

# The Hindrances

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Retreat Talks · 26 min read

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

Yesterday we talked about the skills of meditation, how to become focused and one-pointed, attentive with a sharp intelligence. And what we find is that the mind rebels. All our hopes of quick success are dashed as the armies of Mara, the evil one, burst upon us. These, of course, are the so-called hindrances, the *nīvaraṇa*.

I say they're so-called hindrances because, in *vipassanā*, they're one of the areas of mental and emotional activity we have to observe. What they're a real hindrance to is a peaceful state of mind. They're really hindrances to attaining *samatha*, or a calm, mental, joyful state of mind that leads to the absorptions, the *jhāna*. Here in Pure Vipassana, we're not concerned to fabricate or develop wonderful, spaced-out, ecstatic states of mind. If they come, all well and good. But even then, they're just objects to note and watch, feel and observe, experience and understand.

So what are these hindrances? Well, I don't think they'll come as a surprise. The Buddha gave some apt imagery to go with the teachings. Imagine looking into a pool of water, the body, heart, mind. Suppose it's all kaleidoscopic with variegated colours. Well, you just can't see beyond these colours into the pool, and they entrance. That sends your desire for you. Suppose the water's boiling. You can't see into the pool then either. That's aversion, hatred and anger. Then the pool is covered with mosses. That's the effect of sloth and torpor, dullness and lethargy. Suppose a wind blows across the pool and makes waves. You can't see into the depths then either. That's the effect of restlessness, anxiety and guilt, remorse. And finally the pool is turbid and muddy. That's the insidious pervasiveness of sceptical doubt.

Here I'm not going to talk much about the area of sensual desire, because we've talked a little bit about it when it comes to eating, and I shall be giving further ideas as we progress. But I'll tackle the subject in a couple of days, when all the pain and horror of settling in over these first three days finally subsides. And I promise newcomers, it does, it does subside. The old sloggers will tell you.

So I'd like instead to tackle the whole problem of pain, which is what we're all probably going through to some degree or other right now. But first, let me just give one or two pointers about pleasure.

Firstly, the fact is that sensual pleasure gives rise to happiness. That is a pleasant mental state. We have to make that distinction. Just because there's a pleasant taste on the tongue doesn't mean you have to get

excited about it. Indeed, sometimes people feel quite negative when they eat. So separating happiness as a mental state from the pleasure, a physical state, allows us not to get caught up in fantasies that originate in sensual pleasure. The most obvious and obsessive, of course, are the ones around sex and romance. Hardly a surprise.

And with this one especially, we have to be very careful. It can really take over. As always, the instruction is to note the fantasy for what it is, sexy, romantic, and so on, and turn your attention away, back to the breath, or if there are sexual feelings in the body, to those. Now, when you turn away, you have to stop for a moment and make the decision to abandon such thoughts. Sometimes you may feel the pull to go back there. That's the *taṇhā*, the attachment. If you can, stay with that subtle feeling until it dies away. In that way, you will disempower the habit of seeking happiness in sexual and romantic pleasure. Now, even if you can't make this a lifetime objective, at least you can do it for a few days or weeks that you're on this course.

The second thing to understand is why sensual pleasure is so attractive. It's not just that it's pleasurable in itself. It is also that it provides an escape from unpleasurable and unhappy states. Why else do we refer to comfort food? Feeling a bit bored, a bit lonely, nothing better than a piece of cake and a cup of coffee. So there is an underlying force that keeps us at the pleasurable obsession. Its job is to keep us away from pain and suffering, and that is a very great force in our psyche.

I knew of two young men travelling around Sri Lanka who took drugs all the time. They even took tranquillizers when travelling on a long bus ride. They just didn't see the point of being even slightly uncomfortable. That's the sort of denial we can get into. Our job is not to escape the fact of unsatisfactoriness, the fact of discomfort and pain, and the fact of suffering in our lives. What a futile effort! But to find equanimity with the uncomfortable and the painful. And in so doing, we discover that this is the way to the end of unsatisfactoriness and suffering. This also means we have to find equanimity with the pleasurable, not to believe that transient pleasant feelings and sensations are something we can base our happiness on.

