Hindrances and Factors of Enlightenment - read by Marie Caroll

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 48:28

Hindrances and Factors of Enlightenment

We usually start our practice with high hopes and great determination, but after a while the rot sets in. We can't stop planning our next holiday. We get annoyed with ourselves for being so distracted and try another few breaths, but we're so tense we can't feel anything in the body. We decide we're hopeless at meditation and should never have come on retreat. Misery sets in, we give up, and soon we're dozing.

All such difficulties in meditation are termed hindrances, and they are completely normal—part and parcel of spiritual life. Every hindrance is a form of suffering, of dukkha. Remember, dukkha includes even minor irritations. Our job as we grope our way towards liberation is to understand dukkha, to fully understand it. Each hindrance is a golden opportunity.

But there's a balance to be struck between welcoming the hindrance and relaxing so as to feel its dukkha as a moment-to-moment experience. It's through sensations and feelings that we learn the Dhamma. We can overdo the welcome—rejoice at the first hint of suffering, delight in the chance to propel ourselves towards liberation, and imagine ourselves as courageous warriors certain of victory. But the felt experience of dukkha is not at all delightful. It can feel like a deep wound. Only by embracing the wounds of humanity can we glimpse what lies beyond. For this, the warrior in us needs to admit their vulnerability, feel their wounds, and take care of themselves. It's quite a challenge to get the balance right—lifelong learning. An endless supply of patience is required.

The Buddha described five hindrances: sense desire, aversion, dullness and lethargy, restlessness and worry, and doubt. Don't worry if you can't work out which box your difficulty falls into. Just do your best to maintain mindfulness, knowing there's some hindrance afoot. After a while, the particular flavour of the difficulty may become more obvious.

First, we have sensual desire, stimulated by lovely sights, sounds, tastes, sensations, and aromas. In Buddhism, the mind is also considered as a sense door, and there is a lot of pleasure to be had from mental activities. Why else do we enjoy reading, watching a film, planning? In fact, this is the main area of sensual desire that comes up during meditation. We're trying to follow the breath, but daydreams about food or sex or the great novel we're going to write are much more enticing than the sensation of breathing. The usual reaction for most of us is to get annoyed with ourselves and redouble our efforts to follow the breath. But a moment's inattention and we're off in fantasy land again.

I always liked to write talks around personal experiences and was racking my brains trying to remember one, until I recognised what was blocking all my memories. It was the sensual desire happening right now as I longed for a good example. This illustrates the main problem with the hindrances: we're so driven by them that we don't notice what's driving us. Fish will be the last to discover water.

When we notice we've got lost in fantasy several times, we need to take a step back and ask ourselves, what's going on here? In my case, I'd acknowledge that I'm trying to write a Dhamma talk. Very often that simple acknowledgement brings perspective, and I can reflect that no Dhamma talk will bring lasting happiness, whereas meditation practice does bring me in that direction.

Sometimes we just can't let go. We can't be bothered following the breath because we're so intent on indulging our fantasy. In this case, we let sensual desire become the focus for mindfulness. We can use the noting word "desire, desire" as we feel the experience. As I explore this now, I feel pleasant sensations in my head, along with a very enticing imagery light that seems to contain the perfect example for the Dhamma talk. There's tension in the jaws and my chest. The breath for the moment is still. It's as if I don't want to breathe for fear of disturbing my wonderful example of sensual desire.

As I continue to watch, the bright light gradually dims and fades. The tension relaxes. The breath flows normally again. Desire has now burnt itself out. Because I've been mindful of the hindrance, I've undermined the force of desire inside me. The next time desire arises, I find it easier to persuade myself to let it go. This is such a gift to our future selves.

Trying to satisfy all our desires is exhausting. Each one gives a moment's pleasure, but then we're off again looking for something else. There is another source of pleasure—the contentment that comes from relaxing, realizing we have enough to satisfy our needs right now. This wisdom is strengthened every time we work our way mindfully through desire.

So when we notice we're obsessing about something—the perfect birthday present, the perfect sponge cake—this is an indicator that sensual desire is at work. Congratulate yourself for having acknowledged the issue. Often that's the hardest step. Then see if you can encourage yourself to let go. Gently remind yourself how fleeting is the pleasure that comes of satisfying these desires.

If, despite all your wise words, you're still hell-bent on imagining the perfect sponge cake, then let sensual desire be the focus for mindfulness. Feel its energy, any pleasant tingles, any tensions. You really want to experience the thirst for imaginary pleasure. It is a perfectly valid form of meditation.

