

Douglas C. B. Kraft

1126 McClaren, Carmichael, CA 95608 • (916) 480-9256 • dougk@easingawake.com

The Demon's Blessing

The hindrances are a large and very important topic in meditation. This talk is divided into two parts. Part 1 gives an overview of the hindrances and how to relate to them wisely. Part 2 goes into the nitty-gritty of eleven specific hindrances the Buddha discussed with his cousin Anuruddha.

Part 1: An Overview of Hindrances

Jacob was jealous of his big brother, Esau. Esau always got better stuff. In fact, Esau was going to get the entire family inheritance: sheep, goats, tents... everything. In ancient times, that was the rule: the oldest gets it all.

Their father, Isaac, was 180 according to legends: old, blind, and maybe a little feeble. So Jacob was able to trick his father into giving him the inheritance.

To get his birthright, Esau would have to kill Jacob. And he was enraged enough to do just that. So Jacob ran for his life.

He found safe haven in a neighboring country. He took up shepherding, married, and began to raise a family: he prospered.

He was tempted to forget about Esau and his past. But his heart nudged him to face his trickery and reconcile with his brother.

So he packed his tents, gathered his family, servants, and flocks and began the journey back to the homeland. It took weeks.

Late one afternoon they came to the Jabbok River – less than a day's walk from the old homestead. He set up camp for the night beside the river.

Then, in the dead of the night, Jacob awoke. The hair on the back of his neck was standing on end. There was something in the camp. Was it Esau come to kill him? Was it a wild beast? Was it a demon? Jacob couldn't tell.

What would you have done?

Jacob roused his household and sent them across the ford of the Jabbok toward the

homestead. Then alone, unarmed, in the black of night, and with no possibility of help, he went back into his abandoned camp.

Something grabbed him and threw him to the ground. Jacob grabbed its leg. Together they grappled in the dark. Jacob didn't prevail. But it didn't beat him either.

When the eastern sky turned grey with a hint of dawn it spoke, "Release me, for I must go."

Jacob said, "No."

The entity leaned over and with one finger dislocated Jacob's hip. Wow! Jacob realized this being was more powerful than it had let on! With one finger it had popped his leg out of its socket. It hurt!

It said, "Release me, for I must go."

What would you have done?

Jacob said, "No."

"What must I do to get you to release me?"

Jacob answered, "You must give me your blessing."

The demon turned out to be an angel. It said, "Your name shall no longer be 'Jacob.' You shall be known as 'Israel' and from you shall descend an entire nation."

At that time and in that culture, that was the highest blessing one could receive.

So Jacob released the angel. It left. And Jacob limped into the sunrise.

(Genesis 32:24-32)

Hindrances

On retreat I often spend the first day wrestling with demons. They may not be powerful enough to dislocate my hip. But they are good at dislocating my equanimity. And they are bold enough to come out in the broad daylight rather than wait for the dead of night. Their techniques may not be headlocks and half nelsons. But they don't mind perturbing me with doubts, poking me with restlessness, dulling me with lullabies, and disrupting me with endless patter.

Tibetan Buddhism sometimes calls these disruptions "demons." Theravadan Buddhism uses a more genteel term: "*nīvaraṇa*" which means "hindrances." *Nīvaraṇa* are things that hinder our meditative progress.

As we meditate, we become familiar with a wide variety of hindrances. They are the energies that rise out of our depths – often the unseen aspects of our being. Like angels, they are messengers from beyond our normal awareness. Like oracles, their messages can be wise but cryptic and not easy to decipher. If the messages don't fit our fancy, do we kill the messenger? Do we scold it and say, "If you can't say something nice don't say anything at all"? Do we blindly give in to a surface understanding and say, "Yeah. I knew I was a bad meditator"? Or do we listen with open minds and hearts and learn.

How we engage hindrances is the most important aspect of meditation training.

If we treat them as demons to be conquered or corralled, we'll be locked in an endless struggle. But if we treat them as angels with wisdom to bestow, they can be a blessing.

To better understand the gifts they offer, I'd like to look at hindrances from several angles: (1) crossed intentions, (2)

personal teachers and friends, and (3) a split between Self and Other. Then in part 2, we'll look at one of the Buddha's lists of specific hindrances and how to relate to them wisely.

What's the Problem?

Before we get to those, let's start with the question, "What's the problem with hindrances?"

