

The Five Hindrances

Dharma Talk by Genko Ni-Osho

Second Day of Spring Sesshin 2013

Reading the words of Shakyamuni Buddha from the Dhammapada, Chapter 3: “As an archer aims his arrow, the wise aim their restless thoughts, hard to aim, hard to restrain.

As a fish hooked and left on the sand thrashes about in agony, the mind being trained in meditation trembles all over, desperate to escape the hand of Mara.

Hard it is to train the mind, which goes where it likes and does what it wants. But a trained mind brings health and happiness. The wise can direct their thoughts, subtle and elusive, wherever they choose: a trained mind brings health and happiness.

Those who can direct their thoughts, which are unsubstantial and wander so aimlessly, are freed from the bonds of Mara.

They are not wise whose thoughts are not steady and minds are not serene, who do not know dharma, the law of life. They are wise whose thoughts are steady and minds serene, unaffected by good and bad. They are awake and free from fear. Remember, this body is like a fragile clay pot. Make your mind a fortress and conquer Mara with the weapon of wisdom. Guard your conquest always. Remember that this body will soon lie in the earth without life, without value, useless as a burned log.

More than those who hate you, more than all your enemies, an undisciplined mind does greater harm. More than your mother, more than your father, more than all your family, a well-disciplined mind does greater good.”

The second day of Sesshin! I know why Genjo gives me second day to give Dharma talks; it’s kind of a rough day. We’re all still getting our sea legs, although pretty much everyone here has experience or is catching on quickly. That’s wonderful! Of course, nobody knows what’s going on up here (points to head), do they? We can look real good while all sorts of mayhem is taking place. I have a whole string of questions in my head: “What’s for lunch?” “Is he ever going to ring that bell?” “Will I ever get the smell of sanitizer off my hands?” So, all that stuff just comes up unbidden. As Zen students, we’re really trained hard to come back to the breath, come back to the breath, come back to the breath and let go, let go, let go all that buzzing that goes on in our head. We can go really deep, really fast using that way of practicing. But there are times when it is useful to look at a different way to settle the mind. The Zen way of cut, cut, cut can leave us—if we’re not careful and not balanced about it—a little bit sharp around the edges.

So today, I want to talk about what are called “the Five Hindrances,” and look at how working with them can be another way of settling the mind. The Five Hindrances traditionally are: desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. And we’ll look at each of these.

Desire is that craving, clinging, grasping, thinking about all the other places you want to be, all the other things we want to be doing, that pop up when we simplify ourselves in any way. I got home last night after zazen and there was this huge pile of stuff on the dining room table! Our son's partner, Alicia, had been in Mexico on her family's farm helping out and she came back with what looked like five pounds of Mexican candy of one sort or another. On my way home, I had no thoughts of "I want a Mexican candy" (laughter) but when I saw this pile of brightly colored little tidbits on the table, I was like a little kid going through it! Guava fruit leather, chili peanuts - all kinds of stuff - and I probably spent a half hour sorting them into piles, just like a kid. Then I realized, "Oh man! How crazy!" I did try the guava fruit leather; it was very good!

But this conditioning! We don't realize how prone we are to reach for things, grasp at things, hold on to things; this behavior has a childish quality to it, really. When I spoke to Eido Roshi after Genki Roshi died, we were just reminiscing about qualities of Genki Roshi. I said, "You know, he sure had a strong streak of desire in him! I'd send him a box of tea sweets which would be enough to last any normal person at least a month and in a day or two, he'd call saying, 'More sweets sending!' I'd say, 'How can you eat a whole box of tea sweets in two days?'" And Eido Roshi responded, "You know, you have to remember that he and I were 13 when the war ended and, for five years after the war, there was no food. And those were the five years that we were growing. You can't even imagine how hungry we were. I was hungry, and I can only guess how hungry Genki was!" Because Eido Roshi was in nowhere near the poverty at that time that Genki Roshi was.

