Mindful Awareness of the Five Hindrances

Rebecca Bradshaw · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:02:22

My talk this evening is on mindful awareness of the five hindrances.

There are five states of mind that can sometimes visit our meditation. They're known as the hindrances, and they include a lot of what we don't like to face in practice. The five hindrances are sense desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt. I would guess that all of you have been visited by all five of these hindrances. No one avoids them in practice, though sometimes we are a little surprised at the extent to which they show up.

Yesterday, my partner asked me what I was going to be talking about tonight. I told him I was going to be talking about the hindrances, and he said, "Oh, good." I was a little surprised because people don't usually say "Oh, good" when you say you're going to talk about the hindrances. He doesn't practice quite as much as I do, but he's done a few retreats, so he knows more or less what we're doing here. He's kind of like my informant to what people are thinking who have practiced some but maybe not a lot, because after twenty-four years, I can perhaps forget what it's like to be in that position.

So I said, "Why 'oh good'?" And he said, "Because I remember that it was really a relief for me to hear that these states of mind are acceptable, predictable, and unremarkable states." I told him I was going to use his quote because that's a really nice way of putting it. He got it. That's what we want to understand about the hindrances: that they're acceptable, predictable, and unremarkable.

Acceptable in that we want to learn to hold them with compassionate awareness. Predictable in that you can count on them showing up—it's not some failing on your part. We often think we're bad meditators when one of the hindrances shows up, but they're predictable; they will show up. And unremarkable, meaning that they're not personal. They arise because of conditions and they pass away when those conditions end. These three traits will be woven into my talk tonight.

These five states of mind are called hindrances because they cloud our ability to see clearly. Actually, they are strategies to avoid seeing life clearly. The Buddha said, "These are the hindrances and obstacles that overcome awareness and weaken clear seeing." It can feel that way when these hindrances show up—it can feel like we're being overcome. These hindrances may be the reason why Frank Herbert said, "To endure oneself may be the hardest task in the universe."

Since we're trying to cultivate clear seeing, which is the meaning of vipassana, obviously we need to learn how to work with these energies. Now, I'm not particularly sure I like the term "hindrance" because it makes it seem like these states of mind are something other than our practice, when they actually are our

practice. I prefer the word "challenges," perhaps. Through working with these five challenges, we discover what peace of mind is. They're like the raw material of our freedom.

Our usual stance toward difficulties is to go the other way, to get as far as we can from them. In this way, difficulties control our life; we don't have peace. So what is it like to turn towards these five hindrances or challenges and meet them directly? Could this be part of our path towards a peaceful heart?

In the Tibetan tradition, there's a saying that aspiring yogis repeat when they begin to meditate: "Grant that I may be given appropriate difficulties and suffering on this journey so that my heart may be truly awakened and my practice of liberation and universal compassion may be truly fulfilled." We can consider these challenges of these five mind states as appropriate difficulties on this journey to help us develop wisdom and compassion.

As I said, these challenges are deeply conditioned strategies that we have to avoid life as it is. Opening to them is like opening doors to life as it is, to wisdom—an inherent part of the practice. Joseph said the other night in his talk that meditation is not just bliss. I have a quote from Brad Warner in a book called *Hardcor e Zen*. He says, "Zazen isn't about blissing out or going into alpha brainwave trances. It's about facing who and what you really are in every single damn moment. And you aren't just bliss, I'll tell you that right now. You're a mess."

We all are. But here's the thing—that mess is itself enlightenment.

Most of us have our favorite hindrance or two, the one that keeps showing up. Or maybe we'll experience what I call a "multiple hindrance attack," where you'll start with one hindrance. Perhaps you're a little tired. So then you'll start thinking, "Oh, I can't do this. It doesn't work. What am I doing here anyway? I could be spending my time in a much better way. Actually, what I'd really like to be doing right now is eating some pizza. That would be great. I mean, tofu—how much tofu can a person eat? I'm pretty tired of the food around here." And there you go, you have a multiple hindrance attack. Sometimes you can start with one and cover all five in a short period of time.

I think a sense of humor is a very appropriate response when talking about the hindrances, because if you don't have a sense of humor about these, you are going to get in trouble. Striking some chord here, huh?