The problem is distortion. At the core of every hindrance is tension: we want something, we don't want something, or we don't want to deal with something: liking, aversion, or confusion. That tension distorts our thinking, perception, and decision-making. That is why they're called "demons," "defilements," "taints," "cankers," "effluences," and the like: they muddy the mind and heart.

But the distortion itself is just an innocent biological response. Rather than give it a moralistic name, I prefer a functional name: "distortion."

Hindrances show us where we are distorted. The *Pāli* term, *nīvaraṇa*, literally means "covering" or "veil." It covers a truth. That is the bad news. The good news is that they show us exactly where the truth can be found: beneath that covering or veil. The angelic messenger is pointing it out.

It's up to us to lift that cover and see what's there. We recognize the hindrance and the tightness in it. It's best not to get involved in the storyline. That's a dead end. We just notice the tension in it. Release it. Relax. Smile. Return to sending out uplifted states. And repeat as often as our attention gets highjacked.

That is how to lift the cover. It works very well ... most of the time. However, sometimes we six-R over and over, and the same hindrance keeps returning with vigor. Then we may need to lightly

investigate and see if we're missing something. We may need to spend more time with the Recognition step.

Crossed Intentions

Sometimes what we miss are crossed intentions that invited the hindrance.

At first a hindrance may seem like a nuisance disrupting a pleasant afternoon, or a demon who snuck in under the cover of night, or as unshaven guests who arrive at the dinner table unannounced. We think, "I didn't invite them."

But we did. *Nothing pops into our minds without an invitation.* During quiet moments of meditation or peaceful walks through the fields, these distractions come at our beckoning. A summons was issued from the psychophysical energy system in which we live. Hindrances show up because some part of us invited them.

If we don't remember enticing these creatures, then their appearance is an opportunity to explore parts of our system we've lost touch with. It's a chance to peer into dusty corners of the psyche.

Imagine Jacob's internal conflicts: homesickness, fear of Esau's anger, guilt for ripping him off, determination to heal the wounds, anger at his father for favoring Esau, resentment at a culture that gave all the goodies to the oldest, contriteness for breaking the laws, pride in his success, worry about what the family thought, trepidation about the kind of welcome he might receive... There was ample material for nightmares filled with demons. In fact, a modern retelling of the story might set the wrestling match in a bad dream.

We rarely have only one intention. Usually we have many operating at once. Some we recognize. Some we try to ignore. Many conflict with one another. They

populate our dreams. And they populate quiet waking moments.

In meditation we may go over and over a verbal wrestling match with our boss. "Go away," we say to those thoughts. "I'm tired of fighting." It may also be true that we'd like to win the fight and want some well-honed zingers rehearsed and ready to fire. We have mixed intentions.

I spent three days on a retreat designing a desk lamp. I kept telling myself I'd rather be meditating now. But part of me wanted the satisfaction of creating a lovely design. And part of me wanted a distraction from hours of trying futilely to focus my mind.

One of the reasons we have hindrances is mixed intentions. They will keep coming back until we see each intention clearly and six R them all. Hindrances show us distortions in our system that needs wise attention.

So if you feel dogged by a recurrent hindrance, ask gently if you have crossed intentions. As you notice one, gently Recognize, Release, Relax, Re-smile, Return to sending out mettā and Repeat as often as needed.

Caveat

One caveat: there are some hindrances we just don't like: we have no mixed intentions. We want them gone, period. That disliking is also an unwitting invitation: a cause or condition that draws them forth.

The rule is we get what we put our energy into. If we invest in liking, that draws a hindrance. If we invest in disliking, that also invites a hindrance. If we invest in ignoring, that invites a hindrance.

Angels with Asperger's

Another way to look at hindrances is as teachers. They can be seen as a guide from beyond who knows us well and can point out clandestine tension. Rather than view hindrances as troublemakers or crossed intentions, we can view them as a teacher.

I started with my first piano teacher when I was in second grade. By high school, it was clear that I was deeply motivated. So my mother found a better teacher for me at a local conservatory. His name was Walter Giannini.

For the first nine months with him I did nothing but exercises to build up my hands and coordination. We started with the Hannon School of Velocity and worked through Czerny, Scarlatti, and other classical training methods without looking at one actual piece of music.

But within a year and a half he had me playing Debussy and Gershwin preludes that I hadn't dreamed I could master.

