Day 3 Morning: The Five Hindrances

As we develop meditation, whether it’s mettā bhāvanā (the development of loving-kindness) or other kinds of meditation, we always have to develop skill in dealing with what are called the hindrances, *nīvarana* in Pāli. It’s something that we need to be attentive to, not just in meditation, but in daily life and our interactions with people. Whether we’re walking, sitting, standing, or lying down, we need to be aware of how these hindrances overwhelm or obscure the mind.

The hindrances that the Buddha pointed to are sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and skeptical doubt. These undermine the goodness, steadiness, and clarity of the mind, so it’s important that we become aware of something as a hindrance, particularly in the context of cultivation of the meditations on loving-kindness. When ill will, anger, aversion, irritation, and negativity arise, there should be an immediate flag going up in the mind that says, “Aha, this is a hindrance.” Not, “That schmuck; how could they do that?” That’s the immediate belief in a construct of negativity, rather than a sense of, “Oh, this is a hindrance; now how do I deal with it?”

As with other aspects of meditation, one of the important foundations of dealing with the hindrances is tuning in to the body. Recognizing, what does the body feel like when there is sensual desire? Where do you feel it? How does it make the body feel: the excitement, the anticipation, the leaning into the hope of gratification?

What does the body feel like with ill will, negativity, and aversion: the feeling of being on edge and tensing that energizes us? Of course it’s not a very wonderful kind of energy, but sometimes it temporarily feels better than nothing if you’re looking for something to get energized with. Sometimes it seems that there’s nothing better than a good rant to clear out the pipes, but that leaves debris everywhere.

Sloth and torpor: what does it feel like in the body? What’s the general tone—listlessness, dullness? Restlessness and worry: the agitation you feel isn’t just a mental event; the body is involved as well. Doubt: that uncertainty, hesitation, inability to move forward, that feeling of pulling back.

These are things that we feel in the body. We learn how to be attentive to the experience of the hindrances as a whole body/mind process. As we cultivate mindfulness of breathing and mindfulness of the body, things start to become a bit clearer. You sense that this is a hindrance rather than feeling out of sorts and uncomfortable and then looking for something to blame, either externally or by blaming yourself. You can reflect, “Oh, this is what I’m feeling.” Work with that; breathe through it, bringing attention to the feeling with clear awareness.

Bring up something skillful and wholesome to work with. One of the discourses of the Buddha begins with Ananda visiting a group of nuns. There is an exchange concerning the nuns’ practice, and the nuns are making particularly good progress in their cultivation of meditation and training. Ananda tells the Buddha, and the Buddha gives a discourse, approving the practice and adding that in the cultivation of mindfulness and meditation, it is necessary to direct the mind to something uplifting.

When the mind is scattered, diffused, or overwhelmed by dullness or torpor, direct the attention to something that is uplifting and pleasurable. The word in Pāli is *pasādaniya nimitta*: a sign of that which is pleasurable or satisfying.

We are directing attention to mettā bhāvanā. That’s a particularly pleasurable sign and object of attention to direct the mind to. This isn’t done only to overcome ill will and aversion. It also can be very helpful with sloth and torpor, when the mind is dull. When we direct the mind to something pleasurable, the mind can take interest in it. Usually we get trapped in sloth and torpor because we are not sufficiently interested in something as neutral as the breath, but the object of loving-kindness is very pleasurable. Or with restlessness and worry, we can have a mind that is fidgety, worried, or anxious about this or that. The mind will latch on to anything because it’s quite happy to worry about anything. But give the mind something pleasurable, and it can take some satisfaction in hanging out with that. Hang out with loving-kindness, and let it churn. If the mind is going to churn, let it churn with something skillful.

Sometimes people pick up a strongly adversarial approach to dealing with unwholesome, unwanted states of mind. In Buddhist teachings, the language can often take on a warrior-like tone. The Buddha was from the warrior caste and did use those images, but they aren’t what he used all the time.

This is a very good example of the different ways that the Buddha approached the practice. Sometimes it’s solely to be mindful. It’s all going to work out; we just have to be mindful. All we need to do is gently bring the mind back to the object as an impartial observer. It should be noted, though, that the impartial observer is often a fallacy. We have our issues and agendas going all the time, whether we’re aware of them or not. Part of the function of our practice is to understand those agendas.

Another approach is to bring attention consciously to something wholesome, skillful, pleasurable, and satisfying to the mind. On a certain level you know that doubt, wavering, and uncertainty are unskillful, but it’s hard to convince the doubtful and wavering mind that loving-kindness is a good thing. You’ve got to work at it.