I ask you why should our interior lives be so dominated by pleasant or unpleasant sensual feelings? So be careful when this trait to run away from the unpleasant arises. For instance, should you find abandoning thoughts of romance brings up feelings of loneliness, take that as an opportunity to investigate loneliness. Since we have escaped loneliness by indulging in romantic fantasy, when the loneliness dissolves, so the romantic fantasies lose some of their obsessiveness.

So, whenever we find ourselves caught up in pleasing fantasies, really note, recognize and acknowledge them. Just for a moment, seize that reflection. This is romance. This is greed. This is avarice. This is about fame. This is about power. Turn your attention away from the mind, into the body. Should you feel that pull to go back into the fantasy, stay there with that feeling. Wait till it dies away. Then return to the breath or other sensation or feeling that draws your attention. If you find yourself struggling and fighting

and getting tense, then stop. Relax. Take a deep breath. Relax. The process is one of gently letting go, allowing it to arise and pass away.

So I'd like now to go on to the second of the hindrances, aversion. And I would like to centre on pain because that's what we all feel a great deal of when we start a course. There are two types of pain, physical and mental.

When it comes to physical pain proper, then it's only natural that it should arise. In fact, it's nature's way of telling us that something is wrong. Toothache, earache and so on. In meditation, there seems to be three common areas of physical pain. Pain in the knees, the back and the neck. It's often because of bad posture, by the way. But if the posture is correct, any pain we get will either be because the body is being made to sit correctly, or the internal tensions are allowed to manifest. And they are all usually some form of suppressed emotions.

So if the posture is good, there's really only one place where physical pain proper should arise, and that's at the knees. Whether you're sitting cross-legged or kneeling. And that will disappear once the tendons at the top of the leg stretch and allow the leg to lie more flat, or, in the case of kneeling, once the knees have got used to the pressure. We can ease all this with cushions, and you shouldn't be in the slightest way embarrassed by doing so.

Now, our attitude as Vipassana meditators is not to fight pain. We're not trying to develop into masochistic self-mortificators. Nor are we trying to be macho, trying to prove we're not crybabies. I can take it. Give me more. The purpose we suffer pain gladly is to see how suffering arises. Is pain suffering? That's the question. And if it isn't suffering, then how can we suffer when there's pain? So our purpose is not to make the pain go away, to stare it out, so to speak, or worse, to blast it out with vigorous noting. Be careful here, it's a common tendency. What we want to do is to investigate our relationship to it, our relationship of aversion, that desire of wanting it to disappear, and the fear, that desire to run away from it. The fight-flight syndrome we see in any sentient being who is suffering pain. Are these sorts of responses necessary?

Just as we discover that pleasure and happiness are not the same, so we have to discover that pain and unhappiness are not the same. Now there is one great advantage to pain for all of us. When pain does arise, in the knees for instance, it definitely draws our attention. That's the wonderful thing about pain. It makes us very attentive, and our ability to remain focused grows naturally, though it has to be said this sort of concentration is not very reliable, it's not very strong, since it's dependent on a loud stimulus. Yet if only for this reason, the ardent meditator rejoices at the appearance of pain.

So what do we do? Well, we note. Pain, pain. And our attention beelines in on the physical sensations. As it does so, it notices the emotional reaction of aversion and all the thinking that comes up. It hurts. I can't stand it. Why should I suffer this? It might be doing damage. My knee could implode. As the attention becomes aware of that, it notes aversion, aversion. Then we begin to see how the self wants to indulge the

suggestions of aversion, to move and relieve the pain. We need to work with this vicious cycle, the physical pain, the emotional reaction and the dialogue, and the desire to act by way of aversion, each feeding off the other. The meditator begins to realize the separateness of the physical from the mental base, and yet their utter interdependence. They see clearly how suffering arises because of a wrong relationship to pain.

