

need to go searching for particular objects; rather, maintain a quality of openness and alertness so that whatever presents itself becomes the object of awareness, and let all objects of body and mind arise and pass away by themselves. Our practice is simply to settle back and note in each moment what is arising, without judgment, without evaluation, without interpretation. It is simple, bare attention to what is happening.

Stay mindful too of the different mind states or emotions. These states are less clearly defined as objects. They don't have such a clear beginning, middle, and end, and yet they can become very predominant objects of experience. So if a mind state or emotion or mood becomes strong—feelings such as sadness or happiness or anger or desire, restlessness or excitement, interest or rapture, joy or calm—make the mental note of that mind state, feeling it and observing how that too is a part of the passing show. It arises, it is there for some time, it passes away.

Use the breathing as a primary object, being with it if nothing else is very predominant and coming back to the breath when other objects disappear. Also, if the mind is feeling scattered or confused, without knowing exactly what to observe, center the attention on the breathing, either the rise and fall or in and out. When the mind feels more centered and steady, again open the awareness to the entire range of changing objects—the breath, sounds, sensations, thoughts, images, intentions, emotions—noting each in turn as they arise. Keep the mind open, receptive, and alert, so that in each moment there can be an accurate awareness of what is present.

J. G.

4

Difficulties and Hindrances

THE BUDDHIST TRADITION speaks directly about the hindrances that are encountered in the course of the spiritual journey. Buddha said that those who conquer their own minds are greater than those who defeat a thousand men a thousand times in battle. Almost every experienced yogi can describe in detail hours or years of dealing with some version of the five basic hindrances, the disruptions of mind and blocks to the heart that arise in practice. These same difficult energies are equally well described by Christian and Jewish mystics, Sufis, Hindu yogis, and American Indian shamans.

There is a story told of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. After praising her extraordinary work, an interviewer for the BBC remarked that in some ways service might be a bit easier for Mother Teresa than for us ordinary householders. After all, she has no possessions, no car, no insurance, and no husband. "This is not true," she replied at once. "I am married too." She held up the ring that nuns in her order wear to symbolize their wedding to Christ. Then she added, "And he can be very difficult sometimes!" The hindrances and difficulties in spiritual practice are universal.

When we examine our own minds we will inevitably encounter the root forces of greed, fear, prejudice, hatred, and desire, which create so much sorrow in the world. They become an opportunity for us. They raise a central question for anyone who undertakes a spiritual life. Is there some way that we can live with these forces constructively and wisely? Is there a skillful way to work with these energies? These are not just contemporary problems. In the second century Evagrius, one of the Christian mystics known as the desert fathers, taught his students about the hindrances by describing them in terms of demons that come to one who meditates out in the wilderness. The demons include fear, irritation, gluttony, laziness, and pride. In the Buddhist tradition, they are personified by Mara, the Tempter. They are our fear, our habits, our anger, our resistance, our unwillingness to look at what is actually happening.

As we meditate, Mara comes in many forms. First it may come as temptation and desire, as fantasy, as looking for comfort; Mara is all the things that say, "Let's do this instead." If the temptations don't work and we are still willing to continue, Mara comes to us in a more ferocious guise. It comes as an attacker, as anger, irritability, or doubt. And if we are unmoved by Mara as tempter or attacker, then Mara comes in yet a more subtle form. It comes with whispers of pride; "Oh, look how good I am! I didn't give in to the temptation" or "I've gotten rid of the anger." Things become a little clear, and we settle for that. We get caught trying to hold on to our concentration and stillness or some particular meditative state.

When the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree, he vowed not to get up until he had come to the fullest understanding and freedom possible for a human. To understand the nature of happiness and sorrow, to find freedom in our life, we have to be willing to face all the demons in our mind. Our journey—our practice through all the realms of our mind—is to learn a kind of mind control, a traveler's equilibrium. It is not the control of making something happen, but rather the ability to stay present, open, and balanced through all the experiences and realms of life. Through practice it is possible to train the heart and mind, to make them concentrated, to make them steady and luminous and free. It's possible to become balanced in the face of every kind of experience. Ultimately, it is possible to overcome and transform the forces of Mara with the sincerity of our practice, which means our love and the willingness to be truly mindful. With honesty we can learn to be unmoved. We can come to understand that which is deeper than those forces. We start to see that the worst and most difficult things also change, that they too are empty experiences, light and shadows that we all share and that arise and pass in the clear space of mind.