Suppose your mood has flipped and you're judging yourself harshly for being distracted by the silly desire for the perfect sponge cake. This is the second hindrance: aversion. Again, the hardest step is to notice what's going on. We're so busy condemning ourselves as bad meditators that we don't notice the fact that we're judging. But with practice, we get better at spotting this, and we say, "Oh, this is the experience of judging." And with that, judgment often stops.

This is the magic of mindfulness. Anger, judgment, and other stressful states often disappear on acknowledgement. We only cause ourselves suffering by mistake, unwittingly. As soon as we notice the suffering, we stop causing it.

At other times, however, the anger or judgment runs so deep that noticing isn't enough to bring it to a stop. In fact, it may get even stronger because now we're judging ourselves for being angry, angry at ourselves for judging, and we're going round in circles without knowing how to get out of the loop. The hindrance of aversion can be a very painful experience.

When we're assailed by aversion like this, we let the experience itself become the focus for meditation. We feel the tensions, the unpleasant sensations, how the breath is affected. We notice the stream of thoughts. And we're not trying to get rid of anger or judgment, but curious about it. We want to become intimate with the experience and learn to relax with it.

This is a challenge, as none of us likes to feel our anger, feel our judgment. But if we can persuade ourselves to just give it a try, the pain itself teaches us how to be more accepting of our human imperfections and more compassionate towards ourselves and others.

Physical pain is one very common cause of aversion. It can stir fear, anxiety, anger, or other forms of mental pain. Often we move automatically so as to relieve pain without first becoming mindful of the pain and the desire to move. Alternatively, the spiritual warrior comes crashing onto the scene, guns blazing, and we're determined to sit rock still for the full meditation hour, suppressing any feelings of anxiety or vulnerability.

If you sense this, or if the pain is too strong, then it's best to move. Move slowly and mindfully so that you can watch how the mind changes from aversion to relief as you get more comfortable. This is a valuable lesson. We realize that physical pain wasn't actually the issue. It was our mental reaction that caused the suffering.

Pain is a great teacher. So we need to encourage ourselves to sit with it, feel it, learn from it. But we also need to take care of the body, respect our limits, and learn from those magic moments as we move to relieve the pain.

The third hindrance is sloth and torpor. We keep nodding off. And again, the hardest first step is to recognize what's going on. We can get so overpowered by sleepiness, so mentally dull, that we can't even summon the energy to say, "This is sleepiness, dullness, lethargy."

Like all the hindrances, we want to experience this one, feel it, learn from it. So sit up straight, drag that head up into the air. Sometimes opening the eyes helps, letting in the light. Joseph Goldstein describes imagining his eyelids being held open by toothpicks. Though the waves of sleepiness came and went, they couldn't quite overpower him because his eyes were being held open by toothpicks.

If that doesn't work and you're still nodding off, try standing. The Buddha also recommends mental stimulation. For example, you could repeat the Four Noble Truths. Think about what they mean. It's one time in meditation where thinking is encouraged, but only until you've woken up the mind. Then it's bye-bye intellect, hello sensations and feelings again.

Once we've aroused ourselves enough to be mindful, our aim is to investigate the experience. Feel the dullness in the mind, sensations in the body. Usually there are pleasant feelings drawing us into a doze as well as unpleasant ones associated with our wish to stay awake. It's a rich mixture.

I remember going through a lot of sleepiness on a retreat until I suddenly realised I was waiting for the sleepiness to pass so that I could then meditate. This was a big discovery for me, as I could then recognise that same waiting mind state in many situations. When I was bored at a committee meeting, for example, each time I noticed the waiting state, I would grow more alert and be able to participate. This helped me overcome habits of laziness and passivity and become more active and engaged in life.

The next hindrance, restlessness, is sometimes felt in the body. We keep moving around, trying to get comfortable. Or it can be felt in the mind, as we flit off into one worry after another. Again, the major challenge is to take that little step back, recognise what's happening, and say to ourselves, "Okay, this is the experience of restlessness. What can I learn from this?"

That simple acknowledgement is sometimes all that's needed. A moment ago we were fidgeting and worrying, not knowing what the matter was. But now that we've recognised the problem and named it, our troubles are over. Such a relief when this happens. It really builds our faith in the practice.