Now it may be that pain becomes too severe. Then fear screams, the knee will crack, the tendons will snap, I'll never walk again. Can we stay right there at least for a while to see how it all works? Now we have to be sensible about this and know when to yield gracefully, as it were, to body messages. We don't have to break our knees to become enlightened.

So here's the reason we must learn to sit patiently with pain, to bear patiently, to endure. The Buddha said that patience was the highest form of ascetic practice. And he asks us to bring this virtue to perfection. He says, even if someone were to start sawing you limb from limb with a double-handed saw, and if for a moment you indulge in thoughts of hatred and revenge, then you are not following his teachings. A tall order indeed. And we shall understand how he can ask such a thing when we see how the reaction of aversion and fear are the true suffering, and that pain is, in the end, just physical sensation.

When we see this, really experience it and begin to allow the aversion and fear to subside instead of identifying with them and so not react to them, not to be hijacked by them, we are slowly but surely taking the suffering out of pain. Interestingly enough, if pain is watched long enough, it may very well disappear. Either the reason for it passes or the body creates its own painkillers. But let that sort of thing happen by itself. Don't try to make it happen. If you find yourself gritting your teeth and struggling with pain, the pain will get worse, for that reaction simply adds more turbulence. And if we are victorious, it will simply mean we've suppressed it all, and that's trouble stored up for the future.

So now we've come to a point where we've decided we can't take any more and we have to move. Here is another wonderful opportunity for insight. First, we note the intention, intending to move, intending to move. Then we slowly, ever so slowly, move from one posture to another, noting all the while. We experience the lessening of the physical pain, and we are attentive to the changing emotions, the relief, the joy, the comfort that arises, and all the dialogue, the sighs. We finally settle into another posture and feel so comfortable that we can return to noting and feeling the breath. Ah, what contentment!

Now this is what meditation is all about. Then there it starts, a little tingling as it were, then a slight discomfort, and before long those damn knees are at it again. Is there no peace? And so it goes on, you see. Here we're experiencing the roller coaster of the pain-pleasure syndrome. Can we get off it? Can we take the suffering out of pain and the indulgence out of pleasure? Well, of course we can. Of course we can. We do it so long as we can retain the observation post, that aloofness, that inner solitude above the madding crowd of our sensations, feelings and thoughts. And how do we do this? By turning upon everything in the attitude of the interested scientist, the one who wants to know how it all works, and in this instance, what

is pain, what is suffering, is pain suffering or is it something else? And how can suffering be brought to an end?

And this leads us directly into another area of physical pain, the pain, the discomfort in the body caused by emotions. Mental states express themselves in the body and the physical electrochemical base reacts. We all know that. Stress gives us cramped shoulders and headaches. Anxiety makes us feel queasy and gives us ulcers. And so on. These emotions are products of past behaviour. Please don't think the meditation is fabricating them. Stuff comes up fairly fast and heavy. And at times one wonders... Would I be suffering this if I weren't doing meditation? Well, you probably wouldn't be suffering them, not so sharply anyway, but they're still there, locked in the system. Vipassana simply unlocks them and allows them to express themselves.

In fact, when you start meditating, it's a bit like lifting the lid off a dustbin, the lid of suppressive tendencies. And what are these suppressive tendencies? Why, aversion and fear, of course. Who wants to feel the heaviness of depression, the burning of jealousy, the sickliness of anxiety? No one. Best to keep them locked up in the body. But we know they're doing damage. Surely it's best to let them out into the open. Give them air so they can evaporate. And what is that open air? That is but the spaciousness of our own awareness.

And when we do that, we begin to realize that this is therapeutic. This is the way the heart heals itself. And that the healing has to be a conscious process. Such emotions have to burn out in consciousness. We have to suffer them gladly. That's why we have to learn to sit patiently amidst the flames.