With these challenges, we can't control their arising—they're impersonal energies that arise because of conditions. But we can apply some skillful antidotes to deal with them. We also have to learn how to live with them skillfully and peacefully. So our relationship to these challenges when they arise is very important. We need to check whether our relationship is one of aversion, or whether we're able to accept what's going on at the same time as we take appropriate steps to work with them.

Keep checking your attitude when the hindrances arise. If we feel aversion and want them to go away, we just increase our suffering and increase our entanglement in the hindrances. Of course, we'll all try this—we all have to try it and see if it works first. Perhaps you're sleepy and you don't want to be sleepy

and you want sleepiness to go away and you fight with sleepiness. Before you know it, you've worn yourself out and you've added aversion to your list of hindrances that you're experiencing in the moment.

If we fight with these hindrances, we see that we just increase their strength. But if we're aware of them and accepting of them while not neglecting to work with them appropriately, we can find freedom even within their occurrence.

So how do we work with these five challenges when they come up? Our first and best tool is mindfulness. We want to cultivate a relationship of not getting lost in these states of mind, of being aware when they arise. Recognizing these hindrances when they arise and observing them and getting to know and understand their nature can help them lose their power over us. We can actually be happy each time we become aware of one of these challenges, because it is the awareness that transforms them.

A steady accumulation of moments of mindfulness pokes holes in their power to seduce us and overwhelm us. One friend of mine describes it like a piece of cloth, a fabric, and each moment of mindfulness is like a pinprick in the fabric. Enough pinpricks and you start to be able to see through the fabric. This is how we can cultivate an understanding of the hindrances so that they don't overwhelm us.

The Buddha said that careless attention is what causes these mind states to grab hold of us and to strengthen. We aren't mindful, so they run us over. The antidote then is careful or mindful attention. Mindfulness is our protection. We see each hindrance clearly for what it is. We learn to meet these energies with kindness and compassion. We see that mindfulness, curiosity, compassion, and kindness are appropriate ways to hold these challenges.

During the metta sitting the other day, I offered the quote: "Wisdom tells me I am nothing, love tells me I am everything." Wisdom tells us that these hindrances aren't me or mine. Love tells us that we practice inclusivity, no part left out. Both are true. The hindrances aren't personal, they're not me and mine, and yet we hold them with love and acceptance.

I'd like to start with what are to me the two simplest hindrances: sleepiness and restlessness—or more formally, sloth and torpor, and restlessness and anxiety. They're a related pair. Sloth and torpor is low energy. I've read that sloth is the physical low energy and torpor is the mental low energy. The Buddha said that when sloth and torpor have overtaken us, it's like being imprisoned—you can't get out and enjoy the festival. A simile of a pond is often used when describing the hindrances, and for sleepiness, it's like a pond covered with algae or slime.

It's dense and you can't see through it.

Restlessness, on the other hand, is an excess of energy. Physically, the body can feel jumpy—that kind of "I have to keep moving" feeling. And mentally, the mind is jumpy, full of anxiety, churning with restless thoughts, perhaps a feeling like "I've got to get out of this hall or I'm going to die." The Buddha said that when restlessness overwhelms us, it's like being a slave, ordered about with no rest. Or that restlessness is

like a pond whipped by the wind—the surface so rippled and agitated that you can't see through, you can't see deeply.

One interesting thing about restlessness is that in this tradition there are different stages of enlightenment, and it's said that at each stage certain fetters or difficulties of mind fall away. Restlessness is said not to go until full enlightenment—it's in the last batch. So if you suffer from a little restlessness in the hall, you don't have to feel bad about it. It sticks around a while, very deeply conditioned in us.

The remedies for sleepiness and restlessness are to balance out the energy as best we can. For sleepiness or sloth and torpor, I'll offer some traditional antidotes. It's rather a long list, so don't try to remember all of them, but see if there's one or two you might want to try.

With sleepiness, we want to raise the energy level. One simple way is to open the eyes—it brings in light, it can bring in more energy. We can also become interested in sleepiness itself. The very interest sometimes will dispel it. What does it feel like in the body? What does it feel like in the mind? We can learn the earliest signs of sleepiness and take action at that point, before it gets too overwhelming. I started to notice that for me, the first sign is these strange hypnagogic visions—weird images that make no sense and you can't remember at all. That's my signal that sleepiness is just starting to come, so opening my eyes at that point can be helpful.