So this desire has a very, very strong root. We kind of laugh about Genki Roshi and the way he would eat, but it has a very, very deep root. So, traditionally, there is an antidote to desire, and it is generosity. If you are trying to grasp or cling to something, the antidote is to give it away. Distribute it elsewhere. And if you can't do that, then be grateful for it. What this does is, it really puts into sharp relief for us the fact that we are holding these things to ourselves. When desire is working in us, we can name it, and that gives us just enough space to observe what is going on rather than sink so deep into it. Observe and report. So you let yourself know what is going on.

Another way to work with this one is to remind ourselves how ephemeral this desire is. I had no thought of Mexican candy and then, all of a sudden, it was a big presence in my head and, the next thing you know, "Oh, I'm sleepy. I'll go lie down and take a nap." These things come and go in a very childlike way. Or like a dog. A dog wants a bone, so you give him a bone. Then you give him a toy, and he drops the bone and picks up the toy. We are just like that, and we can get lost in our stories about wanting if we don't name the wanting when it comes up in zazen. So that's desire.

Aversion is the second hindrance, and this one takes a lot of different forms. Just like desire is the one where we grasp, we cling to things, we crave, aversion is the same kind of energy but going in the opposite direction. This is not what we want, and we react by pushing it away from ourselves, whatever it might be. This can have a lot of different flavors. It can be anger, irritation, frustration, sorrow. All of these are ways to push away unpleasantness that comes up for us. So it's not the unpleasantness that's the problem. You may think, "Well, she's crazy," but it's true - it's not the pain in your knees that is the

problem. It's how we relate to the pain in our knees, and when we have aversion towards it, we don't get anywhere. We're just stuck in this pushing place.

The antidote, traditionally, for aversion is compassion - an open heart - and, when we're dealing with other people, it's easy to see how that might be the case. When we're in zazen, these strong feelings come up. Bargaining is another way we try to push away. For example, we may think, Okay pain, you can be here for awhile, as long as I get something out of it. I'm going to push against the pain, and hopefully it will help me go deeper. We need to recognize that, when we're in zazen, we need to recognize what's going on, that we're pushing - accept it, fully accept it that we're pushing against the pain - and open our hearts to ourselves. This is most critical. To say, "Okay, relax, just chill out a bit. You don't need to put that much strong, intense energy into pushing this away. Just sit with it for awhile."

Sleepiness! We certainly feed into this one well, with lack of sleep during sesshin. It's very, very easy to get completely overwhelmed by sleepiness and, certainly, sleepiness as a hindrance has a lot to do with an energy imbalance. In meditation we are supposed to be both tranquil and alert, at the same time. And, in the case of sleepiness, tranquil is kind of winning out and alert needs a little help here! There are some practical ways that you can help rebalance the energy. Genjo says, "Open your eyes. And, if your eyes keep shutting, open them wide." If you have to stare, bug-eyed, that's fine, if it will keep you awake. Change your posture if you need to, take advantage of the breaks to stand up and stretch, but find ways to build that energy up. If all else fails, take a nap. At a break, lie down and shut your eyes. But pay attention and know what this is. Is it an indulgence or is it really necessary? We need to really get to know that kind of heavy, dull sleepiness that we get.

But sometimes sleepiness isn't really sleepiness. It's zoning out or avoiding difficulties, masquerading as sleepiness. Some of us, when trouble comes, decide to just sit in the corner and be very quiet and let the trouble go past. And sleepiness does this for us. Sometimes that's okay. If it's an issue that keeps coming up in zazen for you and, every time it comes up, you find yourself falling asleep, you may not be ready to work with that one yet. So sometimes your body is sending you a message. But, oftentimes, sleepiness is our response—just as desire is our response to pleasant things coming up and aversion is our response to unpleasant things coming up—sleepiness can be our response to neutral things, boring things. Sometimes, if things don't catch our fancy, we just kind of ignore them and go on without giving them the attention they're due. Once again, if you find yourself sleepy, notice what's going on, name it and sit with it as best you can, with the heaviness. Learn what it feels like to be that sleepy without succumbing or trying to shake it off. Really experience that.