But why do they have to burn out in consciousness? Why can't emotions just die away quietly somewhere? For all intents and purposes, we cannot separate the body and the mind. They interact intimately. So when the mind has turbulence in it, which isn't allowed to express itself, it gets buried into the cellular life and starts expressing itself there through physical symptoms. Just because we're not aware of repressed emotions doesn't mean they're not there, and doing damage. That's the reason we have psychosomatic illnesses. Often, through the meditation, because these turbulences are allowed to come out, such diseases are cured. This is one reason, from a health point of view, why we have to let those flames burn, why we have to train ourselves to feel the scorch and smile.

Now when these negative emotions arise and are felt in the body, we find we have the same reaction as to pain. And yet again, we note, feel, observe, experience and come to understand how we always want to fight or run away from unpleasantness. Yet again the question arises, is the original emotion coming up pain or suffering? Or are the reactions of aversion and fear pain or suffering? How does suffering arise? Can we take the suffering out of pain? Can we so position ourselves that we can see, feel, experience the original pain or emotion and also see, feel, experience the reaction of aversion or fear towards it? And when we're in that position, is there suffering?

Finally, there are emotions in the body, emotions that are so blocked and severely repressed that all we

will ever feel is physical pain. Headaches and backaches are sometimes like this. But it could be pain virtually anywhere. Again, we observe the process of aversion and fear, allowing the pain to be just pain, to allow it to express, to expend, to release its malevolent energy. That's the cure.

There was a dramatic incident recorded at the Mahasi Center in Rangoon. A man came with terminal cancer, refusing to take medication. He just sat with the pain. As he describes it, there was an explosion in the stomach and the cancer vanished. Now, whenever I tell this story, I like to add very quickly that Vipassana is not a cure-all. And as I said yesterday, on the one hand, if you practice for the sake of health, you will lose the spiritual aim, and on the other, if you don't get better, you will lose faith in the meditation. Let Vipassana do what it wants to do. Keep that deceiving self, the fiendish Mara, out of the way.

Now, isn't it wonderful? Have you noticed that every time we talk about curing the heart of all her emotional problems, it's always in conjunction with just watching, just feeling. And when we're just experiencing like this, we're doing nothing, nothing at all. That's the wonder of it. If we just leave the heart alone, just get out of the way for once, she does it all by herself. She doesn't need any help from us. The heart can cure herself of all the illnesses we've intentionally or unintentionally caused by our greed, hatred and delusion. Have faith. There are powers in us beyond our control and they're working always towards our well-being.

The next big hindrance is dullness and lethargy. First, I'd like to link this with restlessness. As far as I've come to experience it, these are two sides of the same coin. It's like fission and fusion energy or black holes and exploding stars. The turbulence in our psyche can either go inward and make us feel tired and drawn or outward into restless energy. Interestingly, there's a condition called restless depression where the person feels depressed and yet needs to move about restlessly. So we'll often experience these two states even in one sitting, sometimes one after the other. Even in daily life we can be feeling down one minute, then a friend calls and suddenly we're rushing all over the place getting ready to go out.

Secondly, we mustn't confuse dullness and lethargy with laziness. Dullness refers to porridge head, when the mind feels like sludge, and lethargy refers to the physical heaviness we feel, the body feels like a slug. Occasionally the one comes without the other, but both are products of past conditioning, sometimes because we have been lazy in the past. Sometimes because we've used sleep to annihilate ourselves when the going gets too hard, or things upset us, and so on.

So here we are back to that old duality. We enjoy sleeping, at least there's no pain in oblivion, and we wake up refreshed. But we also often use it to escape unhappy states. Consider. When we're children and we're naughty or weepy, our parents say it's because we're tired, and it's probably true. And what we need is a little sleep. So we learn early on that one way to escape painful feelings is to go to sleep. And hey presto, you wake up refreshed. Or at least you do most of the time. But this sort of sleep is a suppressive measure, a conscious effort to force the unpleasant out of the mind by radically ignoring it. And where has

all that unpleasant energy gone? Surely it's stored somewhere to reappear on some cloudy day.