The beauty of these teachings is that they are not just theoretical or grandiose. There is a practical path we can follow to experience whole new levels of happiness in our lives, to learn a new relationship with ourselves and our experience. Depending on our relationship to these hindrances, they can be the cause of tremendous struggle or valuable fuel for the growth of insight. The first step necessary in working with these energies is to identify them clearly. Classically, there are said to be five primary hindrances, although you may have discovered some of your own. In fact, many yogis speak of being assailed by several of them at once—the "multiple-hindrance attack." To understand them better, let us consider them one at a time.

The first hindrance is desire for sense pleasure: pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily sensations, and mind states. What's the problem with desire—what's wrong with it? Nothing, really. There's nothing wrong with enjoying pleasant experiences. Given the difficulties we face in life, they are nice to have. But they fool us. They trick us into adopting the "if only" mentality: "If only I could have this," or "If only I had the right job," or "If only I could find the right relationship," or "If only I had the right clothes," or "If only I had the right personality, then I would be happy." We are taught that if we can get enough pleasurable experiences, pasting them together quickly one after another, our life will be happy. A good game of tennis followed by a delicious dinner, a fine movie, then wonderful sex and sleep, a good morning jog, a fine hour of meditation, an excellent breakfast, and off to an exciting morning at work, and so on. Our society is masterful at perpetuating the ruse: "Buy this, look like that, eat that, act like this, own that . . . and you too can be happy." There is no problem with enjoying pleasant experiences, and to practice does not mean to dismiss them. But they don't really satisfy the heart, do they? For a moment we experience a pleasant thought or taste or sensation, and then it's gone, and with it the sense of happiness it brought. Then it's on to the next thing. The whole process can become very tiring and empty.

Of course we don't always ask for a lot; sometimes we settle for very little. At the beginning of a meditation retreat people often spend a lot of time dwelling on desires they carry in with them: "If only I had that house," or "If only I had more money." But as they settle into the limits placed on them by the retreat, the desires get smaller: "If only they would put out something sweet after lunch," or "If only the sitting were five minutes shorter." In a situation like a retreat—or a prison, for that matter—where the possibilities for fulfilling desires are limited, it becomes clear that the strength of a desire is determined not by the particular object, but by the degree of attachment in the mind, and the desire for a piece of candy can be as powerful as the desire for a Mercedes Benz.

Again, the problem is not the object of desire, but the energy in the mind. The energy of desire keeps us moving, looking for that thing that is really going to do it for us. The wanting mind is itself painful. It's a self-perpetuating habit that does not allow us to be where we are because we are grasping for something somewhere else. Even when we get what we want, we then want something more or different because the habit of wanting is so strong. It is a sense that being here and now is not enough,

that we are somehow incomplete, and it keeps us cut off from the joy of our own natural completeness. We are never content. It is the same force in the world at large that creates the havoc of people wanting and consuming, hoarding, and fighting wars to have more and more, for pleasure and for security that are never fulfilled.

In India they say that when a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket sees only the saint's pockets. What we want will distort and limit our perception; it will determine what we see. If we are hungry and we walk down the street, we don't see shoe stores or the weather or the clouds. We see there is a nice Greek restaurant. "I could have feta cheese and a nice salad," or "There's an Italian restaurant. Maybe I'll have pizza or manicotti," or "There's McDonald's. Maybe I'll have a burger."

People can get so lost in the imagination that meditators on retreat have often glimpsed a potential partner and gone through a whole romance (meeting, courtship, marriage, children, even divorce) without ever actually saying a word to that person. We call this the vipassana romance.

So the force of desire can cloud our minds, bringing distortion and delusion in its wake. As it says in the *Tao Te Ching*, "The secret waits for eyes unclouded by longing." We can see how desire interferes with our being able to open up to things as they are, in a freer, more joyful way. It interferes with our power to deeply open to the truth, to relate directly and wisely to what is actually here.