Part of his talent was recognizing my motivations, weaknesses, and strengths. He was able to push me to the edge of what I could do without pushing me over that edge. It was a delicate balance. But he was sensitive and masterful.

Nevertheless, I had to do the work. He could only show me what to work on and offer tips. But I had to practice.

The difference between Walter Giannini as a piano teacher and hindrances as a spiritual teacher is that Mr. Giannini had a great personal sensitivity and social intelligence. Hindrances, by contrast, are angels with Asperger's Syndrome: they don't understand social cues. They're not sensitive to our likes and dislikes, personality and mood, preferences and peevs. They just point out where we're out of balance. If we're tired or frustrated or don't feel like looking at those

difficulties, it seems like they are rubbing our noses in dirt.

However, if we are truly ready to move along quickly, they are wonderful guides, trainers, and even friends.

For me, a friend is someone who is able to call me on my games. A friend is someone who has the clarity, kindness, and willingness to say, "Doug, you're deluded on this one." If they can say that honestly and wisely, then I know I can trust them.

Hindrances have no problem showing us we're deluded. However, they are clueless about social niceties.

Would you rather have someone politely say you're brilliant when you're confused? Or have them show you you're deluded when you think you're brilliant?

Self and Other

We've looked at hindrances as crossed intentions and as guides, trainers, and friends. We can also view hindrances as a split between self and other. To see this, let's look at their family tree: how they relate to one another and where they got started.

Taṇhā

In the beginning was the great grandfather and great grandmother of all hindrances, the primal source of our unhappiness, the Goddess of our discontent. It's name is ... ?

In *Pāli*, it's name sounds like a flourish of trumpets: "*Taṇhā!*" The term literally means "thirst." It is most often translated as "craving."

Taṇhā can be as brash as a brass band. Or it can be as subtle as a disturbance in the Force – a quiet fluctuation in our equanimity. It runs the spectrum from a demon to a subtle thickening of mood.

Tañhā is a pre-verbal, pre-conceptual reflexive tightening. It's the gripping of your hands on the steering wheel when someone cuts you off, the sudden focus on someone attractive, the quiet pining for a little more free time, the frustrations at the jingle in your mind.

Self and Other

If we relax tañhā, it dissipates. If we don't, it begets two children: Self and Other. They dearly love one another. Without Other there was no Self. Without Self there was no Other.

The sense of self and other, of "me" perceiving something "out there," is so familiar that we may think it's basic to life. But it's not. In our deepest, purest experience there is just the flow of phenomena: experiences arise and pass.

But when tañhā gets strong, it divides experience into categories: "This is me. This is not me." "This is mine. This is not mine." "This is myself. This is not myself."

The Buddha offered a very simple meditative tool to use when we get stuck in a hindrance. Ask, "Is this me? Is this mine? Is this myself?" The question is not one to figure out. It directs our awareness to take a closer look and see directly.

Here's a simple exercise:

Notice your sense of self. Where does it reside in the body. For most people, our feet are "down there" – our self looks down at our feet. Likewise our knees and our belly seem to be "down" below the center of the self.

The top of the head seems to be "up there."

The self looking down at the knees and up at the crown feels to be somewhere in between.

So close your eyes and see if you can locate the center of the self...

For most people, it is in the middle of the head perhaps about the level of the eyes or a little lower. From here we "look out" into the

world or "listen" out for the sounds of the world.

This location of self is somewhat arbitrary and can be different for different people. For some it's more in the chest.

What's important is not to think where it should be but feel where it seems to be.

Once you have found it, bring your attention to it. Let the awareness seep into the center of the self. You'll probably notice some tension there.

Now allow that tension to soften. See what happens as it relaxes.

Some people may begin to feel a little spacious with that relaxation. See what you notice.

Once you can notice where the subjective center of the self is, you can let it relax. When a hindrance arises, rather than relax that hindrance, relax the self that experiences the hindrance.

This has the same effect as relaxing the tension "in" a hindrance. Without a self, there are no hindrances — just a flow of phenomena. It is tension that divides the flow of experience into categories of "self" and "other."

Lobha, Dosa, and Moha

If we are not able to relax the barrier between Self and Other, then Other begets three children: triplets. They have been called:

The Three poisons

Attraction, Aversion, Confusion

Liking, Disliking, Ignorance

Lust, Hatred, Delusion

Lobha, Dosa, Moha (Pāli).