Sometimes it doesn't resolve so easily. We know we're restless and worrying, but we're still restless and worried. In this case, let restlessness itself become the focus for meditation. Feel the aversion, the desire to move, to think. You want to get to know the raw experience. Allow it to express itself. Watched mindfully, restlessness eventually burns out.

But sometimes we can't manage to be mindful. Restlessness is too strong and keeps sweeping us away into worrying and fidgeting. In this case, it can be good to open the eyes, look at something calming like a plant or the sky. This gives a broader perspective, and the worries and fidgets won't so easily overwhelm us. We'll be aware of them.

I was anxious, restless, and worried for weeks after major surgery to remove my voice box. Luckily, my hospital bed was by a window, and during the daytime my eyes were glued to a big tree in the lawn outside. My body and mind were exploding with restless energy, but it seemed as though the tree could soak up all the impact. During sleepless nights, the clouds in the sky did the same job. Sounds could also soak up my restless energy. I always preferred it when the world was busy.

Although it was a very unpleasant few weeks, it opened my eyes to the peace on offer from what I had often ignored: trees, clouds, background sounds. I began to intuit a vast ocean of peace cradling my

restless mind. This was a beautiful discovery, a great compensation for the loss of my voice box.

Learning to bear with restlessness is a wonderful gift. When it gets overwhelming, take whatever support you can from the outside world. A calming focus for the eyes. Background sounds for the ears. The sense of touch can also be very soothing—I spent a lot of time fingering the bedsheets just to feel their texture. And sometimes walking can help. Not the very slow Mahasi pace, but a gentle meander. We're not trying to get rid of restlessness, but supporting ourselves as we feel its energies in moment-to-moment mindfulness.

The final hindrance is doubt. We need to differentiate here between honest doubt and skeptical doubt. If you have never tried watching anger, you might doubt whether this could possibly be beneficial. This is honest doubt.

We genuinely don't know the answer. Skeptical doubt is where we refuse to consider watching anger because we're not sure whether this could be beneficial. Skeptical doubt prevents learning. We're unwilling to take risks, unwilling to experiment, to find out for ourselves what is false and what is true.

For many of us, doubt takes the form of self-doubt. We agree that the teachings are useful but are convinced we couldn't possibly do the practice. If this gets the upper hand, it becomes paralysing. We can't try out anything new, can't commit, can't take on responsibilities.

Once again, the major step is to recognise what's happening. Instead of believing the thought that says, "I can't possibly meditate. I couldn't ever have any insight. I shouldn't have come on retreat. I might as well go home now"—we pause for a moment and acknowledge this is the experience of skeptical doubt. This gives us some perspective. We can reason with ourselves, encourage ourselves. Is this part of a larger pattern in life? Doubting we can succeed at anything? Can we use the retreat situation as a golden opportunity to learn to work with this hindrance?

We might still feel full of doubt, but so long as we stick with the retreat and do the practice, doubt has been undermined and self-confidence has been strengthened. That's not a bad exchange.

Every hindrance cultivates the opposite virtue as we work through them mindfully. Working with sensual desire cultivates generosity and contentment. Anger transforms to goodwill. Mindful observance of sloth and torpor cultivates energy and resolve. Working with restlessness brings forth tranquility, and doubt transforms to confidence and trust.

This transformation comes about because we're learning to feel our feelings without believing their usual message. The feeling of doubt, in my experience, is most intense in my face, where the skin seems to shrink back towards my skull, prompting thoughts like, "I can't do this." But I'm doing it anyhow—taking a footstep or taking another mindful breath. The feeling of sleepiness is gorgeous, and every bit of me wants to curl up around it and forget the outside world. But for mindfulness practice, I do whatever I can to stay awake and alert.

Same with all the hindrances. We let them happen, feel the feelings, hear the thoughts without believing them.

The hindrances are like emotional storms. It would be a relief to do the bidding of each storm, to go with the flow—sleep when we're sleepy, lash out when we're angry, satiate all our desires. But the relief is short-lived, and all we've done is sow the seeds of future storms while weakening our ability to deal with them. As they say, only dead fish go with the flow.

If we go against the flow, we become mindful of the challenge. This can be uncomfortable, confusing, but it's worthy work, ennobling. We are weakening the potential for future storms, cultivating emotional resilience and spiritual strength. May we welcome each hindrance as a golden opportunity to learn the Dhamma and walk the path to the end of suffering.

