the Bay Area and teaching on the peninsula, and Ujanaka, who now has his own center outside of Rangoon, where some of our friends have practiced.

I felt when I was around them that I was in the middle of a vibration that I had never experienced before with a Westerner. There was a degree of stillness in their being, a degree of composure, a power of innocence, and a power of purity that I hadn't found in the teachers that I'd been studying with. It really impressed me a lot.

As I reflected and heard the stories of their lives, most of them had ordained quite young as novices and then moved into the monkhood. I felt that what I was feeling in that transmission was the power of renunciation that was a thread that had run through their lives possibly before they were even teenagers. It's not uncommon in Asia for novices to ordain at age seven or eight, to be schooled in the monasteries, and then to make the transition to full monkhood when they're eighteen, twenty, twenty-one.

I felt the purity of that entire lifestyle in a system that cultivated mindfulness and concentration and virtue, in a system where their focus from so early on had just been single-pointed on the Dharma. I felt the power of their renunciation. There was an unshakability that came from that lifestyle because they

weren't looking for anything from us. They had their air ticket home. That was really all they needed. And they could just be simply themselves in this really strong and unshakable way. It was a really great lesson.

Well, we too develop this same kind of strength in our retreat experience.

Coming into a silent retreat like this is a major act of renunciation for us. The renunciation that we carry out here works on many levels. We may never even know all the levels it's operating on until years afterwards.

One of the things that happens quite clearly is when we come into an environment this simple, the mind settles and calms. You may feel that already just in the first few days of being here. Another aspect of the silence that I've often appreciated is when we don't speak and we don't act very much, we really don't get in as much trouble. In classical terms, it's said that this really protects our virtue. It protects our karma, protects our sila.

There's also a great strength in self-sufficiency. We find that we can bear these conditions, even though they're difficult. They're difficult for all of us. I just did a period of retreat this fall at the center in Massachusetts, and I've done a lot of retreats over the years. I'm used to the experience. I had a fairly good experience in the retreat, nothing of major difficulty, and yet I still found it arduous to go through the routine of sitting and walking and staying in silence and not having human contact day after day.

I think that for all of us, there is a difficulty in dedicating ourselves, in giving ourselves to this kind of lifestyle. I want to honor and respect your work with that. I know it's not easy. And yet this kind of dedication and bearing these hardships really brings an inner strength that I don't know any other way to come by. I actually believe that we'll all face death a lot more comfortably because of the time that we've spent in situations like this. I have great faith in that.

So renunciation is a very powerful aspect of practice. It's one of the ten paramis. The Buddha made lots of lists, as you know, and he made lots of lists of the good things in life and the difficult things in life. The paramis are one of the lists of the good things. Actually, they're referred to as the beautiful factors of mind. This is a list of the qualities of mind that, when we develop them through action, have the power to liberate us.

These are the qualities that the bodhisattva over many lifetimes brought to fruition so that he could be born and come to fulfillment and liberation in that life as Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha. It is really the cultivation of these ten qualities that ripen the mind, that fulfill the mind, and bring it to the possibility of liberation.

The beautiful thing about the paramis is that they are intentions that accompany actions. As such, we can develop them in daily life as well as in the retreat setting. They're not something we need to leave behind at the gate of the retreat center when we go home, but they're practices and cultivations that we can take with us always in all situations.

This aspect of renunciation is really at the core of spiritual practice in our Buddhist tradition. This is a quote from the Buddha himself who said: "There are these roots of trees, there are these empty huts. Meditate bhikkhus, do not delay or else you will regret it later. This is our instruction to you."

Fortunately, we have something a little better than an empty hut or the root of a tree. At Spirit Rock, we're practicing not exactly the austere form of asceticism, but we've given this its own name. We call it the Upper Middle Path. It seems to work also.

There are many beautiful stories in the tradition of renunciation. One autobiography that I like a lot is the autobiography of a Tibetan Lama named Shabkar. He was born in 1781, so it was the time that we were fighting for our independence and killing the native people of this country. He practiced to great fruition and wrote one of the most beautiful Dharma books that I know of called *Flight of the Garuda*, which is in the Dzogchen tradition.

When he was twenty-five, he entered his first three-year retreat on his own. He went to an island in a remote part of Tibet and stayed there through all the seasons, of course without any heat, and just carried on with the practices that his teacher had given him in solitude. In fact, there were a few other meditators on the island and they would come over to ask him for advice, and he thought that was interrupting his retreat too much. So one year he mudded up the front of his cave so that he couldn't get out and nobody else could get in, and he meditated that way for a year.