I like the Pāli terms because they imply a greater range than any English equivalent. *Lobha* includes everything from the craving of a drug addict to the subtle daydream of a vacation. *Dosa* includes

everything from rage to sullenness. *Moha* includes willful ignorance and innocent misguidedness or bad information.

I also like them because they sound like Larry, Curley, Moe: the three stooges. They get into trouble, suffer a lot, and yet have innocent hearts. All hindrances are like this – innocent and confused.

Hindrances (nīvaraṇa)

Lobha, dosa, and moha soon beget five children. These are the five hindrances or five *nīvaraṇa*. They are:

Desire — the urge to move toward something or to draw it to us.

Aversion — the urge to get away or to drive it off.

Restlessness — more energy than we can manage.

Sloth and torpor — too little energy to stay aware, wisely engaged, and motivated.

Doubt — including doubt in ourselves, doubt in the practice, and our inner critic.

Going forth and multiplying

If these five are not relaxed, they go forth and multiply. They beget multitudes.

In the next part of this talk we'll look in detail at eleven hindrances the Buddha described.

For now I'd like to summarize the first part of this talk by emphasizing that the problem with hindrances is not the hindrance itself — the veil or covering that conceals or distorts our experience. It is our attitude toward them that can be problematic.

There is a story that captures a wise attitude in a simple phrase.

Once there was a monk who lived in a little hut just outside a small fishing village.

One day, a young, unmarried woman in the village got pregnant. The people were upset and demanded to know who the father was. She loved the young man and didn't want to get him into trouble, so she said the father was the monk living just outside of town.

When her child was born, a delegation of elders gathered up the child, marched to the monk's dwelling, and rapped on his door. He opened the door and looked at them with a quiet smile.

They frowned back and said, "Here. This is your child," and handed it to them.

"Ah so," he said bowing slightly. They turned and marched away.

Fifteen years later the mother became ill. She knew she was dying. She didn't want to have this terrible lie on her conscience. So she confessed the truth.

Shortly thereafter a delegation of elders walked quietly to the monk's cabin, knocked softly on the door, and stood contritely.

The monk opened the door and looked at them with a quiet smile. Behind him was a teenager with sparkly eyes. The elders said, "We are so sorry. We know this child is not your responsibility. We have come to relieve you of this burden."

The monk replied, "Ah so."

If this were a story about living in the world, the next day after the elders left the baby and quieted down, the monk would have walked into town to discuss with them what was going on. Living in the world, there are often things to be done in response to events.

But this is a story about meditation. Sitting in meditation, there is rarely anything to be done outwardly. We just view the disturbance, the fascination, the fear, the hindrance with a gentle "Ah so."

It's a simple acknowledgement of what is true in the moment: "Here is a distortion. Ah so."

Given the stresses in our lives, it is no surprise that desire, aversion, restlessness, sloth, torpor, doubt, and many other things arise when we sit down to meditate. If we fully understood them, we wouldn't rail against them. We'd just say, "Of course," or "No big surprise this arose," or "Ah so."

So when distractions grab your attention, greet them with, "Ah so." In it is

recognition and release. It's relaxed. It has a quiet smile. And it gently radiates mettā.

Ah so.

*To study the way is to study the self.
To study the self is to lose the self.
To lose the self is to be enlightened by all things.
To be enlightened by all things is to remove
the barrier between self and other.*

– Dogen

Part 2: The Grit of Specific Hindrances

In the second part of this talk, I'll shift gears from an overview of hindrances and attitudes toward them to examining the nitty-gritty of specific hindrances and how we might relate to them with more kindness and wisdom.

In the *Upakkilesa Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 128) the Buddha mentions eleven hindrances. "Upakkilesa" is usually translated as "imperfections," "obscurations," "defilements" or "mental impurities." It really means hindrances or mental nuisances that pull our attention away from our chosen object of meditation.

Anuruddha

In verse 7 of the sutta, the Buddha leaves a fractious schism in Kosambi and wanders over to the Eastern Bamboo Park where he meets his first cousin, the monk Anuruddha. Anuruddha is living peacefully with two other monks, Nandiya and Kimbila. Fresh out of the brouhaha in Kosambi, he asks Anuruddha how it is they live in such concord.