We can reflect on why we're practicing, to see if that raises our interest in what we're doing. We can reflect on our death to create urgency. We can stand. It can often be useful to do brisk walking outside and get some fresh air. Pulling on the earlobes—I've tried it, and it actually does help some.

Jack Kornfield tells a wonderful story about raising energy. When he was practicing in Thailand with Ajahn Chah, if some yogi was suffering greatly from sleepiness, Ajahn Chah would have them do their sitting practice on the edge of a deep well. It supposedly worked quite well. We don't have one here, but...

And then we often recommend graceful surrender. Sometimes we are simply tired. Our human bodies aren't made to be on high energy all the time—it would be like having a little motor running constantly at full speed. You would burn it out. We can start to know our own energy patterns. I know for me, I'm a person who has a lot of energy in the morning, and then it just goes downhill the rest of the day. So I plan accordingly in how I use my time.

Be kind with yourself in understanding this—that energy levels will change, and at times when energy is low, we can keep going as best we can with a light touch. Even if you have a lot of sleepiness during sittings, reflect on the fact that you're still awake for a pretty high percentage of the time—during walking meditation and all the times in between. So don't get too upset about it.

Early in my practice, this was my absolute favorite hindrance. I spent many sleepy sittings, especially after six in the evening. Sometimes I would almost fall asleep during walking meditation. And I didn't need more sleep—that wasn't the problem. It was simply that my energy was low at that time of night. I

remember once when I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, who you may have heard about—a fairly strict meditation master. I would fall asleep during his talks. Half of it was in Burmese, which didn't help much.

So one night he gave a talk on yogis who fall asleep during talks, how they didn't have any dharma energy. And I fell asleep during that talk. But my practice kept working, so don't worry too much.

I think the biggest problem for many of us with sleepiness is the not wanting it to be there. So checking the attitude—is there aversion? Are we having thoughts that we're a bad meditator, or that we should somehow be able to control whether sleepiness happens? No, it's just conditions. It's impersonal. It's not your fault if you're sleepy.

Then there's restlessness, which is an excess of energy. A few ideas on working with restlessness: First of all, we always have mindfulness. What does it feel like in the body and the mind? Can we recognize, be aware of, and be interested in restlessness?

Sometimes when restlessness is present, it can be helpful to make our awareness larger than the restlessness. Instead of trying to follow what's happening—because when it's restless, sometimes there's this feeling like you're chasing your experience around trying to catch up to it—if the awareness can be large and hold the restlessness within it, then it can be okay. Just: there's restlessness.

Sometimes if there's a lot of restlessness, it can be helpful to anchor the attention with one experience for a period of time to see if that helps calm the mind a little bit. Perhaps resting the attention with your breath, or resting the attention with hearing. Sometimes restlessness likes a large pasture, so hearing can be a good anchor if there's a lot of restlessness, or the feeling of the whole body sitting. Restlessness doesn't like to be contained too much. We have to give it a little bit of space. And Joseph is famous for saying that you can't be the first meditator to die of restlessness. It feels that way sometimes—restlessness is like, ah!

Sometimes we experience sleepiness and restlessness as a protection from deeper pain, as a kind of resistance. And while we can work skillfully with them, I also feel like it's important to have proper respect for our protections. Sometimes we come in here with the idea that we're going to blast through our protections and pull open our hearts. But sometimes it's a bit slower than that. I think if we didn't need our protections, we'd all be fully enlightened. Our protections can help us accept life at a pace that works for us. So when these protections are present—sometimes it's just an energy imbalance, but when they are present—we can focus on the acceptance part of mindfulness, the metta part. Can we hold these energies with care?

The next hindrance I'd like to talk about is doubt. Now this one's a bit more insidious. It can be really sneaky. It's also a very difficult hindrance because it can be paralyzing. The Buddha compared it to muddy water that obscures wisdom. He also compared doubt to traveling in the desert without a map or

provisions—not sure of the way, you go in circles, always jumpy, afraid of bandits, no reference points, lost. He also compared doubt to a traveler with valuables coming to a fork in the road and tarrying too long deciding which fork to take, only to be overcome by bandits.

We may doubt this practice, we may doubt the teachers, we may doubt our ability, we may doubt that it's the right time to do this. The thing with doubt is it can make up the most believable stories once it gets going. And if we're not aware of it, it can tell us stories that we start to believe. These can paralyze us from investigating further and cause us to pull back in our practice. So doubt can be a problem if we're not aware of it and we believe it.