This is the account of one of his years and his food supply. He said: "Throughout the year, one of the local people occasionally brought me goat's milk and curd. In the summer, some vegetables were to be found. By the end of autumn, however, my supplies were exhausted, and for two months I was reduced to eating only a thin soup of tsampa"—which is roasted barley grain. Can you imagine two months eating a thin soup of tsampa? It makes you appreciate oatmeal, doesn't it? It never sounded so good.

This was one of his statements to his teacher when he went into retreat. He called his teacher Father: "Until I achieve unchanging stability of mind, I won't remain in busy worldly places, but will stay alone in isolated places of retreat."

Father, accept this offering made to please you. The length of my practice shall equal the length of my life.

Coming into a situation like this, we also make a great renunciation. We give up family and friends and home and pets, our choice of meals, our entertainments, our restaurants—so many things of our life. You know, I think if this was imposed in prisons, it would be outlawed as cruel and unusual punishment. And yet we take it up gladly.

This level of giving up can bring its own challenges. It can bring a sense of insecurity, of loneliness or isolation, of feeling disconnected. Sometimes it can bring up a sense of unworthiness because we're not getting the contact and the feedback that affirms us as we do in our daily life. Sometimes we might wonder, what have I gotten myself into and why did I do this?

I'm reminded of another story from my early days at the meditation center in Massachusetts. There was a fellow who used to come around quite often for retreats. He was very worldly. In fact, we heard that he had made a lot of money in the real estate market. In those years, people of my age did not have a lot of money, and so we all looked on him with some fascination. Wow, this guy really scored big in the real estate market.

He ended up taking robes and ordaining with Ajahn Sumedho, who by that time, a student of Ajahn Chah, had set up a monastery in England, an early monastery in England. We were all amazed because he seemed so worldly. In fact, he said to Ajahn Sumedho, "I have all this money. What shall I do with it?"

Ajahn Sumedho said, "Give it away. Stick with me and you aren't going to need a penny of it."

And he did that. He gave all his money away, and he said about a year later, "You know, I was just about to invest that money in oil stocks. If I had, it would be worth a million dollars today." This was 1980, so he gave away a lot.

Entering the life of the renunciate, the monk's life, is its own challenge. It is arduous. And for such a worldly person, it was difficult. We often said of him that we felt his past virtue had kind of dragged him kicking and screaming into Sumedho's arms. I often think that way about coming on retreat. If I can just let my virtue take me there, once I get there, I know I'll be okay. But sometimes it feels like I've been dragged kicking and screaming.

So what is the purpose of this kind of renunciation? Why do we put ourselves in these situations?

Part of the beauty, the real essence of renunciation, is that when we let go of so many outer activities and our life becomes stripped bare in a way, what really stands out are the inner workings of our hearts and minds. Just as these little weeping trees—I think they're willows in the courtyard—losing their leaves now, you see so clearly the structure of the branches. When those trees were full of leaves, it just looked like a big bush and you couldn't really tell what supported the leaves. Now that the leaves have fallen, the branches are really clearly revealed.

So when our outer activities fall away, we are just left with the inner workings of our heart and mind. That is really where we learn. That is where we go to school in this practice. We are really here to understand how our hearts and minds work. This is what wisdom is about.

Particularly, the wisdom that we want to understand is: what activities of heart and mind and body lead to happiness? What activities of heart and mind and body lead to sorrow? This is really what we take up as a central theme of our investigation. And in this situation, that's all so clearly revealed.

It's a little bit like Gil said this morning. When we focus very clearly on the breath for a period of time, it tends to highlight whatever is not of this simple awareness of the breath. The other thoughts and plans and hopes and fears and wants that come in are so apparent because we're used to seeing the breath in its

bare simplicity.

Similarly with this situation. It's so simple that when other things come in, we see them, sometimes for the first time. Someone said in an interview today, "Boy, this is really challenging."

I'm seeing again and again and again all these judgments of other people, all my opinions, the full extent of my comparing mind. It's just leaping out at me.

And this is part of the result. Sometimes it seems like we're going backwards. This stuff seems like tough stuff to see, to handle. It's kind of like one teacher said—Ruth Dennison said that self-knowledge is never good news. So sometimes in this setting, we see a lot of stuff that doesn't look like good news, but it actually is because it's in the seeing of it that we can learn from it and become freer.