Anuruddha says they are kind to one another; each places the others' needs before his own; they look out for each other; share the chores; and so forth. He says, "We are different in body, but one in

mind. ... blending like milk and water and viewing each other with kindly eyes." (verse 12) They play well together. And they meditate together.

Jhāna

The Buddha picks up on this reference to meditation:

15. "Good, good, Anuruddha. ... Have you attained any superhuman states, a distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones, a comfortable abiding?"

"Venerable sir, as we abide here diligent, ardent, and resolute, we perceive both light and a vision of forms. Soon afterwards the light and the vision of forms disappear, but we have not discovered the cause for that."

"Superhuman states" don't have super powers. The term "super" just means "above the norm." It means "jhāna" or "higher stage of meditation." "Comfortable abiding" means "equanimity." The Buddha is asking if they enter jhānas and rest stably there.

Anuruddha replies that they perceive "light and the vision of forms." "Light" means radiance. "Vision of forms" refers to staying with the object of meditation or mindfulness.

In other words, they start off meditating well. The mind-heart becomes light and luminous. Their attention stays on the object of meditation comfortably. But soon it all collapses. And they don't know why.

We all know that place: the good sitting that gets overrun by hindrances. We six-R. But they persist. Perhaps we're mystified at what's going on.

The Buddha says:

16. *"You should discover the cause for that, Anuruddha. Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I too perceived both radiance and the object of meditation. Soon afterwards the lightness and mindfulness disappeared. I thought: 'What is the cause and condition why the radiance and mindfulness have disappeared?' Then I considered thus: 'Doubt arose in me, and because of the doubt my stability of mind fell away; when my collectedness fell away, the radiance and mindfulness disappeared. I shall so act that doubt will not arise in me again.'*

Let's unpack this.

As I said earlier, when a hindrance hijacks our attention, the first thing we do is six-R. Sometimes after six-R'ing once or a number of times, the hindrance fades. And sometimes the hindrance returns again and again with the same strength.

The Buddha says, "You ought to ask why that's persisting." To do this, simply ask, "What's going on?" or "Am I missing something?" Then let go of the question and go back to meditating. The question invites the mind-heart to pay closer attention.

The Buddha goes on to say that back in the old days before he was awakened, sometimes when he asked that question, he realized that doubt was a problem.

Perhaps doubt was the original hindrance. Or perhaps the original hindrance was something else – maybe restlessness. But as the restlessness

persisted, he began to doubt the practice, doubt his ability to meditate productively, or doubt the Dhamma.

In other words, he had an unwholesome response to an unwholesome state: a hindrance attack. Hindrances draw other hindrances. They like to run around in gangs.

If this is the case, it helps to let the original hindrance run off and do what it wants while we attend to the doubt, release it, relax any tension, smile and return to our object of meditation.

As we relax the tightness in the doubt, it will gradually subside. Along with that, the original hindrance (doubt) may begin to run out of gas.

Other Hindrances

Verse 17 is exactly the same as 16 except he speaks of inattention rather than doubt. Other verses follow suit until he has mentioned 11 hindrances.

I'd like to look at each of these from verse 16 to 26 starting with the key Pāli term and what it means. Then I'll suggest how to relate to it with kindness and wisdom when the Six Rs themselves don't seem to be enough.

Doubt

As I mentioned, the first specific hindrance the Buddha refers to is doubt – a loss of confidence or loss of faith in oneself or the practice. There is nothing wrong with a healthy skepticism if it motivates us to look more carefully into what's going on or encourages us to investigate our experience more openly. The doubt the Buddha is concerned about is a cynical closing of the mind and heart — a turning away out of a negative bias.

One antidote for this doubt is curiosity — taking more interest in our experience. It may also help to reflect on our

motivations. Curiosity and investigation are awakening factors that can bring us out of the dead end of overbearing doubt.

Inattention

In verse 17, the Buddha moves on to a second hindrance called “inattention” or “non-attention.” This means having more interest in something other than meditation while we’re meditating. Earlier I mentioned wanting to develop some zingers to win an argument and designing a desk lamp while on retreat. I can blame the fight or the desk lamp for hindering my progress. But they were only a problem because I was more interested in them than meditation. These are examples of what the Buddha meant by “inattention” or “non-attention.”