However, we need to be a bit circumspect. Feeding sensual desire with pleasurable objects is not a good idea; we are pretty good at that already. The appropriate way to address the tendency to sensual desire is to take it to another level. Instead of fixating on that which seems gratifying and pleasurable, realize, “Oh, there’s so much suffering in this.” Focus on loving-kindness and realize the kindest thing is not being trapped in sensual desire’s illusion of pleasure and gratification.

The hindrances are a very fruitful realm for investigation, and overcoming them is a necessary foundation to lay for our practice. As we continue to cultivate, we need to be more and more skilled and quick at noticing: Is that a hindrance? Is that an obstruction to that which is truly skillful?

In another discourse, the Buddha points to the hindrances as being the fuel or nourishment for ignorance, *avijjā*. Ignorance, or not knowing the true nature of things, is the ground that all suffering arises out of. But that ignorance is not something that is immutable and indivisible, or a fixed aspect of the mind. It comes into being fed and nourished by certain conditions; the conditions that feed and nurture it are the five hindrances. If we are working with the five hindrances, we are very directly undermining that fundamental tendency towards avijjā, the lack of true knowledge and awareness.

As we practice through the day, doing sitting and walking meditation, be aware if a hindrance is present. This particular thought, mood, perception, or feeling—could it be a hindrance?

If it is, work with it. Ground it in the awareness of the body. When the Buddha describes the hindrances, he points out that when we’re able to relinquish and let go of them, the mind is able to become more peaceful and settled. When we’re able to relinquish the hindrance, joy, a sense of well-being, and satisfaction come up in the mind.

The Buddha gives images to illustrate this. He compares one who is overwhelmed by the hindrance of sensual desire to someone in debt. With sensual desire, there’s always something hanging over you. When one is in debt there’s always a sense of concern, so the mind isn’t able to come to a place of ease. But when one has paid off one’s debts, there’s a sense of happiness, well-being, and joy that arises quite naturally. I think anybody who has finally paid off a mortgage thinks, “Wow, that feels so good.” There is a sense of well-being and happiness that arises when sensual desire is abandoned and let go of.

Ill will is compared to somebody who is sick and has a fever. Food doesn’t agree with them; nothing tastes good. As long as there is fever or illness, one feels out of sorts and uncomfortable, but when the sickness goes away, food tastes good and the world looks better again. A sense of happiness and well-being arises. The relinquishing and abandoning of ill will and aversion feels good.

Sloth and torpor, the dullness and drowsiness that overtake the mind, the Buddha compares to somebody who is in prison. When someone is put in prison, he or she doesn’t have access to family or resources. There is a great sense of loss and suffering, but if the person is released from prison, property is restored, and connections with family re-established, then he or she would feel extremely happy. There would be a sense of ease and well-being. Similarly, a sense of ease and well-being comes to one who is able to relinquish and abandon sloth and torpor.

The Buddha compares restlessness and worry to slavery. Slaves aren’t able to go where they want or do what they want; they’re not their own masters. If they were granted the freedom to go where they want and do what they want, they would feel happiness and well-being. It’s the same way with the relinquishing of restlessness and worry. There is a tremendous sense of well-being if we realize that, having been a slave to restlessness, agitation, and worry, we are no longer worrying about something and in particular, we are not worrying about what the next thing to worry about is. To be able to put all that down and say, “There’s just this body and this mind. There’s this peace and awareness”—that’s a different world.

Skeptical doubt, the Buddha compares to somebody who has property and possessions and who must travel through a desert or wilderness fraught with danger and robbers. If that person makes a safe passage through that desert or wilderness and gets to the destination with all property intact, he or she would experience joy and well-being. In the same way, when we are trapped in doubt, everything is fraught with danger, difficulty, and uncertainty; we are always wondering what is going to happen. If we relinquish that doubt, a sense of safety, refuge, and certainty arises.

There are many tools to use in working with these hindrances, but particularly during this retreat, please experiment with the application of loving-kindness. See how it’s able to work as a means for undermining the hindrances. A sense of wholesomeness is intrinsic to loving-kindness. These are very beautiful states of mind. We can direct attention to loving-kindness and have confidence that this is a wholesome state of mind.

In the cultivation of more refined states of mind, as we relinquish the hindrances, the mind has a sense of brightness and stability. In the classical description of the first *jhāna*, the mind is withdrawn from sensual desires and unwholesome states of mind. Through the strength of that withdrawal, that delighting in seclusion from the agitation of sensual desire and from unwholesome states of aversion, ill will, doubt, restlessness, sloth, and torpor, the mind is able to settle.

We need to work at it to a certain extent. One of the descriptions that the Buddha gives is a bath man or a bath man’s apprentice. In the Buddha’s time they used a kind of clay for soap. You would take that ball of clay and wet it, knead it, and permeate and pervade, suffuse and fill that ball of clay, so that it’s not too wet but the moisture completely pervades it. It doesn’t drip and the consistency is very even. That’s what you would use to rub against yourself if you were in a bath in the Buddha’s time.

