

Near Friends of the Five Hindrances

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So hello everyone. Nice to have you here. So I begin with this talk with evoking a simple, maybe obvious idea that our lives are often challenging. That being a human being is challenging in so many different ways. Small ways every day and big ways. Existential ways and sooner or later in life.

And then how do we respond to those challenges? And there are two ways that I'd like to suggest. One is a way that closes possibilities, that we narrow our focus, we close down. And the other way is we open possibilities. We create more possibilities. We're open to things being different.

One way closes our minds, our hearts. Another way opens it. One way kind of marshals more self-centeredness in the process, that it kind of supports self-centeredness. And the other one supports kind of a decrease in self-centeredness. So there's some other way of being in the world that's much more satisfying than that.

And for these divisions in these two different ways, I want to talk about the hindrances and what I call their near opposites or near friends, to use kind of a Buddhist terminology. And for those of you who don't know, the hindrances are very common teachings in the insight tradition world in Buddhism. And people who want to develop the insight practice that we teach, you're supposed to become an expert on the hindrances. There's a lot of things that these are really the primary, considered to be some of the primary forces in the mind that you want to be mindful of. Because they're the forces that hinder mindfulness.

And the principle is the more you can become aware of what hinders your ability to be present in a clear, open way, the easier it is to be open in a clear, open way. Rather than running away from the challenges to being present, we want to be present for the very challenges of being present so that we can work through them or not have them be such challenges. And the

five hindrances, I'll give you a list in a few minutes, are one of the primary strategies that people have to cope with human challenges in unuseful ways. And it's helpful to see them as strategies rather than just kind of innate things that's how we are. That we're challenged and we kind of try to react to it in a way.

And then there's the opposite of the hindrances and there's many opposites we can call them. The near opposites or the near friends are those that resemble the very problem that we're addressing. So things that resemble the hindrances but are not the hindrances, they take us in the opposite direction. And so it's easy to confuse the two or to think that these near friends of the hindrances are also hindrances we're supposed to kind of not have. But if we can appreciate that there's something that's very closely related that is actually has a very different effect on us, then we can maybe, it's easier to kind of slide over from the hindrances to the near friends or it's easier to kind of just kind of feel our way.

Maybe both are existing together sometimes and we can find the beneficial one and avoid the one that is not so beneficial. So the five hindrances, to give the simplest version of the list, is sensual desire, ill will, and then, I call it rigidity. And then restlessness and doubt. So we'll go into those a little bit more. And their near friends, the near friend of sensual desire, is kind of a healthy desire. A wish that I'll talk more about.

There are healthy desires in Buddhism and sometimes the popular idea of Buddhism is that it teaches that desires are the cause of suffering and so get rid of all your desires. And this is not possible. Maybe not without becoming seriously psychologically troubled. And so there are healthy desires. The opposite or near friend of ill will, many people immediately go to good will, but that's kind of like the far opposite. The near opposite of it is to avoid.

And sometimes the ill will is called aversion. And so, but there is healthy averting. And so much so that one Buddhist teacher I know in America has complained to us, people like me, you guys are using the word aversion, but aversion is good sometimes. And I've argued back. He says, no, no. In the English way we speak, use the word, aversion always is negative.

That's just the way we use it. It's a kind of a hostility, a little kind of like, don't like something, you're pushing something away. And he said, no, no. It just means to turn away. And so the Latin means to turn away. So avert. You avert yourself sometimes in a good way. But avoid. So there's ill will. And then there's healthy avoiding of things. That doesn't involve any hostility.

There is this rigidity. And the opposite is a relaxation. Rest. Becoming still without being rigid. Becoming still by relaxing deeply. And then there's restlessness. And the opposite, the near

enemy of that, near friend of that, is to be enlivened, vitality, to be vitalized. And those are good things, to have a sense of wonderful, calm, but engaged, flowing vitality. And without being restless. And then the opposite of doubt is questioning. To question things, to have an inquiring mind.

So we find our way and kind of feel our way. What's the difference between these two? And as we recognize we have the hindrances operating. And their strategies to somehow cope with unhelpful strategies of coping with some challenge, we can ask ourselves, what is the way of coping with a challenge that doesn't close us down, that opens us up to possibilities, that opens up the mind, that doesn't overwhelm us, doesn't have us kind of, yeah, so.