But doubt isn't always negative. It can inspire us to look deeper in our practice. Bernie Glassman says in *In structions to the Cook*, "Doubt is a state of openness and unknowing. It's a willingness to not be in charge, to not know what is going to happen next. The state of doubt allows us to explore things in an open and fresh way. Our problem with doubt is that we take it to be a negative thing. We think that because we don't understand, or because we're not sure, there is something wrong. But this doubt can be positive. Positive doubt can allow us to see what life is about. It can help us get rid of our complacency."

So doubt can inspire us to search more deeply, and we can use it in that way to fuel our practice, to see for ourselves. It can keep us from getting too sure, from knowing too much.

After several years of practice, a student came to Katagiri Roshi saying, "I used to think I knew what you were saying in your lectures, but lately I just don't get it at all." A grin spread over his teacher's features. "Finally," Katagiri Roshi said, "you're getting somewhere."

He's pointing to that positive aspect of doubt—if it lets us be open to seeing freshly, seeing anew.

But if doubt is causing our practice to be stalled or paralyzed, here are some possible antidotes. Again, be mindful of doubt. Notice when it arises. What is it? What is doubt? It seems like it's a string of thoughts, and some fear perhaps, and some resistance. How do you experience it in the body? How do you experience it in the mind? Just being aware of it can be a very powerful antidote to its power over you.

Perhaps notice the relationship of doubt to emotion. Do certain emotions bring on doubt for you? Perhaps boredom, or aversion, or failed expectation? These can often bring on doubt. Notice the relationship of energy to doubt. Do you find that doubt arises when your energy is low? If you know that, then when your energy is low, you can be on the lookout for doubt so that it doesn't sabotage you.

The Buddha said another antidote to doubt is to get conceptual knowledge—to hear the Dharma, to ask questions, to get clarifications. But only to a certain extent. That conceptual knowledge can only take us so far. An even better antidote is developing faith through verification, through one's own experience. So as we practice more and develop faith through our own experience, we will often find that doubt lessens.

One last antidote for doubt can be to make a time-limited commitment and judge afterwards. You may

find that questions arise: Is this practice any good? Is it the right thing for me? Do I know how to do it? Do these teachers know what they're doing? All the questions that can come up. You can make as long a commitment as possible. If you can make it three months, great. You can make a date with doubt and say, "Okay, on December 14th, I'll sit down and we'll have a long chat. You can tell me all your concerns and I'll think about them." But if you do that during the retreat, you find that it just dissipates your energy. So if you can't make it to December 14th, well, maybe a week. All right, next Friday night after the talk, we can have a little doubt fest for half an hour. We can think about it then. Because they're important questions, right? These are important questions. But they will sabotage you if you spend a lot of time getting lost in them.

One last quote about doubt, again from Brad Warner in *Hardcore Zen*: "Doubt in everything is absolutely essential. Everything, no matter how great, how fundamental, how beautiful or important it is, must be questioned." So meditation is doubting all that we carelessly assume about life and investigating for ourselves.

All right, now we get to the last two juicy hindrances: sense desire and aversion.

Sense desire. The Buddha said that all of our suffering comes out of desire, the mind that wants. Of course, we're all familiar with this mind. It has many variations: wanting, greed, envy, covetousness, fantasy, obsessions, addictions, attachment, expectations. They all boil down to wanting.

Sense desire arises when we give unwise attention to beautiful objects. What does that mean? Sense desire is a kind of energetic leaning towards pleasant things or experiences, a tendency to grasp at pleasantness. It's a part of all of our conditioning. Something pleasant comes along and we want to hold on to it, keep it.

Yes, I want that. It's our tendency, if we're not aware or give unwise attention, to think that this thing will satisfy us. That's where the lack of wisdom enters.

When sense desire operates, Patrick O'Fools, in the book I mentioned the other night, *Buddha Takes No Prisoners*, says it's like we frenetically rearrange the deck chairs on the SS Samsara, trying to make ourselves happy by acquisition.

Here's a quote: "We live in a society whose whole policy is to excite every nerve in the human body and keep it at the highest pitch of artificial tension, to strain every human desire to the limit and to create as many new desires and synthetic passions as possible in order to cater to them with the products of our factories and our printing presses and movie studios and all the rest."