There's another story of renunciation that I wanted to pass on. There's a book that's just come out about an English woman named Ani Tenzin Palmo who was born in 1943 in London and took robes in the Tibetan tradition in 1964, at the age of 21, in India. She felt a strong longing to be in solitary retreat and went way up in a cave in the Himalayas, 13,000 feet up, and spent most of 12 years practicing on her own in that cave. She's now come out of the solitude, returned to the West, and is founding a center in Italy and beginning to teach.

She passed through Spirit Rock last year and gave some teachings and had lunch with some of us. I said to her, "I have so much admiration for what you did. I feel it's completely beyond my capacity to do something like that." She said—she was very humble and very simple—"I only did what I wanted to do. I just felt drawn to be there, and I just did what I wanted to do." So she's very humble, and very, very dedicated.

Someone asked her—actually it was a journalist who wrote this book, who didn't know a lot about the practice—"Don't you feel you're escaping when you go into retreat like that? Don't you feel you're escaping the real realities of this world and the things that people deal with day by day?"

And her reply was: "Not at all. To my mind, worldly life is an escape. When you have a problem, you can turn on the television, phone a friend, or go out for a coffee. In a cave, however, you have no one to turn to but yourself. When problems arise, you have no choice but to go through with them and come out the other side. In a cave, you face your own nature in the raw, and you have to find a way of dealing with it."

I think this really expresses well our situation here. We face our own being in the raw, and that's where our learning is. The inner life, when the externals drop away, becomes so vivid, becomes so alive, it stands out, really maybe for the first time.

Sometimes dreams get very vivid. People often report that the dream life has become very strong, very rich, seems very meaningful, and there's a strong temptation to pick up the dream and figure out what it means. Someone asked Joseph Goldstein a question about that in a retreat. He said, "I have these really

important dreams. Jung said that if you don't analyze a dream, it's like receiving a letter that you don't open." And Joseph's reply was: "When you're in retreat, it's a good idea not to open your mail."

That's actually a good piece of advice. Enjoy the dreams while they're there and leave them there as you wake up.

Sometimes our emotional reactions become really strong. This is the phenomenon that's become known as "yogi mind," when small things in our daily life look like huge things here. When I entered retreat this fall in Massachusetts, we'd had a small board meeting the day before, and there were a lot of issues that we discussed that were going to impact Spirit Rock for a while. I got into retreat and about a week in I started thinking about all these issues and I felt I absolutely had to write a letter to our executive director because they were so important and my input on them was absolutely crucial to the future sustenance of Spirit Rock. Of course it wasn't, and I'm glad I never put pen to paper, but it seemed awfully big at the time.

This situation is really designed to bring forth the difficult mind states that are still lurking in us. What happens is when we simplify and we meditate, we turn our mind to our bare experience, we get one of two outcomes. One possibility is we connect with our bare experience directly. We're with the breath, we're with the body, we're with sounds. And the meditation deepens, the concentration and mindfulness go on a steady path of deepening.

The other alternative is that we get whatever is blocking our ability to be present. Then if there's a block to our ability to be present, that's where the learning comes from. What's beautiful about this process is that it really doesn't matter which way our experience is going. It really doesn't matter so much if we're with the chosen object directly—the breath or body—or if what we're meeting is the impediment or the obstacle to being with that chosen object, because either way is the perfect deepening of our practice.

The process of this unfolding, the process of our deepening, is so organic. It's so natural. It is just like how a rose knows which petal to unfold next so that the whole bud can come from this tightly coiled mass to the full flowering. Our practice is just the same way. In our thinking mind, we really don't have a clue which petal is to open next. Sometimes we might think we came on a retreat to work on one particular issue.

And as the retreat unfolds, it's something entirely different. Sometimes we think we came because we want to recapture a meditation experience that was profound and insightful and transformative from an earlier retreat. And sometimes that experience never presents itself again in our life.

But what you can trust in is that the experience that is presenting itself is the experience that you need to learn from. I think that's really the beauty of the simplicity of awareness or mindfulness—because mindfulness doesn't inject anything different into the situation, but only connects with what's already there. It allows the coming into life, the coming into flowering of what is already there without adding

anything new.

So sometimes as we sit, we feel the deepening of mindfulness and concentration. Sometimes as we sit, what we feel is the releasing of accumulations—the inner holdings stored in body and mind from past experience that has never quite had the time or the wisdom to be digested. It's a bit like fasting. When we stop taking in food, then what comes out are the toxins that have been stored in the body. And by coming out, they can be released.