The meditator does the same thing with his or her body and mind. It’s interesting that the Buddha points to the body. The meditator permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills the body with that delight in seclusion from sensual desire and unwholesome states. Attend to that feeling of seclusion, so that the mind is able to be present with the breath as it comes in and goes out of the body, as the body is sitting and relaxing. Fully permeating and pervading, suffusing and filling the breath, body, and mind, with this quality of loving-kindness. Drawing back from and relinquishing the five hindrances.

This is a present-moment practice. As you breathe in, there is a sense of permeating and pervading, suffusing and filling. As you breathe out, allow loving-kindness, the thoughts and feeling of well wishing, kindness, and warmth, to fill the body and mind.

If any hindrances arise, if there’s any sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, or doubt, rather than seeing it as an enemy coming to attack and then gearing up to annihilate and destroy it, come from a base of loving-kindness: “How do I work with this? This is not to my benefit or well-being. What’s a skillful way of relinquishing this? What’s a skillful way of letting this go?” From that place, you can be as innovative as you want.

The classic advice for relinquishing sensual desire is the contemplation of the unattractive nature of the body. Oftentimes this contemplation is picked up with aversion, attending to the repugnant nature of the body. Why does it have to be like that? With loving-kindness you can say, “What’s the point in this constant attraction to something that is always breaking down? It’s never comfortable. Why do I keep trying to make it happy? Give it up.” There is a kindness there. “Oh, okay, I can let that go.” Then what is left in the mind is very bright.

With aversion and ill will, rather than being fearful, approach it with a sense of kindness: “This aversion, this ill will, why do I set myself up in opposition to everything? Why do I keep getting into arguments with it?” Even if you actually win the argument, there is still a resonance of having got into an argument with yourself, a petty squabble that you have maintained in your mind. “I can let that go.”

Bring a sense of kindness to working with sloth and torpor. Sometimes we can get frustrated with sloth and torpor when the mind is dull, or we get very idealistic, thinking we should be able to sit and not have these intrusions of dullness. I think one of the things that is important to understand is that loving-kindness is not acquiescing to everything and saying everything is fine: “This sloth and torpor, isn’t it lovely, wonderful?” or “That aggressive, obnoxious person, isn’t he nice?” No, we don’t have to acquiesce. But we don’t have to get caught up in aversion, don’t have to get trapped by the negativity.

So, we conserve a lot of energy by not fighting with sloth and torpor and instead recognizing, “What’s a skillful way of working with this?” Sometimes it’s a real kindness, rather than idealistically sitting and struggling, just to get up and stand. Go and do some walking meditation. Sit with your eyes open. “Sit with our eyes open? Do real meditators do that?” Well, why not? A very simple thing can give energy. Sitting with our eyes open can energize. We can pass through the period of sloth and torpor; it’s actually fairly simple. But we do have to have kindness to ourselves to allow that, and we tend not to.

With restlessness and worry, it’s helpful to tune in to the body. When the mind is restless, it’s moving around, looking for something, anything. So permeate and pervade, suffuse and fill the body with the quality of loving-kindness. Breathe in and out, tuning in to the rhythm and the feeling of the energy through the body. Even if it’s a restless energy, allow and be very conscious of permeating and pervading, suffusing and filling. Turn your attention to non-desire and step away from any unwholesome states, negativity, and aversion.

Find a place in the body that does feel comfortable. Then find an object that is pleasurable or satisfying,pasādaniya nimitta. Maybe your chest or stomach isrestless. Well, what about your hands? Can you just relax your hands? Can you make that a pleasurable sensation? Pick a spot and see that you can suffuse that particular area with a feeling of well-being and seclusion from the unwholesome. From that you have a base, and you can work on that to pervade the other areas of the body.

We are working in accord with that image of the bath man. It’s a lovely image and very much body-based. And of course we do have a mind with this body as well. That is, we can affect the mind directly without getting entangled in it. Sometimes, seclusion is from the mind itself.

The mind goes off on a particular tangent, say, doubt. It’s doubting about this, uncertain about that. Well, why do we have to make a decision? Why do we even have to have a particular opinion or a view about whether something is right or wrong? There is just this breath; there’s just this sensation of the body, breathing in, breathing out. This itself is a great act of kindness.

Use the theme of the five hindrances and the application of loving-kindness, not simply as a theory or a mental state. Work it in and see how it pervades the rest of your practice. It’s not just about meditation. It isn’t as if you come into the meditation hall and the five hindrances appear only then. This is a life skill; get familiar with this. Also, the more skillful you are at becoming aware of how the five hindrances work and how you can relinquish them, then when you do come to sit, the more the mind is able to settle more quickly. So I offer that for reflection today.