When do you think that was written? Thomas Merton, 1920s. We can relate to it now, can't we?

We're told every day to believe that if we satisfy our desires, we'll be happy. There was a Newsweek cover that I liked. It said, "What You'll Want Next." We're a little bit radical here. We're taking the revolutionary stance that we want to learn to work with desire in a balanced way rather than to be enslaved by it.

The Buddha said that desire is like a pond filled with lovely colored dyes. We become distracted and enchanted by the dyes and don't look more deeply. Because sense desire has something pleasant as its object, we don't always recognize the suffering in it. It can seem quite nice. It gets confused with the pleasantness of the object.

So what is the problem with sense desire? Sense desire is a state of tension, a state of separation. It obscures the truth that nothing can permanently bring us happiness—no sense pleasure can permanently bring us happiness. If we look closely at the state of desire, we see that it is actually a state of tension, of stress, of dukkha, suffering. There isn't any peace in it. If we satisfy one desire, we may have a few moments of peace, but that peace is really just that desire isn't present in that moment, and then another desire will come up.

The Buddha compared this wanting energy with being in debt. It arises again and again and it's never paid off. Or he likened it to a traveler who leaves without provisions and thinks the next town will have food and drink, arrives there and finds it empty, and goes on to the next village thinking it will have food and drink and finds it empty too. The truth of this world is that everything changes, and if we look for our happiness in sense desire, we're always going to be restless because of the continual searching that will be necessary.

So what should we do when desire arises in our practice? First, we can remember that it's not desire that is the problem—it's being lost in desire that is the problem, the difficulty. So we want to be mindful of it. We don't need to repress it or condemn it or make it go away. But we also don't want to encourage it or feed it.

The way we do this is by turning our attention toward the desire itself and investigating it. Usually when sense desire arises, we're very focused on the object of our desire. In our investigation, we turn from the object to the wanting itself. We apply this tool of mindfulness. We recognize, first of all, that sense desire is present.

If mindfulness is strong or the desire isn't particularly strong, that may be sufficient to return the mind to spaciousness. Sometimes we'll turn our attention to desire and it will evaporate. If not, we may need to explore it in a little more detail. What does it feel like in the body? What kind of sensations may be associated with it? What is the flavor in the mind? We become very intimate with wanting—its back and its front, its subtleties, its nuances.

This clear seeing is very freeing. It means that we don't have to be run by desire. We can let it arise and let it pass away. It doesn't have to fool us and rule us. We can become interested in the difference between being mindful of desire and not being mindful of desire. What happens when we're not mindful? What happens with desire? We believe whole stories about what will satisfy us.

What happens when we're aware of desire? Is there a problem? This is something we can explore.

On retreat, we have our own particular forms of desire that arise. We've mentioned Vipassana romances—finding somebody we find particularly attractive and getting a whole story going about our relationship to them. There are many things we can crave in our little world here on retreat. How much time do you spend thinking about lunch? Or the other comforts we may crave?

Our practice is not to consider desire something that must be gotten rid of, but something to be understood, investigated, and understood. When we can do this, we can learn to hold our desires with a lot more lightness, perhaps even playfulness.

One of my favorite stories about relating to desire comes from one of Sharon Salzberg's books about the Dalai Lama. She writes:

"At a Buddhist-Christian conference I attended at Gethsemane Monastery in Kentucky, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was speaking about the tour of the monastery he'd been given earlier that day. He began by saying that he was quite impressed that the monastery was able to support itself through the manufacture of cheeses and fruitcakes. Then in the midst of this formal presentation, with television cameras rolling, the Dalai Lama said, 'I was presented with a piece of homemade cheese, which was very good, but I really wanted some cake.' He laughed uproariously and repeated, 'It was so unfortunate. Really, I was hoping someone would offer me some cake, and no one did.' His childlike candor was wonderful, with nothing manipulative about it. Clearly, he could be quite happy without a piece of fruitcake, and some of this state of happiness was the very ability to laugh at his desire for the cake—as well as being able to speak about it unabashedly before dignitaries of two religions and a television audience."

It's great, isn't it? Maybe we can learn to hold our wanting mind like this.