In our practice, the stored accumulations—the tensions of body and mind, the underlying knots—begin to come to the surface. And in that coming to the surface, there's difficulty, there's struggle, there's conflict, there's pain, but there's also the possibility of release, of freedom.

So much of the fruit of our practice is this unburdening process—the letting go of all the holdings from the past that have weighed on us unconsciously and now have the possibility of really being released by that bringing into awareness. Carl Jung said, "The process of enlightenment is not one of throwing circles of light around everywhere. It comes from making the darkness conscious. This latter process, however, is disagreeable and therefore unpopular." But this is what our work is. This is part of what we're engaged in.

So it's very important to trust in the miracle of this unfolding—that what is presenting itself is what we need to learn from. If we start to doubt that, we can really get in trouble because we think that what is presenting itself is because we've landed in this lousy situation where the room's too cold and it's raining all the time and nobody's friendly to me and people don't make eye contact when I go by. If we could just get out of this lousy situation, everything would be great again. But actually, of course, it's the same mind, whether we're here or at home, and the same underlying structure is being shown.

When I started this retreat in the fall, I went through a lot of resistance at different points—to the arduousness, to the weather, to periods of walking when I didn't feel like walking. And I'd go through these periods of real aversion and I'd start to blame it on the walking or the weather or the facility or something else. And I finally connected: Oh, there are times in my life when I really drag my heels too. I feel this resistance in my daily life, in many different situations that I just don't feel like doing at that point. And I came to see, this is just resistance. It's just non-acceptance.

When I could frame it like that, and I knew it wasn't the situation, then I could start to see the flimsiness of the resistance. And I asked myself the question: what would this moment be like if I met it with acceptance instead of resistance? And at times that veil just pulled away. And there was no more resistance to what before had been a solid mass of aversion.

So there are great joys in renunciation as well as the difficulties. The kind of clarity that we can see when we see an old pattern just evaporate before our eyes—there's a huge relief and a joy in that. The sense of stillness and peace that we touch, the heartfulness, the sensitivity to nature and each other.

In terms of the difficulties that get revealed, the Buddha talked about a number of ways of classifying

them. One of the key lists is the list of the five hindrances. I know you all have heard about these many times before, and I'd like to talk about them briefly tonight. Another of the lists is what in Pali is called the kilesas—the three kilesas, often translated as defilements, but the real root is torments of mind. There's a lot of overlap between these two lists.

Before talking about the hindrances, I wanted to explain how I see the difference between the two. The way I understand the hindrances is that these are the forces in particular that greet the meditator. These are the forces that when a meditator sits down and makes the intention to be mindful and to pay direct attention to our experience, these are the particular forces that oppose that mindfulness.

So they're a little different from the list of the kilesas or torments of mind, which are much more universal. They are the roots of suffering in all beings, in all times, in all situations, which are considered to be greed, aversion, and delusion.

The hindrances the Buddha talked about were the forces of sense desire, of ill will or aversion, of sleepiness, of restlessness, and doubt. You'll notice that the first two really overlap with the kilesas, very similar to greed and aversion, and point to this central tendency of mind that is always trying to change our experience. It's really the movement toward pleasure and away from pain that keeps the mind moving all the time, that makes it difficult for us to experience peace. This is in a way the pivoting of the mind, always trying to gain pleasure and avoid the unpleasant.

So let's talk a little about the different forces that visit the mind. I'm sure you've seen many times already the wanting mind that comes in practice. It may be a wanting for something externally, missing some things from home that we've left through renunciation. It may be a wanting for something here—an experience of concentration or peace or stillness or a particular meditation experience.

One of the underlying assumptions with wanting is that there's going to be lasting happiness if we get what is wanted.

And this is one of the things that we have to question with every hindrance: the difference between the story of the hindrance and the feeling of the hindrance. If we're taken in by the story of the hindrance, we're taken away from this moment because the hindrance of desire is always pointing to something in the future. If we follow that arrow, we're taken away from our present experience and we're deceived.

This is the trick of the hindrances—we are deceived out of mindfulness. But we can actually take that energy, turn it around, and look directly at the hindrance itself. In that, we're reestablished in mindfulness. So instead of looking at the object that desire is pointing at, we become familiar with the feeling of desire itself—how that toppling forward feels in mind and body, that reaching out. And we question: is it really the lack of the object that leads to the suffering, or is it desire itself that is difficult to experience?