Another way we can work with persistent sleepiness is—if you've been focused on your breath or a koan—move from the breath to a sound, or touch. Get back in touch with your physical form, other than the breath. You can do this by noticing where your butt is on the cushion (you probably haven't forgotten that!), notice where your arm is touching your leg. Focus on some area where you're grounded in your physical presence and then come back to the breath. You may find that re-visiting your body in some other way may help you fight off sleepiness.

The next hindrance is restlessness, which is an imbalance of energy but in the opposite direction. Here we're too alert and not tranquil enough. One of the ways that this shows up is when sitting, we start this kind of obsessive planning. If you're tenzo, for instance, it may take the form of "Okay, I got the garlic chopped...when the bell rings, I'll go out and do this." It's a kind of inner commentary on what the cooking process is. Very understandable, but we do obsessive planning about all sorts of stuff. Mostly it is activity we do not have to plan right now, during zazen. But this might be one indication that we're restless.

Sometimes, we're dealing with an issue that's uncomfortable for us. Something comes up and it's really difficult to sit with it. There are folks who fall asleep with that—kind of go towards the avoidance end of the spectrum—and there are the restless folks who are wrestling with that discomfort, trying to get it manageable, again with that planning and working on it. Once again, try to identify what is going on, specifically, accurately and concretely what is going on, and connect with that as it is. This is another place where grounding yourself in your body is helpful. Taking advantage of kinhin (walking meditation) can help. During kinhin we're moving around just enough that we can untangle what the cause of the restlessness is, get a better handle on it, and then, when we get to the cushion, we can work with it. But getting grounded in our body is very helpful. After working with the hindrances, I often think of the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree on that last night, when Mara is tempting him. Mara says, "Just who do you think you are, to try to achieve enlightenment?" Buddha touches the ground, and we always say he's calling forth the earth as a witness. I think he's also saying, "Ground yourself, Shakyamuni, ground yourself." So feeling the touch of your own body is very important for both sleepiness and restlessness.

Another thing we do here in sesshin is samu, or work practice. I suspect that all of us attracted to Zen, particularly our Rinzai flavor of Zen, have a strong streak of restless nature in us, because we all love samu so much. And this was a big thing for Genki Roshi. He was nothing if not restless! He found many beautiful, creative, intelligent ways to deal with that restlessness during samu.

So those are the first four hindrances. I think of them as four of the Dwarfs. They're Smiley, Cranky, Sleepy and Twitchy (laughter). And the fifth one is doubt. That's kind of an outlier because it doesn't have an opposite kind of energy, but it's definitely one we need to pay attention to. This is not doubt as in "Great Doubt" or "Make your whole body one great inquiry." That's not the kind of doubt we are talking about. This is about indecision, a lack of willingness to take risks, so we're holding back in some way. This is what doubt is. For me, this dwarf is named "Ms. Skeptic." This is the person that doesn't just plunge in and do something, but says, "Hmm, why are we doing that? That seems kind of weird. I don't know if I like doing it that way. I think we should do it another way." Just that kind of judgmental commentary that goes on and on in our minds about whatever it is we're doing. The antidote for judgment is considered to be sustained attention and focus. Sustain your attention, focus on what you really need to be focused on, and don't comment around the edges of it. Other ways in which we can work with doubt, if it's a strong part of our own hindrance nature, is just to express a willingness to learn, and a gentle curiosity and sense of adventure about what we're doing: "Well, this is weird but let's give it a shot!" Just move past the judgment, and overcome the doubting in that way. Take the risk! A very important part of it, take the risk.

So every one of these mind states or hindrances has a different kind of quality to it. In the Tibetan tradition, desire is considered to have a cloudlike nature, very humid and close. And it's true. We can be surrounded by our stuff and the things we want to hang onto and they can smother us. Aversion is like smoke, hot, billowing smoke sending ash all around, and heat, and dryness. This is what aversion does to us. Sleepiness is like a foggy mist. You can't plow through it. You can't see through it; you can't wade through it. Restlessness is a very interesting characterization in the Tibetan tradition; it's considered an eclipse of the sun or moon, a very strong and active blocking of what's going on. And doubt is like a cyclone, sending dust up into the air and obscuring things in that way. So this is how the Tibetans see these. If we can really get in touch with the quality of each of these hindrances, we can move past using an antidote and play off their own unique energy. Once we reach a little bit more of a tranquil state and are a little bit more clearheaded, we can take these hindrances—particularly the ones that are strong in our own selves—and transform their energy into something positive.