The second difficult energy we encounter is aversion, hatred, anger, and ill will. While desire and the wanting mind are seductive and can easily fool us, the opposite energy of anger and aversion is clearer because its unpleasantness is obvious. Anger and hatred are usually painful. We might find some enjoyment in it for a while, but it closes our heart. It has a burning, tight quality that we can't get away from.

Like desire, anger is an extremely powerful force. It can be experienced toward an object that is present with us or one that is far away. We sometimes experience great anger over past events that are long gone and about which we can do nothing. Strangely enough, we can even get furious over something that has not happened, but that we only imagine might. When it is strong in the mind, anger colors our entire experience of life. When our mood is bad, then no matter who walks in the room or where we go that day, something is wrong. Anger can be a source of tremendous suffering in our own minds, in our interactions with others, and in the world at large.

Although we generally don't think of them as such, fear and judgment and boredom are all forms of aversion. When we examine them, we see that they are based on our dislike of some aspect of experience. With the

mind full of dislike, full of wanting to separate or withdraw from our experience, how can we become concentrated or explore the present moment in a spirit of discovery? To practice we need to come very close to and investigate this moment, not push it away or pull away from it. So we need to learn to work with all these forms of our aversion.

The third common hindrance that arises is sloth and torpor. This includes laziness, dullness, lack of vitality, fogginess, and sleepiness. Clarity and wakefulness fade when the mind is overcome with sloth and torpor. The mind becomes unworkable and cloudy. When sloth and torpor overcome us, it is a big obstacle in practice.

Restlessness, the opposite of torpor, manifests as the fourth hindrance. With restlessness there is agitation, nervousness, anxiety, and worry. The mind spins in circles or flops around like a fish out of water. The body can be filled with restless energy, vibrating, jumpy, on edge. Or sometimes we sit down to meditate and the mind runs through the same routines over and over. Of course, no matter how much we worry and fret over something, it never helps the situation. Still the mind gets caught in reminiscences and regrets, and we spin out hours of stories. When the mind is restless, we jump from object to object. It is difficult to sit still, and our concentration becomes scattered and dispersed.

The last of the five hindrances is doubt. Doubt can be the most difficult of all to work with, because when we believe it and get caught by it, our practice just stops cold. We become paralyzed. All kinds of doubt might assail us; doubts about ourselves and our capacities, doubts about our teachers, doubts about the dharma itself—"Does it really work? I sit here and all that happens is my knees hurt and I feel restless. Maybe the Buddha really didn't know what he was talking about." We might doubt the practice or doubt that it is the right practice for us. "It's too hard. Maybe I should try Sufi dancing." Or we think it's the right practice but the wrong time. Or it's the right practice and the right time, but our body's not yet in good enough shape. It doesn't matter what the object is; when the skeptical, doubting mind catches us, we're stuck.

WORKING WITH THE HINDRANCES

How do these five hindrances interfere with our clarity of mind? There is a traditional analogy comparing our nature to a pond, and the point of practice is to see to the depths of the pond. Desire comes like beautifully colored dyes in the water that obstruct our vision. When we are angry it is as though the pond were on a boiling-hot spring. Again, we cannot see far. Sloth and torpor are like a thick layer of algae growing on

the pond's surface. Restlessness is like a strong wind blowing on the pond's surface and creating waves. And doubt is like mud stirred up from the pond's bottom. Getting caught by any of these hindrances makes it impossible to see clearly into our heart and mind.

We are each challenged by these hindrances again and again in the course of our practice. So it is important that we learn to work with them when they arise. If we are able to work with them skillfully, we can actually use these times to strengthen, clarify, and deepen our awareness and understanding.

How do we approach them? Certainly not by judgment or suppression. Suppression doesn't work, because suppression is itself a form of aversion. It deadens our awareness and our life. On the other hand, we don't want to get involved in expressing all the hindrances and acting them all out. That simply reinforces the patterns (and might get us in other trouble as well).