With aversion, the feeling is that the situation is just not good enough. There's something wrong with the

situation—the food or the people or the temperature or the hall or the teachings or whatever. That's where the problem is.

The Buddha was meeting with a group of monks and nuns and he said, "Did you see that jackal that just ran out of the underbrush?" The jackal ran out of the underbrush and sat for a moment in the open, then didn't stay long and ran into the hollow of a tree. It sat down in the hollow of a tree for a moment, but it didn't stay long. It got up, ran away, and lay down in the forest. Then it got up from lying down and ran away somewhere else.

He said, "Everywhere it went, it blamed its situation. It wasn't comfortable in the undergrowth. It wasn't comfortable in the open. It wasn't comfortable in the hollow of the tree, and it wasn't comfortable in the forest. It blamed the undergrowth. It blamed the open. It blamed the hollow of the tree, and it blamed the forest." He said the problem was with none of these. The problem was the jackal had mange. Mange was the problem. Mange was the reason the jackal suffered, not the situation.

Aversion is like that. We feel like we're suffering because of the situation, but the actual source of the suffering is our own disliking of it. When we can drop the disliking, the situation can be just fine, can be accepted.

One of the most insidious ways that aversion turns, of course, is toward ourselves, where we feel that we're not worthwhile, or we can't accept ourselves, that we're not complete. The Dalai Lama came to the center in Massachusetts in 1979—at the time he wasn't as famous as he is now. There was a question from the audience about this feeling of not being worthy, not feeling worthwhile. The Dalai Lama just said very directly, "That is not true. You mustn't think that way. You are very, very worthwhile—as much as any being that is created, as much as any product of nature. Trust in that."

I had a friend who was also a monk in Thailand who had been there longer than I had. After I was ordained, my preceptor asked me to stop at his monastery on the way up to this practice wat near Chiang Mai that I was going to practice at. He was a Western monk, so I stopped to visit him in Chiang Mai. We hung out and got to know each other a bit, and he had this really strong metta vibe. Everybody loved this guy. He had been around quite a while, and in the mornings he would stay at his hut. He would practice. He would be quiet. In the afternoon he would receive visitors—both Thai people came to visit him because he spoke fluent Thai, and Westerners came to visit him. He'd give his afternoons to being with people and counseling them on their life or their meditation practice.

We went out for alms round the first morning I was there. He had the biggest alms bowl I had ever seen, and he had a waistline that sort of matched it. He was doing very well, as we say, in the monkhood. I mean, the bowl wasn't quite this big, but it wasn't far off. I was looking forward to going on alms round with him. So we started off, we set off. He went in front because he was the senior monk and I went behind.

And then these two novices were coming with us—younger boys around the monastery—and I was a little puzzled because normally the novices don't go on alms round.

So we set off and we'd just gone a couple of blocks when his bowl was full and my bowl was overflowing. I wasn't accepting any more. We ducked into an alley and he called the novices up. They opened their robes and I saw that each of them was carrying a plastic bag slung over their shoulder. He took all the food that he had collected from his bowl and put it in their plastic bags. They covered their robes back up again, his bowl was empty, and we walked on. We did that a couple more times.

Then we went back to the monastery and he shared his food around, feeding probably a dozen people from his morning alms round. Those same people lined up to give him food every morning because they knew he would walk that way and because they loved him so much. He had this great energy—he was always giving, and the people appreciated it.

In talking with him personally, he told me that he had spent the first nine years in robes working with his self-hatred. I was absolutely amazed because I didn't see a trace of it. What I saw was this wonderful, spacious quality of affection and kindness and compassion. Through his practice—primarily through his meditation practice—he had completely transformed that trait in himself.

The third hindrance of sleepiness I think we've talked about quite a bit already. Just one other suggestion: be really clear in your noting of sleepiness or dullness, and see if the noting itself serves to sharpen the attention and give a little break in the dullness. Also take a look and see if you're averse to the sleepiness, because sometimes the aversion can actually increase the dullness. See if you can open to it with real acceptance.

With restless attention, give it a very big space. Make the mind very wide, very soft. Sometimes when we get restless, we think, "Oh, I need to get concentrated again," so we try to shrink the focus down and make a narrow focus on the breath so we can get concentrated. But that tends to bottle the energy up and can make it more restless, more explosive. So let the mind be very wide, very soft. It can be helpful with restlessness to focus on some point low in the body—maybe the contact of the seat with the cushion, just that touch point. Very simple, very clear touch point to ground the attention.