So, So the first one. And so sensual desire. That is, it can be so strong sometimes that we can call it sensual hunger or thirsting for things. And we know that some people are addicted to what could be called pleasures. And it makes a huge It's a huge cost to people's lives, to their families, to their friends, to their careers, when the addictive approach to sensual desires takes over.

But even way short of that, people can spend an inordinate amount of time being attached to comfort and seeking comfort as a way of solace, as a way of feeling stressed, feeling troubled, challenged by something, and then using comfort to not address the issue, but rather to get away from it. So rather to somehow, you know, one of my strategies that in my life that doesn't serve me very well, I call it the ostrich approach. And so sometimes when things are really challenging, I kind of pull in and kind of get really quiet and kind of like get involved in something. And I just not notice the problem, just like it's going to go away. It doesn't work. So if you ever see me that way, just giggle. You don't have to be an ostrich right now.

But comfort is one of those ways for some people. Eating a lot maybe. Some people, I've known people who watch, I keep wanting to say TV. Who has a TV anymore? But the, you know, to watch Netflix or watch a movie or something or YouTube or something. And, and the, and now people can tell me, you know, I just like, I binge watched and I just feel awful. Really feel bad, stay up late, and it can drain one's vitality to spend too much time watching something on the screens. But to be comfortable, to avoid some kind of challenge we have.

The near friend of this is a healthy desire, but in particular one that I think is fascinating to think about, that I learned from Zen practice, has to do with the request. And in Zen they had the question, what is being requested of me right now? So rather than being self-asserting oneself, what do I want here? What do I need here? In Zen, the question is, what's the request of me from reality?

So in any circumstance, and sometimes it was just a small thing, like if you had to put away a book that you were looking at. I don't know if people have books, but TVs, books. But if you want to put away your shoes, they'll say that. And so the question would be, what's the request of the shoes? Or what's the request of the shoe rack? And that's a way of breaking through, kind of like, just doesn't matter, you know, or I'm just going to put it anywhere I damn please. But actually, what's the request? You look at the shoe rack, and you look at your shoes, and you look at who's coming, and you say, well, if I put them over a little bit to the right, there's a little more space for more people that are coming. That's the request of the moment. So what's the request? What's being asked of me?

Some people, what's being requested? What did we do that's beautiful? What's the thing that shows a kind of mindfulness in what we're doing so that it spreads out from us to others because things are taken care of in a way that supports other people to be present in a caring way to whatever they do. And so I saw this with shoe racks. You know, it's interesting to study Buddhism. If you do a sociological study of different cultures of Buddhism by how the different places treat their shoes, it's fascinating. There are some places where the shoes are just fanned out in front of the entryway and you have to kind of step over them to get to the, you know, you put your shoes in the far end of the fanning. In other places, like in Zen, Japanese Zen, where it's just so orderly, that was really valuable for me when I went into Japanese Zen Buddhism. Was I learned to delight in how I put my shoes in the shoe rack. It was like, oh, do this with care. Like, this is important. As opposed to, I have more important things to do than put my shoes in the shoe rack. In Zen, everything is important. And to learn this kind of presence, OK, here. So what's the request here, is what they say in Zen.

But to turn that around, and you can also say, what is your request of reality? Rather than what is your desire, what's the heart's request? Is there something that, if you take time to ask yourself, what do I really want right now? What's the request? And I love language, you know, words and etymology. So, re-request. The spiritual quest. The quest. What's your life quest? What's your spiritual quest? And now, what is the re-request? What's the deeper quest here in this situation now? And what do you really most want from the situation? As opposed to sensual desire.

So if we have a sensual desire for something, say we want to have sensual desire for comfort food, And we stand in front of the cabinets or the refrigerator. And you stop and say, what's the request right now? What is my deeper quest? How does this, what I'm doing right now, tie into the deeper quest purpose that I have for my life? What's my heart's deeper request than simply comfort? To take that time and ask that question, maybe you'll see there's a different

desire. I've done that sometimes and said, oh, I don't need to do this. But it would be nice to meditate right now. Because that's a deep request. That really taps into something, for me, very deep inside, with a deeper sense of integrity than just having more chips. So here, just sit and be present here. So what's the request? So the near friend of central desire is this deeper desire, the quest.