Now, dullness and lethargy can be caused by any repressed or suppressed emotion, in which case they can arise with feelings of depression. So whatever the cause, and remember we're not concerned to find ultimate causes, dullness and lethargy, when they arise, have to be dealt with in such a way that the energy is allowed to disperse itself. And we do that by making the sensations and feelings, the objects to be observed and felt, experienced and understood. It's as simple as that.

Two of the first few disciples of the Buddha, who were later to be seen as his most important, were Sāriputta and Moggallāna. Now Sāriputta took a whole two weeks to become enlightened. It took this long, it said, because he wanted to investigate every bit of the path on the way. In the end, such was his grasp of the Dharma that he became known as the general of the Dharma, and the Buddha acknowledged him as second only to himself in understanding. Moggallāna, however, was not so intellectually inclined. He was more of a magician, able to exercise psychic powers, again second only to the Buddha. When he began to meditate, the one big hindrance that came up was dullness and lethargy. So great were they that he had to ask the Buddha for guidance, and on this account, it is said, he became enlightened in only one week.

So what were the directions the Buddha gave? Well, first, he told Moggallāna not to take any notice, but at the first signs of dullness and lethargy, to simply put more energy into the practice, put more energy into the posture, lift up that spine. If attacked again, to consider the Dharma, to recognize the danger of this hindrance. This dread of consequences should lift up the energy enough to stay awake till it passes. If that failed to recite the Dharma, give the mind something simple to do like repeating the verses of the Dharma and so dispel the torpor.

On one meditation course, I was suffering from this so much I decided to repeat the times tables and I got as far as 17 both forward and backward over a period of several days mind. My teacher at the time, Sayadaw Ujjanaka, told me that was skillful, but I think it would probably have been better to recite the discourses, if I'd have known any.

If this should fail, it's time to do something. The Buddha advised Moggallāna to rub his ears. Now at first that seems a little odd, but then, when we remember there are all those acupuncture points in the ears that affect every organ, it's definitely worth trying. If that fails, rub the legs. So now we've changed our posture. Then get up and wash the face in cold water. Sit in light or look at the light with the eyes open. Then, which works only for those who've practiced concentration meditation, create a light source in the mind itself. Moggallāna would have been adept at this, but for us, we would probably go on to the next, which is to walk up and down. And then, only then, when after nine different efforts, still the lethargy and dullness is pressing down, can we consider redefining it as tiredness, and so take a rest.

The Buddha's advice shows us how persistent and also how gently we have to parry the blows of these hindrances. And we have to be inventive too, for what worked one time often doesn't have the same effect again. Remember, only after nine determined efforts can we take a rest.

Taking these ideas as a standard, we can work out our own. As for myself, at the first signs I note more rapidly. I can put more energy into the posture. At the second, I take sloth as an object to observe. I note, feel its texture, observe it. Thirdly, if it comes back, I keep doing this but with the eyes open. Letting in light often wakes you up. But the eyes, which you can keep wide open, are turned towards the ground a couple of feet or so ahead. You can also look through a window or at a light, but there's danger of being distracted. So be careful not to look around. Then I'll stand and perhaps do a quiet stretch. Finally, if it's just too heavy, I'll do walking meditation. Not to beat it by walking fast, but to stay awake, still feeling the dullness and the lethargy fully, still allowing it to dissipate its energy. And if I do walking meditation with dullness and lethargy, I don't do it slowly, but at a normal pace, just keeping the attention on the feelings in the body.

Alternatively, I can just decide to struggle with it on the cushion. I just keep gently pushing up against it. I may fall asleep, but as soon as I wake, I make this effort to straighten up and just keep sitting. The danger of this is that I can give in and fall asleep properly. But usually, if you fall into sleep in a meditation posture, the body jerks forward and that's enough to waken you. And sometimes you may find yourself in that strange world of neither asleep nor awake, and the body swaying.