To help us bear with the hindrances, it's good to remember that just being mindful of these develops skillful qualities like patience and resilience, which in turn support the strengths we need for vipassana. These are termed the factors of enlightenment.

Sounds lofty, but in fact these are very practical qualities that can be detected and developed in every meditation session. Panti Bodhidama uses the image of wild geese in flight, with mindfulness in the lead and the other qualities following. As you know, wild geese fly in a V-shaped formation, with one flank spread widely, almost abreast of the leader, pushing ahead, while the other flank rides in the slipstream, taking it easy. This is a very helpful image because three of the enlightenment factors are stimulating, keeping us alert, while three have a calming effect, making sure we don't run away with ourselves.

In the lead is mindfulness—sati in Pali, often translated as awareness. As we breathe in, we know we are breathing in. As we breathe out, we know we are breathing out. At one level, we're aware all day long, hearing sounds, seeing what's in front of our eyes, and so on. But we're not usually aware of being aware. It's this level of awareness that we're cultivating in vipassana, termed samma sati, right awareness. We hear a sound and we know we are hearing. Simple as that.

And yet we very easily forget all about this simple and natural ability to know experience as it happens. We get too busy doing this and that to even notice that life is happening now—not in the future with our great plans, but now. This sound, this footstep, this breath.

These fleeting experiences can seem irrelevant. We assume we should be doing something, achieving something. It's very hard for us to believe that not doing is also worthwhile. It's only through mindfulness practice that we see how any doing, any judging, interfering, any attempt to achieve adds tension and stress to present experience. And thus, mindfulness trains us to relax, become content with being rather than doing.

Within that magic combination of alert relaxation, we sense our minds opening, some vital energy stirring, some potential within us becoming conscious. This is satipañña, our intuitive intelligence, which is waking up and looking for the path to full awakening, enlightenment.

To help us find and keep to the path, we have all the supporting factors for mindfulness. The first of the slipstream is called samādhi in Pali, the ability of the mind to direct and rest attention. Unfortunately, samādhi is usually translated as concentration, which suggests straining to hold attention. But think of how easily your attention is held by a good film, a story, a puzzle, a hobby. That's the flavour of concentration we are aiming for in support of mindfulness.

The word focus is also helpful. We start by focusing on the sensations of the abdomen caused by breathing. If a sound grabs attention, we change focus and attend to the pitch and rhythm of the sound as we note hearing, hearing. If we find ourselves getting bored, restless, fed up, we broaden the focus to acknowledge that sense of restlessness or boredom. And to our surprise, perhaps, we might then notice the sensations at the abdomen coming into focus again, rising and falling.

The concentration we develop in Vipassana keeps shifting its focus so that attention lands wherever it is naturally called. Concentration has a calming effect because it gathers our mental energies and trains them in one direction.

Suppose we're lost in a foreign city. A thousand thoughts clamour for attention. Will I ask someone the way? Should I try that street? Should I find a police station? While the mind spins around like this, it grows more and more agitated. To calm ourselves, we choose to act on one and do that mindfully. It hardly matters which we choose. The important thing is to give the mind a focus for mindfulness. This will have an immediately calming effect.

It's the same in meditation when any of the hindrances show up. The mind spins around trying to think our way out of the difficulty, but only grows more and more agitated. If instead we focus attention somewhere—the breath, the footsteps, the emotions underlying our disturbance—a degree of calm follows and we can bear with the disturbance more easily, learn a useful Dhamma lesson from the experience.

The calming effect of concentration is balanced by the stimulating effect of energy, the leading factor in the wide flank of our wild geese formation. We have the physical energy of the posture. Experiment for yourself. Feel how much more alert you are when you sit up straight and how this dulls down as you let yourself slump. Standing is even more energising when we need an extra shot during bouts of sloth and torpor.

There is also the energy that comes from resolution. Again, experiment. See how alert and determined you feel when you make a firm resolution to be mindful. Bhante Bodhidhamma recommends St. Augustine's approach, using the phrases "I can, I ought, I want, I will" to open four avenues for the energy of resolve to flow. Try saying: I can be mindful. I ought to be mindful. I want to be mindful. I will be mindful. Repeat

these to make their meaning sink deep. Although attention will still wander, you'll find it easier to rein it back in, gather it around the breath or footstep or whatever aspect of present experience is calling attention.