So then there's ill will, aversion, in some schools of Buddhism. And that always has a quality of hostility in it. And even though it can be quite mild, annoyance with things. And this always closes down the heart, always closes the mind when we're caught in ill will. And it's always a kind of reinforcement of self-centeredness. But to avert, to avoid things which are unhealthy, that doesn't have to be self-centered. That can be actually the opposite.

So for example, to avoid the tendency to be hostile, to feel you have ill will towards whoever comes along. And you say, you know, I think I'm going to be careful today. Maybe I'll go for a walk around the block before I go to this meeting where I'm just angry at everyone. So we're averting, avoiding how we're feeling, not just going along like usual and trying to find another way that's not hostile. So there is a healthy way of saying, not this, not now. Let me stop doing this. Let me turn away from this kind of thing. And some of us do that regularly in meditation. I go to, you know, we're sitting here meditating. And after a while, you're tracking a little bit, noticing what you're thinking about in meditation, kind of distracted thoughts. And say, you know, I don't need to think about that anymore. This is not the time and place for this.

And so there can be hostility to that, angry with yourself for having one more distracted thought. But that doesn't help you to do that. That kind of creates more self-centeredness, because it's about me not liking something, me doing the wrong thing. But if it's instead, you say, no, this is not useful. What is the request now? The request is to open up in some deep way to my experience here and now. And for that purpose, let me stop thinking about these things. Let me avoid it. Let me avert myself, attention, from those thoughts to being here with this deeper request, this deeper intention we might have.

And this is where the first thing, request, this deeper desire, comes back over and over again to support us. Because if we know we have a deeper desire, deeper quest of what our life is about, then it's easier to avert from things that don't serve us. Let's come back to the request, the deep spiritual quest, something that we have.

And then the third hindrance is usually classically described as sloth and torpor. And some people love this word sloth. I noticed that because I've been avoiding, I've come up with a different translation for the original Pāli, but some people have protested to me, because I guess that's cute, a sloth, or they like to do things slow, or you know, the kind of sloths

are inspiring for people who are always hectic and running around, and so you're welcome to keep sloth if you're one of those people. But these are, whatever it is, they are ways of shutting down. They're ways of resistance. There's a challenge and we shut down. There's a challenge and we are closing down. We're not open to being present. We're not vitalized and engaged and, you know, enlivened in a good way. The opposite happens.

And it's classic for children to do this if they don't like what's going on. And, oh, I'm so tired. And it's amazing how quickly they can switch that over to be fully energized. I mean, just like in a moment's notice, all you have to do is say ice cream. And they have all the energy they need. But you know, oh, it's so difficult. I'm so tired. But adults do this too, as a strategy. Sometimes if we're overwhelmed, if we're deeply bored, if our self-centeredness is not being supported, there's a shutting down, a quieting down, a closing down that goes on.

In the extreme version, I like the word, the classic word does not, in the meaning of the classic Pāli word, *middha*, is not, literally means rigidity. And this works really well for one of the ways we really shut down that's based on fear. The freeze instinct that we have. And this is one of the really great challenges for people who go around with chronic built-up anxiety. They shut down. They freeze in certain situations. And it isn't necessarily because the mountain lion has come in. One of the earliest memories I have of really freezing and kind of disassociating in that fear was my freshman year in college. And everyone in the English class was required to go alone to see the professor in office hours. And that for me was so intimidating. And I remember going in there. And sitting there opposite the professor and I had such a complete feeling of disappearing. I said, why is this person looking at the wall? Because I wasn't there. And that's the last thing I was aware of before I was aware of walking down the hallway. And what happened between having that question, why is this person looking at the wall? And me walking down the hallway, I have no idea. I just kind of disassociated. And it was because I was, for me, that was so anxiety producing to be in front of this authority figure when I was 18. And so this freezing, this rigidity that goes on. And this is not healthy for us to do. Because it's all kinds of terrible things can happen in that disassociated, rigid state.