Not long after I had read that passage, I took my two goddaughters out for ice cream for one of their birthdays. We got a free hot fudge sundae at the end, and I like hot fudge sundaes. So we were sharing it, all of us with our spoons. And in a moment of careless attention, I got overcome with desire, and I pushed Davi's spoon out of the way so I could take a big chunk of hot fudge. We just started to laugh. They said, "Rebecca, did you see what you did?" And we just laughed. We thought it was so funny. They reminded me of it for months afterwards. But we were able to hold it a little like the Dalai Lama—"Oh, look at that. It's the wanting mind."

So last but not least is aversion, which is another one of my particular favorites.

Aversion manifests in many different forms: fear, anger, ill will, hatred, annoyance, irritation, anxiety, panic, terror, resentment, judgment, boredom. It's a moving away from experience, a rejection of experience—giving unwise attention to repulsive objects, as the Buddha said.

The Buddha's simile for being lost in aversion is that it's like being ill. Nothing tastes good. You can't enjoy anything. And it's like boiling water—when water boils, it's turbulent and you can't see through it. Aversion contracts the heart and narrows our vision.

Remember the last time you were angry with somebody. What a narrow picture you had of that person at that point. Or the last time you were afraid—how fixated you were on the object of fear, cutting out the larger view. Aversion blocks our connection and causes us to feel separate and alienated. It contracts the heart.

Aversion is deeply conditioned, as is sense desire. With sense desire, we have sense contact.

We experience it as pleasant. And if we're not mindful, desire arises and we get lost in it. With aversion, we have sense contact, we experience it as unpleasant, and if we're not mindful, aversion arises and we can get lost in it. So desire wants to hold on and aversion wants to push away.

Whereas the painfulness of desire can be masked by the pleasantness of the craved object, aversion is clearly painful to most people, and we don't tend to like it. We tend to want to get rid of it. It can cause us to lash out in ways that are quite unskillful. Or we may suppress it, which doesn't give us a chance to learn how to work with it skillfully—and there's the likelihood that it will come leaking out in some unskillful way.

And so mindfulness, again, is our antidote of choice: becoming aware of aversion, letting it be there, but not acting it out unskillfully. We bring wise attention to aversion. Anger feels like this. Fear feels like this. How do we experience anger or fear? How do we experience it in the body? How do we experience it in the mind?

Sometimes when we're experiencing aversion, it can be useful to ground in the body, to experience it there, because the mind stories, as we all know, can be so seductive. We can get swept up and lost in them so easily. And again, the power of aversion is that we believe it. We believe all these stories that come up. We get lost in the stories. We identify with them. So even if we can just remember that it's a mind state, notice that it's present—that's a great advance. It's one of those little holes in the fabric. We're on our way to freedom.

The antidote to aversion is interest. How about judgment? Can you count how many times judgment comes up in a sitting? Can we become interested in it? I've particularly in the last few years become interested in noticing how long it takes me from when I first have to deal with unpleasantness or some kind of sudden change till I accept it, till acceptance comes. Just watching the whole process of how my mind will deal with some inconvenience or some unpleasantness.

For example, I fly sometimes to teach, and it's not such a picnic flying these days. There will often be schedule changes and cancellations and this and that. And so I'll be very interested. I just watch my mind. Okay, what does it do when I get to the monitor and look at it and my flight's been canceled or changed? How long does it take? How long do I fight it until I can accept it?

Recently, I was traveling for about sixteen days. Some of it was a vacation, but I was in Portland, Oregon and quite ready to fly back to my own home and bed after a number of days on the road. I got to the

airport and by some new rule they had made, they wouldn't let me get on my flight. This meant I was going to have to stay overnight another night because it was the last flight out that day. I was going to have to find a place to stay in Portland. Not pleasant.

So I watched how I dealt with this. And I was really tired, so I started to cry. And then this voice in my mind said, "Rebecca, you've been practicing for twenty-four years and you're a Dharma teacher. Shouldn't you be doing better than this?" And then I said, "Well, I'm not. I'm tired. I want to go home." And so I said, "Okay, well, I'm going to be all right with that then." And I let myself have a little—I mean, I didn't sob out loud, but there were tears going down my cheek. I said, "Okay, I'm just going to be with this until it passes." So I just sat there. And then it passed, and then I said, "Okay, now what do I need to do about finding a place to stay tonight?" You just start where you're at.

There was something powerful about simply being able to say, okay, this is what's happening right now. And it will change. I knew it would change, and it did.