There was also a time, something I picked up from another monk, when I sat facing a wall, in really old Bodhidharma style. Some of you may know the legend of the great Bodhidharma, with an R by the way, to whom Zen is accredited. He sat for nine years facing a wall. When you face a wall in meditation and you fall asleep, bang! Boy, does that head hit that brick. And do you know, this stuff can be so heavy, you still keep falling asleep. Well, after a few bangs, I began to sense brain damage. I did eventually find a kinder way. I used to sit under a mosquito net, and just the gentle brush of the net against the forehead would be enough to startle me from sleep.

My teacher then, Sayadaw Ujjanaka, used to call dullness and lethargy my two very good friends. And they are, aren't they? You'll hear them. Oh, you're so tired. You've not had enough sleep. You aren't ready for such rigorous training. What you need is a little kip, a ziz, a power nap. You'll feel so much better. You always do. Ten minutes, and you wake up two hours later. So, refuse to be annihilated. Refuse to be annihilated.

Now, some of you may think we don't get enough sleep. But it does take a day or two to lift the energy. But we're hardly doing anything strenuous, physically or mentally. It's not as though we're out there digging roads. We're not working out accounts. We don't have to deal with fractious people. The whole situation here is one of outward calm, taking our time, the joy of knowing we have nothing to achieve, nowhere to go. And since we're not communicating, we don't even have to be somebody, a personality. If only on account of that, we don't need as much sleep as we might in ordinary daily life.

Some of you may know we sleep in one and three quarter hour rhythms, and it's the first two only where we actually sleep at the deepest of four levels. After that, we never sleep so deeply again. So decide that

the five and a half hour sleep is enough, and honestly recognize any so-called tiredness as dullness and lethargy. Work against them, and so lift up your energy level. You'll see, it's like running. You suddenly get second wind. In a longer course, you could all reduce your sleep to less than four hours, and sometimes go through a day or two without sleep. So calming and energizing can this *vipassanā* meditation be.

Now I mentioned earlier that dullness and lethargy are not to be confused with laziness. If by laziness, we mean an actual decision not to put energy into what we're doing. Laziness is the obvious enemy of effort, and we can say our meditation period has been poor if we don't work against the tendency to be lazy. Of course, the more we give in to laziness, the more we add to the store of conditioned laziness, which is one of the factors that go to make up dullness and lethargy in the first place. And the more we fail to work up our energy, the more difficult it will be to raise energy in the future. Remember, it's all about conditioning.

They say Margaret Thatcher only slept four hours a night while in office. Now this is not a political statement. Anyway, beware. Let sloth and torpor, dullness and lethargy come and go and under no circumstance make a decision to be lazy.

So now we come to restlessness. It's the same. Always do the opposite to what the hindrance is advising you to do. Sloth suggests you take a nap. Restlessness suggests you walk about and do something. But don't. Refuse to be a slave to these dictators. Refuse. Sit. Sit still. Observe that feeling and how we react with aversion. Note, feel, experience, observe both the dislike we have of it and the desire we have to appease it. Make that little vicious circle the object to understand, the physical feelings, the mental state and the relationship we have of aversion. Slowly, the discomfort of being with restlessness will lessen and we'll be able to sit still even amidst a tornado.

Another thing you can do is scan the body. Start from the top of the head and just pass your consciousness through every part all the way down to the tip of your toes and back up again and just see where restlessness is actually felt. Do we really feel restless at the end of our noses? Just moving the consciousness up and down the body like this can have a calming effect but don't do it for that reason for then we lose our spiritual purpose. And we fall into the trap of trying to establish a comfort zone. We do it to observe, to watch, to feel, to experience and to understand.

If, however, the restlessness gets too much and we decide to move our posture, well, just as we move out of pain, note intending to move, intending to move. Move very slowly, noting, feeling, observing, experiencing all the different changes in posture, sensations and emotions as you do so.