If we don't suppress these energies and don't act upon all of them, then what is left? The most direct way is to be mindful of them, to transform them into the object of meditation. Through the power of mindfulness we can make these very forces another aspect of our meditation, using awareness of them to bring the mind to greater freedom. Working with them can be the source of insight and energy. We can directly observe the nature of desire, anger, doubt, and fear and really understand how these forces operate in the mind. We can use their power to enliven and strengthen our investigation. And these very forces can teach us the truth of the dharma, for we can see in their operation the laws of karma, or impermanence and impersonality. With mindfulness, our way of transforming Mara's army is wonderfully simple. We don't have to fight to overcome them. Instead, through awareness, we allow their energy to teach us their laws. We learn to experience even their extremes without being caught or overcome by them. Learning to work with the hindrances in this way is a particularly important part of actualizing our practice amid the stress and demands of daily life.

There is a second whole way of working with hindrances. This is recommended for use when they are particularly strong. Through cultivating their opposite states as a balance or remedy, we can help weaken the hindrances and unhook ourselves from our strong entanglement with them. When they are weaker, we are better able to observe them mindfully. A third way for more advanced students to work with these energies deserves a brief mention as well. When concentration becomes quite strong and the power of mindfulness is well developed, it becomes possible to simply *let go* of these states as soon as they arise. This letting go has no aversion in it; it is a directed choice to abandon one mind

state and redirect the concentration to a more skillful object such as the breath or a state of mental calm. This ability will come spontaneously in deeper states of practice, and most students need not be concerned with it unless it arises naturally. It cannot be used in the early parts of practice because without sufficient balance and steadiness it easily becomes aversion, a movement of judgment to get rid of the hindrances instead of observing them with mindfulness.

Let us begin with our usual meditations. How do we actually apply these ways of working in practice? For example, if sense desire arises, greed arises, wanting arises, what do we do? We look directly at this mind state and include it in the field of awareness. First make a soft mental note of it: "desire, desire." We can observe sense desire just as we observe the breath or sensations in the body. When a strong desire arises, turn all the attention to it; see it clearly. What is this desire? How does it feel in the body? What parts of the body are affected by it—the gut, the breath, the eyes? What does it feel like in the heart, in the mind? When it is present, are we happy or agitated, open or closed? Note "desire, desire" and see what happens to it. Pay meticulous attention.

If we look closely, we can learn a lot about this force that so greatly affects our lives and the world around us. It can cause wars; it is the force behind all the advertising in our society, behind much of our life. Have we ever stopped to examine it, to feel it directly, to discover a wise relation to it? When we look, we see that it creates tension, that it is actually painful. We can see how it arises out of our sense of longing and incompleteness, the feeling that we are separate and not whole. We see that it is also impermanent, essenceless. As we investigate desire, it reveals itself to us. It is actually just a thought and an accompanying feeling that comes and goes from the empty mind—that is all it is. That is easy to notice when we are not caught up in it, but many other times it seems very real. As Oscar Wilde said, "I can resist anything but temptation." The wanting mind is powerful, and learning to observe it will take some practice. Much of the power of desire comes from its being a habit with us. Our habitual patterns of desire are conditioned and reinforced in many ways, and they have tremendous momentum. But being mindful of desire does not mean getting involved in aversion toward it. Rather, it means watching desire come and go without being caught by it, and seeing its nature clearly.

Still, many times as we look carefully we can also see that beneath desire there is a more neutral, universal energy with which we live, an energy called the will to do. While sometimes it is associated with greed and grasping, it can also be directed by love, by compassion, and by wisdom. With the development of awareness we can get a taste of living in

states free from so much desire, of a more spontaneous and natural way of being without as much struggle or ambition. When we are no longer caught by desire, compassion and understanding will more naturally direct our life. This can be experienced and sensed directly in our practice. But it cannot be grasped by our thinking mind. It comes more clearly as we begin to recognize the moments of desirelessness and contentment that come between our desires. This is an exquisite area in which to pay attention.

When desire arises, it is a force that pulls us out of the moment into our imagination. Sometimes it becomes so strong that we are unable to watch it. One antidote is to resolve to practice moderation with regard to the object of desire. Another antidote is to reflect on impermanence, even on death. How much will fulfilling this desire mean at the end of our life? Recognize that no matter how many times we get what we want, it always passes. It's endless. It's like one of the Sufi tales about Mullah Nasruddin. After buying a basket of hot chili peppers because they were so cheap he couldn't resist, he began to eat them. Tears streamed down his cheeks, his tongue burned, and yet he continued. When one of his students asked him why, he replied, "I keep waiting for a sweet one!"