Resolve itself can be strengthened by reminding ourselves of some broad aim for the practice. Although we let go of aims as we relax into present experience, we can remember them when we need to summon more energy to deepen our resolve. For example, bring to mind whatever inspired you to learn to practice in the first place. Maybe it was a book you read, a teaching you heard, a meeting with someone who radiated wisdom or compassion. Maybe it was an experience that gave you a glimpse of your spiritual potential. Having brought your inspiration, the goal for your practice, to mind, you might find more meaning and depth in the resolutions. I can, I ought, I want, I will. Then let go, relax. Trust that those intentions will support your ongoing practice as you attend to the sensations of breathing.

Thus our first pair of supports for mindfulness are concentration, calming us by gathering and directing attention, and energy, prodding us to wakefulness.

The second of the slipstream factors is equanimity. This is an evenly balanced state of mind—not disturbed by unpleasantness, not enchanted and enslaved by pleasure.

When something very enticing happens—the sound of your name being called by a friend, the taste of chocolate—we usually react automatically, looking around eagerly for our friend, anticipating a pleasant chat, devouring the chocolate. We're so caught up in our reaction that we hardly even register the initial moment of pleasure. If equanimity were established, we would feel the pleasure of the call, the taste, but not get excited. We would enjoy and appreciate the situation while knowing it as fleeting and unstable, not something to invest our hopes in. We might still look around gladly for our friend, but not be dismayed or disgruntled if they're already disappearing, waving goodbye.

Equanimity develops as we encounter dukkha mindfully. Seeing how fleeting and unreliable pleasure is, we learn not to get so excited. Seeing that pain is impermanent, we grow confident that we can bear with dukkha. The mind grows less reactive, steadier, better at seeing the wider picture, more willing and able to bear the ups and downs of life. Equanimity is hard-earned, but worth every tear we shed, every gnashing of teeth needed for its cultivation.

Equanimity is balanced by investigation of Dhamma, the second of the supporting factors on the wide flank. While equanimity persuades us to step back and see the larger picture, investigation requires us to cozy up to whatever calls attention.

Say we're doing walking meditation. Investigation prompts the question: what is it I'm really experiencing? The question draws attention close to the basic sensory data. We feel how the foot peels off the floor, moves through the air, touches down again. Thinking can be temporarily suspended. But whenever it sneaks in to trap us in stories, plans, and musings, we lose contact with the movements of the

feet.

Slowly it dawns on us that there's no room for my plans, my dreams—no room for anything I normally think of as I and me and mine—in that strangely familiar, fluid level of reality. There is only the awareness of the feet walking. A pleasant experience, but without room for the endlessly enchanting story of me.

It's the mental factor of investigation that has led us to this strange and unsettling conclusion. We've brought our attention to the feet as they walk and discovered the Dhamma—the truths that the Buddha claims will set us free from delusion, free from suffering.

Investigation is based on curiosity. We want to know what's true. Without curiosity, meditation can help us relax, be happy, take it easy, stop trying to achieve anything. While this is indeed a welcome and healthy contrast to the busyness of modern life, it's not leading us to full awakening. It's only as we focus on detail that we start to see anicca, dukkha, anattā—how sensations and feelings keep changing whether we like it or not, and how unsatisfactory that is for our usual grasping sense of self. The up-close, microscopic view challenges our fuzzy view of the world.

Any form of Dhamma study sharpens the factor of investigation. Listening to Dhamma talks, taking part in discussions, reading scriptures and Dhamma books—all these stir curiosity, stimulate us to discover whether our own experience corresponds to that described in the talks, the books, the scriptures.

If the moment you start meditating your mind settles into a blank daze and all your enthusiasm for Dhamma study goes out the window, see if the noting word "learning, learning" brings back that sense of curiosity. It helps if you can think back to happy learning situations in life. Did you enjoy learning how to ride a bike? Bake a cake? Learning is a challenge, yes, but how else are we going to grow any way wiser?

For many of us, the notion of learning the truth about life, the universe, and everything is so exciting that we immediately get lost in our speculations about what Nibbāna is and isn't. Whenever this happens, we have to let go of heady excitement, bring ourselves back down to earth as gently as we can, so that this breath, this footstep can do their job of teaching us the Dhamma.

To help us calm down, we have the final factor on the slipstream of mindfulness: tranquility. This is the felt peace of a mind and heart at rest. It's a contentment with present experience—just the feeling of the foot lifting off the ground, perhaps. It's hard to believe we can be content with so little, but we can. The advertising industry would collapse if we could all detect this potential.