On retreat, we have a special kind of aversion called yogi mind, which I mentioned the first night and which tends to pick up steam around this point. Once you're starting to cook, yogi mind picks up steam. Yogi mind is when something little—because there's not a lot happening, or rather, there is a lot happening around here, but there's not a lot coming in from the outside—little things become really important.

You may even have a VV. We mentioned VRs, Vipassana romances. Well, there's also an aversive form of this known as a VV, which is a Vipassana vendetta. That's when there's somebody on retreat who you have just decided you don't like. It's just some little thing you've picked up and then projected, the same as a Vipassana romance. But they can get pretty intense. We can have whole Vipassana vendettas. So we should watch out for this. Watch out for the aversion that can take over when something in this environment doesn't go exactly as you wished, or when you see your Vipassana vendetta walk by. See if you can make that part of your practice and not separate.

I still remember a number of years ago sitting a retreat here with an ex-boyfriend. It had been a few months, but it was still sore for me. I saw a note he had put up on the bulletin board addressed to a woman. I worked with that for a week—all the emotions it brought up. But the great thing was, it was actually really interesting. It was painful at first, but then it got really interesting to understand and see how the emotions would roll through, and what would happen when I was able to bring more and more mindfulness to them. That was yogi mind.

The interesting part of the story is that after retreat, I said something to him about this note he had written to this woman. He said, "I didn't write any notes on that retreat." I had made the whole thing up. This is yogi mind, so watch out for it.

A universal antidote for all of the hindrances is noble friendship. Sangha. I like to think of us all here

together supporting and strengthening this noble friendship—the fact that we're all here with this commitment to work with these five challenges. That helps. Sometimes we support each other by persevering together. You come into the hall and see it full of other people, and you feel inspired to keep going even if you're in the middle of a multiple hindrance attack. Sometimes we support each other through challenging each other, through our Vipassana vendettas and our Vipassana romances. Noble friendship is supporting each other as we work together to meet these mind states with compassion and with mindfulness.

Sometimes it feels a bit slow, doesn't it? The hindrances keep coming back. They may find new ways to trick us, seduce us that we weren't aware of. I think we have to be willing to be very, very patient in our working with them.

In that line, I'm going to end with a story from a book called *In Praise of Slow* by Carl Honoré, to give us some long-term perspective.

Another marathonic musical event is underway in Halberstadt, a small German town famous for its ancient organs. The local St. Burchardi Church, a twelfth-century pile that was sacked by Napoleon, is the venue for a concert that will end in the year 2640, sponsors permitting. The featured work was written in 1992 by John Cage, the avant-garde American composer. Its title, appropriately enough, is ASLSP, or "As Slow As Possible."

How long the piece should last has long been a bone of contention among cognoscenti. Some thought twenty minutes enough; hardliners insisted on nothing short of eternity. After consulting a panel of musicologists, composers, organists, theologians, and philosophers, Halberstadt settled on 639 years—the exact time that had passed since the creation of the town's renowned blockwork organ. To do justice to Cage's piece, the organizers built an organ that will last for centuries. Weights attached to the keyboard hold down notes long after the organist has left.

The ASLSP recital began in September 2001 with a pause that lasted seventeen months. During that time, the only sound was that of the organ's bellows inflating. In February of 2003, an organist played the first three notes, which will reverberate through the church until the summer of 2004, when the next two notes will be played.

The notion of a concert so slow that no one who attends opening night will live to hear the final note clearly strikes a chord with the public. Hundreds of spectators descend on Halberstadt each time an organist comes to play the next set of notes. During the long months in between, visitors flock to soak up the residual sounds echoing around the church.

It's a spacious view—profoundly spacious.

And so I want to encourage us all to take a spacious view of the hindrances, to hold them with mindfulness, but also to hold them with abundant compassion and generous patience. These visitors that

arise in our practice—desire, aversion, sloth, restlessness, doubt—they are not problems to be quickly solved and dismissed. They are teachers arriving on their own schedule, playing their notes, and then falling silent again.

Like those visitors to Halberstadt who come to soak up the residual sounds, we too can learn to be present with whatever echoes through the chambers of our own hearts and minds. We need not rush the piece to its conclusion. We need not demand that our practice conform to our preferred timeline.

Let us sit for a moment together.

May your work with the five challenges open the doors of wisdom.

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