And then there's also lethargy. This is the kind of kid's strategy. It's so hard. I'm so tired. We kind of get heavy and resistant by being tired and sleepy. And not a few people end up sleeping in meditation. One of the reasons for that is because there's too much difficult material coming up. Strong emotions begin opening up. Meditation is not a straight route to becoming calm and happy. Meditation is a straight route to meeting yourself, discovering who you are. And that's not always good news. But it's real news. And if you really want to meet your-

self in a productive and useful way, mindfulness is the way to do that. And the benefit of that is if you really meet yourself deeply, even in the most challenging things, In the middle of that, ask, what's the request here? What's being requested of me in these challenges? What is my heart request, given that I have these challenges? And so when you have deep fear, deep anger, deep grief, deep sadness, what is the request? What's the deepest request? It's always useful.

So then, you know, so the opposite of this rigidity and lethargy is to have vitality, is to be enlivened. And this is something that can become slowly second nature. If you ask yourself the question, what is the posture that I should take now that is a little bit more lively, a little bit more engaged, has more energy to it, that feels good? Sitting in a chair. I can easily sit in a couch and with such slouching, in such a kind of way, that it actually begins draining my energy. And I can also capable of sitting away from, not use the backrest, sitting upright. And I can feel there's more energy here. I feel more alive and good. How do you walk? I'm easily possible, I can easily walk kind of feeling sorry for myself. And it's like walk kind of slow and kind of like, it doesn't feel good. I could also pick up the pace and it feels like, oh, now I'm engaged nicely. There's a more sense of engagement, of vitality. It doesn't take so much to shift a little bit to choose where the vitality is. Where's the vitality right now? And this can be a great antidote to, no, no, I'm confusing it. I'm so sorry to tell you this. I'm confusing the pairings. So lethargy and rigidity, the opposite of that, the near enemy of that is rest and relaxation. What needs to be rest and relax right here? And so both of them involve a stillness, a quieting. But there's a healthy one and an unhealthy one. Now we get to the other one. So make up for this.

So the The hindrance is restlessness. And classic language is restlessness and regrets. They both have the effect of creating agitation. And this is why they're together here. And so we can become so agitated by all kinds of reasons. Frustration. We can get agitated because we have unfulfilled desires. We can get agitated because we have unexpressed hostility that we just don't know what to do with. We can be restless because we have a lot of self-remorse and self-criticism, uncertainty about ourselves. We can be restless and agitated because of what we've done. Will people find out what we've done? And will we be blamed? And will people not like us? And so it's kind of sometimes anxiety produced, the agitation we live with.

The near enemy or the near friend of this kind of agitation, that's a healthy vitality. There is a kind of energy which is strong that we can live with that I call vitality or feeling physically enlivened. And this is what I'm proposing is that we can do a lot of small things through the day, choosing how to be present for something in a way that's enlivening or not enlivening.

And if you're standing in line at the supermarket, you might just stand there and just judge what other people are buying, or how quickly the clerk is, you know, doing the checkout, or look at the magazines, or wonder about, you know, which of these, these are nice, all these chocolates they're selling here. You know, and think, I want chocolate. And that's one option. But what would we feel like a nice, clear sense of physical and vitality standing here? Oh, if I stand on both feet, if I kind of stand facing a certain way, maybe I don't need to be looking at everything around me and losing track of myself. Maybe I can stand up a little bit stronger, a little bit straighter. And they're just, not that anyone has to notice dramatically, but there's vitality and there's presence, there's attention. And ask yourself the question, while you're looking at the National Enquirer, ask your question, what is your heart's deepest request? And probably you'll bat it away, that question. But ask the question, what is your deepest request? When you're standing upright, straight, present in a nice way, and then you might get a deep answer. Right there in the supermarket. Who would have believed?

And then we come to the last of these, doubt. And remember, doubt here, as a hindrance, is always something which closes us down. So always involves some kind of narrowing of attention. Some kind of narrowing possibilities. It involves uncertainty, indecisiveness, and confusion about what to do. The near friend of it that can look like that is healthy doubt, a healthy questioning. What's going on here? Inquisitiveness. Let me take a deeper look here. Let me find out what's happening here. I'm unsure what this is about. I'm unsure what I want. I'm unsure of things. But let's now reflect on this and consider. And then you can ask the question again, given my heart's deepest request, what perspective does that give? with what I have doubts about or uncertainty about. Does that offer some clarity?