If restlessness is only in the mind, thoughts tumbling one after the other, obsessive thinking, then we need to be patient. Every time we wake up out of a stream of thought or daydream, note the content. Lust, ambition, worry and so on. And gently but firmly bring the attention back to the breath. But the intention must be very empowered. It must be a resolute intention, a determined determination to observe the breath. Alternatively, you may look into the heart centre and see if you can identify, feel and note the emotions which are impelling the thoughts. Actually, I always find this most productive, for all thought

has an emotive value. However, sometimes the mind is just frivolous and simply needs to be tamed. The meditator must decide this for themselves.

The final hindrance is sceptical doubt. This can become a serious spiritual disease. Actually, such doubts can undermine our work, our relationships, our whole life. It's the sort of thing that stops you doing. It's a fear, a fear of failure, a lack of confidence, a lack of trust. We question everything, but we won't try it.

Suppose you go to a doctor with an ailment. But you're not sure of the doctor. You feel you've not been listened to, or because you've had a bad experience before with another doctor. You've lost confidence in doctors and modern medicine. You read the leaflet that comes with the medicine, and you become afraid of the side effects.

Suppose you go for a job, which every one of your friends and colleagues say suits you, but you don't feel up to it. You actually get the job, but talk yourself into failure.

You form a relationship with someone, but you can't quite finalise it into a closer partnership or a marriage. You don't trust them, you don't trust yourself. You feel your past relationships, for one reason or another, didn't last, so why should this one? Why go through the pain of separation again? Let's keep the relationship superficial.

It's the same in the spiritual life. You can't trust the Buddha and his teachings. It's all very interesting, but you don't try it. Well, at least, since you're all here on this course, you've overcome that one. There's a loss of confidence in the teacher, heaven forbid. Not that there isn't good reason for leaving a teacher, but to leave them because they've asked you to do something, simply because you don't trust them anymore, may be giving into sceptical doubt.

Then, of course, there's doubting oneself. Everyone else can do the meditation, but I can't. I'm special that way. It's an inverted conceit, isn't it? Instead of being great and wonderful, I'm useless and disgusting. But such thoughts and feelings about ourselves have to be noted and recognised, watched and observed, experienced and understood.

Such doubts as these can all come up very strongly, and at various times it can be very confusing. And that's one of the reasons for doubt, the confusion and the anxiety around confusion, those times when we don't know. We find it very difficult to be in a state of don't know. If you feel assailed by such thoughts, be sure to approach me about them. For heaven's sake, don't run away, or at least don't run away without telling me.

As we shall see when we come to talk about the factors of enlightenment, the Buddha wants us to cultivate right doubt, not sceptical doubt. And right doubt is not to believe what he teaches, but take his teachings as hypotheses that we have to prove right for ourselves. In other words, he wants us to develop curiosity, an enduring desire to want to know, and specifically to want to understand how we create suffering for ourselves.

So, these are our hindrances, all the alluring sirens of desire, from a simple desire to rest to those vast overwhelming cravings of lust for sex, for money, for fame, for power. Then there are all the goblins of aversions, from minor irritations to meditation rage. There are also all those wailing ghosts of anxiety, fear and terror. Then there are the whirlpools of sloth and torpor taking us down into oblivion, plus the gusts and hurricanes of restlessness from fidgetiness to the manic agitation of guilt. And finally there are the cold, anxious fogs of doubt.

As they come up, one after the other, the hosts of Mara, we need to accurately acknowledge them. Be precise. Then consider what to do. Don't let them creep up on us, unawares. That's when they easily ensnare us. And once we've fallen into the trap, it takes an even greater effort to extricate ourselves.

There was a tale told of a Zen master and a nun. It seems the nun suddenly began hallucinating, snakes all over the place, and all over her. They called doctors and other professionals, but to no avail. Then they called a Zen master, and when he came, he told the nun that he could do nothing unless he knew all the details of the snakes

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