Of course, in our lives we will still act on desire much of the time. If we become mindful of it, then even our action will teach us, instead of just reinforcing our habits. One Indian meditation teacher who had a powerful craving for sweets tried to let go of it in sitting without much success. So one day he went out and bought a huge plate of his favorite sugary sweets. He planned to eat the whole thing, trying to be mindful as he did so. Actually he could hardly begin. By the end of that plate he was sick of sweets and a lot freer of the desire. But we have to pay attention to learn. When desire arises, look at it and let it come and go of itself. If it is too strong and you are unable to be mindful of it, use a remedy to help bring the mind back to balance. But continue to pay attention. It is making these energies mindful that brings insight and wisdom in our practice.

How can we work with the opposite of desire, aversion? Again, we begin by making the effort to be mindful of it, experiencing it fully and noting it as "anger, anger." Anger presents us with the same opportunity to learn, to find greater freedom. So we should not fear it, but investigate it. How does anger feel? Where in the body do we feel it? What is its temperature, its effect on the breath, its degree of pain? How does it affect the mind? Is the mind smaller, more rigid, tighter? We can learn a lot from anger. Anger shows us precisely where we are stuck, where our limits are, where we cling to beliefs and fears. Aversion is like a warning signal lighting up and saying "attached, attached." The amount of attachment is revealed by the strength of our anger. Often we cannot change

the conditions of our life, but we can always learn from them. Here, anger has come to teach us about its true nature, and our attention shows us the hurt, attachment, and identification that underlie it. Yet the attachment is optional. We can relate more wisely. When we stop and look at it, we will discover something fundamental about anger: conditioned by our viewpoint on that day, it is impermanent. It's a feeling with associated sensations and thoughts that come and go. We do not need to be bound to it or driven by it.

Of course, many of us have been conditioned to hate our anger. As we try to observe it, we will find a tendency to judge and suppress it—to get rid of it because it is "bad" and painful, or shameful and unspiritual. We must be very careful to bring an open mind and heart to our mindfulness. We need to let ourselves feel fully, even if it means touching the deepest wells of grief, sorrow, and rage within us. These are the forces that move our lives, and these are what we must feel and come to terms with. It's not a process of getting rid of something, but one of opening and understanding. So when anger or irritation or fear or boredom arises—any of these states rooted in aversion to experience—we must explore and observe it fully. We may need to actually let ourselves get caught up in it sometimes to understand it well. We will probably note anger or fear arising many times in practice before we have come to a balanced, mindful way. This is natural.

What we have to understand in working with anger and ill will is true of all the difficulties in our practice: that they are our strongest teachers. This became very clear in the spiritual community that G. I. Gurdjieff led in France. One old man who lived there was the personification of these qualities—irritable, messy, fighting with everyone, and unwilling to clean up or help at all. No one got along with him. Finally, after many frustrating months of trying to stay with the group, the old man left for Paris. Gurdjieff followed him and tried to convince him to return, but it had been too hard, and the man said no. At last Gurdjieff offered the man a very big monthly stipend if he returned. How could he refuse? When he returned everyone was aghast, and on hearing that he was being paid (while they were being charged a lot to be there), the community was up in arms. Gurdjieff called them together and after hearing their complaints laughed and explained: "This man is like yeast for bread." He said, "Without him here you would never really learn about anger, irritability, patience, and compassion. That is why you pay me, and why I hire him."

All these forces are part of our practice. Our main tool is to examine them with mindfulness. Still there are times when hatred and anger are too strong to watch. We can often balance them by developing thoughts

of compassion and forgiveness. This is not just a papering over of anger; it is a deep movement of the heart, a willingness to go beyond the conditions of a particular point of view. When we feel anger toward someone, we can consider that he or she is a being just like us, who has faced much suffering in life. If we had experienced the same circumstances and history of suffering as the other person, might we not act in the same way? So we allow ourselves to feel compassion, to feel his or her suffering. We can also first reflect upon someone we love very much and let loving thoughts grow in our heart, and then extend that energy toward the person or situation that is the object of our hatred. In this way, we do not cut off from the power of love and compassion within us. It is a very real power and an accessible one when we can remember it, and we can use it to still the turbulence and confusion that often surrounds our anger.