And one of the clarities about the deepest request question is that you might not have an answer to what you're uncertain about, what you have some questions about, but you might have some answer about how you want to be in relationship to it. You want to be in relationship to the challenge you have. With presence, with attention, with uprightness, turning towards the challenge you have, rather than being pushed around by or caught up in the agitation of doubt, of uncertainty, of indecisiveness. And so in this mindfulness practice, a lot of it comes down to how do you want to show up for your life? How do you want to be present? What kind of attention do you want to bring to whatever you're doing? And those questions are relating to every time we're involved in something that's a challenge. How do I want to be now with this challenge?

All too often we have some serious challenge and the old operating systems kick in. Operating principles kick in. The habits kick in. I want to look for something pleasant instead. I want

to blame someone. I want to shut down. I just, I don't know if I want to, but I just kind of running around like a chicken without its head. Or I'm just filled with indecisiveness. These are all optional. We don't have to believe these hindrances, this way of being. We don't have to prioritize them. We don't have to think that they're true to be this way. Because they all represent ways that we are being, not true decisions, understandings of how reality is, how situations are. They're the response within us. And these are responses, the hindrances are responses that close down the range of possibilities we have in responding. And if we'd have a smaller range of possible ideas of how to respond or possible possibilities available, that can make the whole thing even more challenging and can reinforce the very strength of the hindrances. But if we can come into a way of being that opens up the field of possibilities, that can give us a lot more confidence, a lot more creativity. Then we can move in a different direction.

And one of the ways we do that with mindfulness practice is how we show up. And to show up, asking the question, what is the request here? The request of the situation, the request of my heart. What's a deeper quest that I have that this is part of? What is it that would be healthy to stop doing, so I can know better what is healthy to do? What is it that needs to relax here? Maybe it's the ill will. Maybe it's essential desire, the tension of that. What is it that needs to rest? What kind of respite do I need? Rest, relaxation is an important part of human life and a lot of people in our culture here locally don't get enough. And then in what way do I want to be vitalized, be enlivened by this life, show up in a way that I feel energized in a good way. I don't know what to do, the situation is difficult, but at least I'm sitting in a way that feels lively. I'm not going to give up my uprightness, my sense of vitality. Which we often give up. I've seen myself give up so subconsciously. I don't even know I'm doing it. Oh, the computer's not working. Oh, not again. I don't know how it works. And I don't even know that I'm doing it. But, you know, oh, look, the computer's not working. Look at that. I'm being given another opportunity to sit up straight. And then doubt. So what's the inquisitiveness, the curiosity, the questioning we can have that opens the field? And one question for that is, what am I not seeing here? What am I overlooking? I don't know what's happening here, I don't know what to decide to do, but am I missing something? Are there more possibilities here?

So, hindrances are an important part of our practice. Studying them, getting to know them. And as we study them in our practice, then we can also then know we have these things that look like them, that I'm calling the near friends, that are our friends. These are kind of the opposite ways of being. And they make the whole study of the hindrances, I think, more inter-

esting to have something close by that can offer you an alternative. So maybe the hegemony of the hindrances can decrease a little bit. And so next time you find yourself in a personal challenge, take the opportunity to kind of pause and ask yourself, which hindrance is operating here? And what alternative is there? Rather than to live with this hindrance operating and interfering with all the possible ways of responding. So thank you.

So those are my thoughts on this topic. And so we do have the potluck lunch today. It usually happens at the last Sunday of the month. And we have about, you know, seven minutes left, eight minutes before the usual time we end. So everyone's welcome to stay for the potluck, whether you brought something or not. It's just a nice way to hang out. It's an excuse to hang out with each other. So don't feel like you have to have brought something. And some of us will have tables here. Are tables set up outside too? Yeah, so there's tables outside as well. You can eat outside. And because it's a pathlak and it's nice to kind of meet people, say hello, especially if you've never been here. If you're willing to stay for a few minutes, you're welcome to leave if you prefer. But just a turn to maybe two people next to you. And look around, make sure no one's left out that way. And just look around and say hello. Say hello and introduce yourself. And maybe you have one or two things that were interesting for you from this talk you'd like to share with your new friend. And then in about five minutes there'll probably be a bell or something for the public. Thank you.