Whatever helps us feel relaxed and at ease cultivates tranquility. One way to do this is by auto-suggestion. We lay off investigation for a while and instead use the noting words "calming, calming." The idea of the breath as a gentle wave can help, as if we're in a hammock or a boat at harbour, being rocked by rhythmic waves of breathing.

Body scans can also be calming, especially if we focus on the limbs and bring attention downward. As you are breathing out, let attention flow down from left shoulder to left hand. Feel the hand resting on the lap until, at the next out-breath, you run attention from right shoulder to right hand. Keep scanning down the limbs till you feel the mind settling, growing tranquil.

One mistake that's easy to make is to expect tranquility to mean perfect, deep peace and to disdain anything less. That's a bit like expecting to win Wimbledon when we first take up a tennis racket. We need to remember we're practicing, training, and that any move in the right direction needs to be noticed and encouraged. Look out for any pleasant, relaxing feelings in meditation. Appreciate them. Make much of them.

Another danger, of course, is that we curl up around the pleasant feeling of tranquility and get dozy, or allow a lovely trance to take over, where we can fool ourselves that we're totally enlightened and don't need to do any more work. This is why tranquility needs the balance of joy, the final factor on the wide flank of our wild geese formation, pushing us onward.

Joy in Vipassana can be understood as enthusiasm for practice. We want to continue being present, being aware, learning the Dhamma. Like tranquility, joy has a pleasant feeling, but it carries more energy. It naturally follows from investigation of Dhamma. Investigation uses the mind's ability to solve a puzzle, to sort out this from that. Joy is the feel-good that comes when we're engaged and interested in what we're doing.

The joy of Vipassana is subtle, and we might even believe meditation to be a flat, joyless affair. But it can be instructive to ask yourself: Is there anything holding me to meditating a moment longer? If you can relax enough to find the answer, you will get a taste of Vipassana joy—the joy of interest, of curiosity. In this case, we're interested in finding out what's holding us to meditate. But any question asked mindfully will engage attention and cultivate this joy. This joy of engaged interest is easily overlooked. Taking the time to notice and appreciate the experience is like cultivating a new pathway for the energy of life to flow again. The more we appreciate it, the more often our psychophysical energies will use this pathway in future.

Another reason we fail to detect joy in meditation is because we tend to be overachievers. We want to be enlightened now rather than crawling slowly through the labyrinth of delusions. This is why tranquility makes such a good partner for joy in this final pair of our wild geese formation. Tranquility helps us relax enough to notice the joy of engaging with this puzzle we call the Dhamma.

Another error is to cling to preconceived notions. We've heard of meditative joy as gorgeous tingly feelings all over the body, as if we're being massaged by an ocean of butterflies. And so we expect total over-the-moon rapture and disregard anything less. We have to be patient, realistic, remember that we're learning to enjoy meditation, and that again, each small move in that direction is to be welcomed.

To recap: the factors of enlightenment can be imagined as a flock of wild geese soaring high in the sky in their classic V-shaped formation. In the lead is mindfulness. Breathing in, we know we are breathing in. Simple as that. On the wide flank, prodding us onward, are energy, investigation of Dhamma, and the joy of being engaged in an activity so interesting and worthwhile. In the slipstream, calming us down, we have concentration and equanimity. And lastly, taking it very easy in this slow, slow slippage towards liberation, comes tranquility—the peace of a still, untroubled mind.

In the Theravada scriptures, the Buddha says we must develop and pursue these seven factors. In a translation of a related Tibetan scripture by Anālayo, the words are "cultivate and make much of," which I like. We are to care for, appreciate, celebrate, and make much of these seven factors. In turn, they lead to our long-lasting happiness and well-being.

I remember seeing a documentary about a nomadic tribe in Nepal. Although their journey was challenging, hazardous, and for some proved fatal, the sentiment that inspired the trek was: it's the journey that counts, not the destination. This is the attitude we need so as to cultivate the factors of enlightenment.

The process can also be likened to training a puppy dog. The trick is to reward good behavior, ignore the bad. So too in Vipassana. We don't make any big deal out of lapses in attention when the mind wanders. We just get straight back to the job. On the other hand, we look out for, appreciate, and pat ourselves on the back for any traces of tranquility, joy, or any other factors of enlightenment. It's okay to celebrate our successes. In fact, it's more than okay. It's necessary.

May we soar through wide open skies to our true home—the peace and joy of liberation.

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