Boredom, judgment, and fear are also forms of aversion that we can learn to be mindful of. Usually we are afraid of boredom and will do anything to avoid it. So we go to the refrigerator, pick up the phone, watch TV, read a novel, busy ourselves constantly to escape our loneliness, our emptiness, our boredom. Without awareness it has a great power over us. Yet we need not let boredom run our lives this way. What is boredom when it is experienced in itself? Have we ever really stopped to look at it? Boredom comes from lack of attention. With it we also find restlessness, discouragement, and judgment. We get bored because we don't like what is happening and so don't pay attention. But if we stay with it, a whole new level of understanding and contentment can grow. In meditation we let boredom itself be an object of interest to explore. When it arises, feel the boredom. Note it, feel its texture, its energy, the pains and tension in it, the resistances to it. Look directly at the workings of this quality in the body and mind. We can finally stop running away or resisting it. Insight, consciousness, freedom are to be found not in some other experience, in some other moment, but in any moment in which we really learn to pay attention. When the awareness is clear and focused, even the repeated movement of the in- and out-breath can be the most incredibly interesting and wonderful experience.

In the same way, we can become aware of judgment. If we observe, we can see that judgment is actually just a thought, a series of words in the mind. When we don't get caught up in the story line, we can learn a great deal about the nature of thought by watching the judging mind. We can learn a great deal about the nature of suffering in life as well. Start by simply noting "juǎ_jing" when it arises—and noting it softly, like a whisper, not like a baseball bat, trying to get rid of it, because that's just more judging! At times in practice we find how incredibly active the judging mind is. We judge everything: too noisy, too fast, too hard, too long, too much,

too little. This is bad, that's no good, and underneath, fundamentally, we ourselves are judged as not being good. It is helpful to bring a lightness and tenderness to observing this aspect of mind. For humor, we can also count the judgments, like counting sheep. See if it is possible to discover 300 subtle judgments in an hour of sitting. This can bring a tremendous leap in attention.

Fear will also come in practice. It comes strongly for everyone at certain times. Let yourself experience it mindfully, noting, "fear, fear, fear." How does it feel? Where do you feel it in the body? What is it like in the heart, the mind? Of course, there are times when we are really caught by it. We identify with it, we resist it and push it away. To work with it mindfully, we must soften the attention and let ourselves touch it with our heart. Try not to be afraid of it. Sit with it, be aware of it, and after much practice, at some point there will simply come the recognition, "Oh, fear. Here you are again. Now, that's interesting." We will have made friends with our fear.

As our capacity to be mindful grows more continuous, we can find ourselves filled with joy and rapture. These states are born out of wholehearted attention and deep interest in the present moment. The fullness of our being is what provides this joy, not the particular object of the moment. A sight, a sound, a taste—whatever it is, it is not the source. When this unique kind of joy is present, anger and fear have ceased to overpower us, and we can taste another level of freedom.

Sloth and torpor are the next difficult energy. Sleepiness has three causes. One is the tiredness that signals a genuine need for sleep. This often comes in the first few days of a retreat or at home after a long day, when we sit after a period of great business and stress. This kind of sleepiness passes after we take some rest. The second kind of sleepiness comes as resistance to some unpleasant or fearful state of body or mind. We don't want to feel something, and so we get sleepy. A third cause of sleepiness is a result of the imbalance of concentration and energy in practice.