First of all, desire. Without desire, none of us would be here because we wouldn't have survived without wanting to eat and drink. Genki Roshi's strong desire came from a very strong survival mechanism, which he absolutely had to have, to survive his childhood. Desire is also a good friend to us. The energy inside desire can be very powerful and helpful.

Likewise, the energy in aversion protects us from things that can be dangerous. There are ways it can blow through things where nothing else can blow through them, when we take this energy and transform it.

Likewise, sleepiness. Sometimes, we need to sleep, to pay attention to our body and just rest and replenish ourselves. And sometimes we do like the bamboo and just bend, until the strong wind blowing at us has passed. So the energy of sleepiness can allow us to be supple and flexible and know when to duck. This is what sleepiness energy can do for us.

Likewise, restlessness. Look at all we can do during samu. We can accomplish a tremendous amount of work during samu. If I'm feeling nervous or upset about something and can't sit still, I go out and weed in the garden. Absolutely the best antidote for restlessness, and I get a lot of work done. My husband Taishin always says, "It's great when you come back from sesshin! You clean things that don't normally get cleaned."

And then doubt—doubt is very much reinforced in this culture. Everyone has an opinion about everything. However, this tendency to judge is also the ability to discern, if it's used from a place of a broader perspective. We need to be able to discern between this and that. It's a very vital energy.

So as we work with each of these, transforming the energy into positive, this is the basis in the Tibetan tradition of what is called the Lojong, or "Mind Training Exercises" which are all post-meditation, that is, applied in our daily lives. It's taking what you got on the cushion and applying it in this way. But much of the value comes from taking negative situations and transforming them into positive. It's a very useful way to deal with these hindrances. Once we know what they are, can label them, can hold them and not be afraid of them, as we work with them, bit by bit, we let go of the kind of default track they play in us and we become more workable. Our minds become a bit more workable. And finally, we get to the

place where we each have our own little personal flavor—as long as we’re human, it’s not going to go away—but then we can let go of the one who lets go, and this is the final stage of working with each of these hindrances. We recognize them, we apply an antidote, we transform them and, finally, we let go of the one who is letting go.

I wanted to read one of the Songs of Realization. This is a Tibetan tradition I recently learned about. Apparently, the Tibetan Lamas do something very similar to the Chinese or the Japanese at the time of an enlightenment or realization experience. They would write a song about that experience, and Tibetans, being very different people, have very different kinds of songs from the Chinese or Japanese enlightenment verses. It’s been fun learning some of them. I’d like to read two verses from a song called “Seven Delights” by the Lord Gotsangpa, who was a Tibetan teacher from a couple centuries ago. This is what he sang:

When thoughts that there is something perceived and a perceiver

Lure my mind away and distract,

I don’t close my senses’ gateways to meditate without them

But plunge straight into their essential point.

They’re like clouds in the sky, there’s a shimmer where they fly;

Thoughts that rise, for me, sheer delight!

When I’m plagued by god-like forces or demonic interference,

I do not drive them out with rites and spells;

The thing to chase away is the egoistic thinking

Built up on the idea of a self.

This will turn those ranks of Maras into your own special forces;

When obstacles arise, sheer delight!”

So for the rest of sesshin, I wish all of us “sheer delight” in dealing with our hindrances!

Dhammapada passage from translation by Eknath Easwaran.

Closing verses from Seven Delights, by Lord Gotsangpa, translated by Jim Scott and Anne Burchardi, in Songs of Realization, arranged by the Marpa Translation Committee under the direction of Khenchen Tsultrim, Gyamtso Rinpoche.