Doubt is said to be the most insidious of the hindrances because when we believe in it, it cripples our practice. We stop paying attention, we stop deepening. As William Blake said, "If the sun would doubt, it would immediately go out." And that's what happens with our practice when we doubt.

So with doubt, it's important to reflect on your intention—which we've been discussing in the early days of the retreat—reflect on your motivation, reflect on earlier retreats and the benefits that you found in the practice. Then it's also helpful to look at what came before the doubt. Doubt usually doesn't come after you've just had that really crystal clear, still sitting where you felt absolutely peaceful for forty-five minutes. Somehow that's not usually when doubt arises. So see if, before the doubt came, there was a

difficult experience.

This really came clear to me when I was doing a self-retreat a few years ago. I was staying in a small cabin in upstate New York, and I had chosen to go there for a two-month self-retreat in October and November. I was quite alone. Every few days a friend would come and bring me food that I'd requested, but otherwise I didn't see people at all.

I was a California guy at the time, and I thought, "October will be nice weather, and usually the first snows come about Thanksgiving, so I should be able to make it through October and November." I just went with my tennis shoes and my Birkenstocks—bad decision, because the first snow started coming in early November. There I was with my tennis shoes trying to do walking meditation, my feet getting very cold and very wet, and I was getting frustrated. So I took to tying plastic produce bags around my feet and then going out to do walking meditation in the snow. That was okay until the produce bag wore out and then I'd get cold feet again.

Then there was about a two-week period where I didn't see the sun. It was snowing and raining and gray and cold, and I felt very oppressed by the weather—feeling gloomy and disillusioned. The solitude was difficult for me and I just went into this funk. I thought, "I need to go back to California. I'm sure it's much more pleasant there now." Actually, it was about this time of year. I was starting to think about how I could go home.

Then I suddenly connected: "Oh, this is doubt." It took me about a day, but I realized, "Oh, this is doubt." And then it took me a little bit longer, but I realized: "Oh, just before I started doubting, I was feeling some kind of despair." All the things together had combined to bring up this despair in me that I wasn't comfortable with, that I hadn't felt before and just didn't like. That was really what was at the root of the doubt.

When I could see that, I was back in the despair. But that was a lot better than being in the doubt.

Because at least there was clarity. So with all these difficult energies, clarity is worth a lot.

With all these difficult energies of the hindrances that will inevitably arise as part of the situation, as part of the deepening of our practice, what we really need to think of is not that we want them to go away, but to discover that we have the potential to make friends with them. So not relating with them with a sense of aversion or wanting them to disappear, but opening to these experiences directly with a sense of real acceptance.

It may not happen the first time that we see a particular desire or a form of aversion, but it calls out a deeper strength from us than we maybe knew we had—that we can actually accept them and understand them. Because really, they're just forms of energy until we invest. They're quite impersonal. It's not my anger or your anger. It's just anger. So can we open and see them with a friendly kind of attention? And mindfulness has this quality of friendliness in it.

If we can do this, this is really a miracle of practice. Because what happens is, in a moment of difficulty—whether it's a moment of aversion or desire or fear—in that moment, if we can be aware and open, we're transforming that whole moment from a moment of difficulty, a moment of suffering, and a moment of the unwholesome, really into a moment of the awakened mind. We're giving birth right in the middle of the suffering. We're giving birth to the qualities of clarity, of friendliness, of compassion, of acceptance. And that's like magic.

There's no technique that can do this. But it's something that we learn from doing it again and again and again in our practice. And every time we're able to do it, it comes more easily the next time. This is really the alchemy of our practice. This is the transformation of our suffering directly, moment by moment, into the awakened mind.

One of my Tibetan teachers, a young Lama named Sukhne Rinpoche, said that the sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusion. The sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusion.

I'd just like to close with a quotation from another Tibetan. This is a teacher from the 12th century named Gampopa, who was a disciple of Milarepa. And he had a little poem that he called The Four Blessings, that are referred to as The Four Blessings of Gampopa. This is put in the form of a prayer or a supplication, and it doesn't matter so much whom the prayer is directed toward. It can be directed toward the teacher, could be directed to the Buddha, could be directed to the Dharma or to life itself.

These are the four blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessings so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessings so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's sit for just a minute.

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