Usually sleepiness comes upon us gradually. As we sit, we can feel the sleepiness begin like tendrils of fog curling around our body and then whispering in our ear. "Come on, let's just take a little snooze. It'll be really nice." The mind then becomes dissipated and depleted, and we lose heart for what we have undertaken. This can happen many times in our sittings. Yet sleepiness is a workable state. To practice with sleepiness requires our full endeavor, because it is a powerful condition. Much of living is only half awake. Our life has been spent in sleep and sleepwalking; meditation means waking up. So we begin by noting it and bringing mindfulness to the sleepiness. Be aware of how the body feels when it's

tired, the heaviness, the softening posture, the sense in the eyes. Of course, if we're sleepy and nodding off, it is somewhat difficult to watch. Observe as much as you are able. Pay attention to its beginning, middle, and end, and to the various components of the experience. See the impersonal conditions that cause it. Is it tiredness or resistance? Sometimes interested, penetrating awareness of sleepiness can itself arouse the energy to dispel the sleepiness and bring insight and understanding. Sometimes when we recognize that the sleepy or lazy mind is resistance in us, we can discover an important fear or difficulty just underneath it. Such states as loneliness, sorrow, emptiness, and loss of control are common ones that we avoid, and when we recognize them with mindfulness, our whole practice can open up to a new level. It is useful to know that some sleepiness can also be caused by the development of concentration and calm in the mind. If we get quite concentrated but have not balanced the mind by arousing an equal amount of energy, we will be stuck in a calm but dull state. This, too, requires careful attention.

There are other ways of working with this hindrance. Sit up straight and take a few deep breaths. Meditate with your eyes open wide. Stand in place for a few minutes or do walking meditation. If it's really bad, walk briskly or walk backward. Splash some water on your face. Sleepiness is something we can respond to creatively. When I was going through a long period of sleepiness in practice, my teacher, Achaan Chaa, had me sit on the edge of a very deep well. The fear of falling in kept me quite awake! Sleepiness is workable. When the mind is attacked by sluggishness and it becomes too constricted and heavy, our effort should be to balance the mind by making it more alive. We can accomplish this through continually trying to direct the mind to the object of this very moment, and then this very moment, and so on. The accuracy and immediacy of the watchfulness—saying in effect, “Just this breath” or “Just this step,” without trying to see beyond it, will steady the mind. If we can say, “Just this breath,” in every single moment, from moment to moment, the mind will become expansive and refreshed, and sluggishness will disappear. When nothing at all seems to work, then it is time to rest.

The fourth common difficult energy is restlessness. When this comes on the inner radio, try not to judge it or condemn it. Like all other phenomena, it is conditioned and it comes and goes. Be mindful and note, “restless, restless.” Let yourself experience restlessness without indulging or getting caught up in the content of its story. It can be terribly unpleasant; the body filled with nervous energy, the mind spinning with worry. Open to it and observe it without identifying with it or taking it as self. It is not “my restlessness,” but rather an impermanent state born out of conditions and bound to change. If it gets very intense, think to your-

self, “Okay, I'm ready. I'll be the first meditator in America to actually die of restlessness.” Surrender and see what happens. Like everything else, restlessness is a composite, a series of thoughts, feelings, and sensations. But because we believe it to be something solid, it has a great deal of power over us. When we stop resisting and simply allow it to move through us with mindful attention, we can see how transitory and insubstantial the state actually is.

One antidote to restlessness is concentration. When restlessness is too strong to simply observe, try relaxing and counting your breaths—one to ten, then start again at one—until the mind comes back to balance. If it helps, breathe slightly more deeply than usual as a way of collecting and softening the body and mind.

Part of understanding restlessness is understanding that meditation, like life, has its way of recycling. Some people don't like the aspect of life that has so many cycles. They want it to be very even and not have so many ups and downs. Unfortunately, on our planet, things don't work that way. There are constant changes. Our practice is to relate to what Zorba the Greek called “the whole catastrophe,” all the parts of it—the beautiful, the pleasant, the troublesome, and the unpleasant—with a certain amount of ease and humor.

This quality of acceptance is the ground out of which true insight and understanding develop. If we don't accept some aspect of ourselves—a feeling, a physical or mental sense of ourselves—then we cannot learn about it. We cannot discover its nature and become free in relationship to it. We become afraid, we resist, we judge, and we try to push away. We cannot look deeply and push away at the same time. When mindfulness is well developed and the ground of acceptance is laid, then the body and mind are filled with a sense of comfort. Even if something difficult or painful has arisen, this comfort is underlying it. The element of comfort is also an antidote to restlessness and anxiety.

The fifth hindrance is doubt. Look at it carefully and with detachment. Have we ever really observed the voice that says, “I can't do it. It's too hard. It's the wrong time to sit. Where is this getting me anyway? Maybe I should try some other practice”? What do we see? Doubt is a string of words in the mind, often associated with a subtle feeling of fear and resistance. When we become mindful of doubt as a thought process, when we note, “doubting, doubting,” and when we do not become involved in its content, a marvelous transformation occurs: doubt itself becomes the source of awareness. We can learn a great deal about the impermanent, ungraspable nature of the mind through watching doubt. We also learn about what it means to be identified with and caught up in our moods and state of mind. When we are caught up in doubt, there is a great deal of

suffering. And in the moment, when we feel it without grasping, our whole mind becomes freer and lighter.

One aspect of doubt that is especially difficult is the inability of the mind to focus on anything; the mind runs all over the place, considering possibilities, and remains indecisive. An antidote to this is to come fully back to the present moment, with a degree of continuity, a firmness and steadiness of mind. Gradually, this dispels confusion. Sometimes doubt is too strong, and we become muddled in it. Doubt can be balanced by developing faith. To strengthen faith we can ask questions or read great books. We can reflect on the inspiration of the hundreds of thousands of people in the spiritual life who have followed the path of inner awareness and practice before us. It has been valued by every great culture. To live with great wisdom and compassion is possible for anyone who genuinely undertakes a training of their heart and mind. What better thing to do with our life? A clear understanding of the teachings and wise reflecting upon them can inspire faith and help the mind return to a place of balance. It is natural for the heart to doubt. But let us understand it and let the doubt lead us to a deeper attention and a more complete seeking for the truth.

All of the kinds of doubts that come as a resistance—"It's not working today, I'm not ready, it's too hard"—could be called small doubts. After some practice we can learn to work skillfully with them. There also arises another level of doubt, which is very useful to us. It is called the Great Doubt, the deep desire to know our true nature or the meaning of love or freedom. The Great Doubt asks, "Who am I?" or "What is freedom?" or searches for the end of suffering. This doubt is a source of energy and inspiration in practice and is akin to the factor of enlightenment called investigation, about which we will speak in Chapter 6. A spirit of true investigation and inquiry is essential to enliven and deepen our spiritual practice, to keep it from being imitative. Working with the spirit, we can even find that buried within each difficulty is hidden treasure. The difficulties of doubt can lead to the discovery of our Great Doubt. The hurt of anger can lead us to a deeper sense of strength and love, and underlying restlessness is a source of spaciousness and peace.

The path of awakening is our great and wondrous legacy as human beings. It will often be difficult and at times seem almost impossible. Thomas Merton writes, "True love and prayer are learned in the hour when love becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone." When we remember this, the difficulties we encounter in practice become themselves part of the fullness of meditation, a place to learn and to open the heart. They are the juice, part of what makes us alive. Working with these hindrances will lead us to great insight and great understanding.

So the purpose of practice is not to create a special state of mind. That is always temporary. It is to work directly with the most primary elements of our experience, all the aspects of our body, our mind, to see the way we get trapped by our fears and desires and anger and to learn directly our capacity for freedom. If we work with them, the hindrances will enrich our lives. They have been called manure for enlightenment, and some teachers speak of them as "mind weeds," which we pull up and bury near the plant to give it nourishment. Our practice is to use all that arises within us for the growth of understanding, compassion, and freedom.

J. K.

EXERCISE

Making the Hindrances Part of the Path

Choose one of the most frequent and difficult mind states that arise in your practice, such as irritation, fear, boredom, lust, doubt, or restlessness. For one week in your daily sitting be particularly aware each time this state arises. Watch carefully for it. Notice how it begins and what precedes it. Notice if there is a particular thought or image that triggers this state. Notice how long it lasts and when it ends. Notice what state usually follows it. Observe whether it ever arises very slightly or softly. Can you see it as just a whisper in the mind? See how loud and strong it gets. Notice what patterns of energy or tension reflect this state in the body. Become aware of any physical or mental resistance to experiencing this state. Soften and receive even the resistance. Finally sit and be aware of the breath, watching and waiting for this state, allowing it to come, and observing it like an old friend.