As with doubt, antidotes for inattention include taking more genuine interest in the object of meditation and reflecting on our underlying motivation. It doesn’t help to criticize ourselves for mixed motivations. But it does help to honestly and kindly acknowledge what is going on. Wholesome recognition of unwholesome qualities brings more wholesomeness into the mind-heart.

Sloth and Torpor

Torpor is dull or sleepy awareness. The mind can feel like a fog. Sloth is a loss of motivation — a kind of “ho humming.” Often they arise together as in, “Ho hum. My mind is dull. I’ll six-R in a few minutes.”

Anything that perks up the mind or motivation can help. Energy, joy, and investigation are awakening factors that bring more energy. Sometimes it’s enough to just invite more energy into the system — not pushing or grasping but just opening to it. Smiling is one of many ways to invite some joy. Investigation might include looking more closely at what we’re actually experiencing. For example, when I

feel groggy, I can sometimes notice a dull ache in the back of my head and thick awareness. Taking more interest in seeing the sensations we’re calling “grogginess” or “dullness” can bring clarity.

If this doesn’t help the mind lighten, there are other strategies. Taking a few deep breaths brings more oxygen into the body and increases its energy. Meditating with the eyes open or meditating while standing up brings in more alertness. Meditating outside can freshen the system. Shifting into a walking meditation can help the blood circulate and raise energy levels. Walking backwards can sharpen attention.

If these kinds of strategies fail, ask “Am I a bit sleep deprived?” The mind and body are truly interdependent. If our physical energy is just too tired, the best thing may be to take a nap and start again when we’re fresher.

Fear

In verse 19, the Buddha talks about fear. Fear is a signal that something is threatening the integrity of our organism. Fear tries to protect us. We can be grateful for this. Usually we’re not because it’s ... well ... frightening.

Fear comes in many varieties: some are real and immediate; some are real but loom in the future or drift like ghosts from the past; and some are imaginary. Nevertheless, feeling itself can be quite compelling. When it is too enthusiastic or unwise, it can make meditation and life miserable for no good purpose. So I’d like to spend a little extra time with this hindrance to sort out ways to engage it wisely and compassionately.

Real and Immediate Fear

The simplest fear is about things that are real and immediate. For example, we can’t remember if we turned the stove off. With this kind of fear, we needn’t bother to

six-R. It's best to take care of the threat: get up and check the stove.

When we return to meditation, the fear may linger. It can take a while to metabolize the hormones that stimulate fear sensations. If so, we can simply observe those sensations and six-R them.

Real and Looming Fear

Another type of fear is real but looms in the future: we're worried about an upcoming job review, we wonder if a friend was offended by an off-hand comment we made, we're concerned about what may show up in our blood tests just sent to the lab.

We might ask, "Is there something wise to do about it now?" or conversely, "Would I be better off meditating now and tending to it later?"

The questions aren't meant to start a mental debate. They are used to direct awareness from the thought content to deeper intuitive wisdom.

If it is wiser to meditate now, this doesn't mean the thinking will stop. Evolution has bred the mind to figure out solutions to dangers. There's no need to beat ourselves up or beat the mind up for trying to do its job. However, we don't want to indulge the thinking either. The mind can make up endless stories to justify what it feels. That is not helpful.

Rather than trying to stop the thinking or indulging it, we just notice the worry and relax into it. We drop the storyline without trying to expel it. This feels like letting it go outside and run around on its own while we bring awareness back to the present moment. How does the mind-heart feel? What are its textures, its moods, its tensions? We let tightness soften.

As the tensions soften, the mind will gradually unwind itself. Meanwhile, we aren't feeding the thinking. Patience helps.

Nebulous and Unclear Fear

With another variety of fear, the source of threat is less clear. Like Jacob waking in the night, we feel anxiousness or urgency without knowing what it's about. The mind will quickly start looking for culprits. In our world and lives, there are lots of candidates willing to step into the spotlight.

Before we assign a culprit, it's best to six-R the sensations themselves. It's best to see if we can sit openly with the feelings rather than jump up and blame a villain for them.

Sooner or later most of us meet a demon in the night — a fear that is both large and difficult to see clearly. A common one is the growing realization that the ego-mind is not in charge. We don't have the control we thought we had. Something else is piloting the plane. We are only the navigators.

If we had a stressful day, it is likely to show up in our meditation practice whether we like it or not. Our lives are governed by natural, impersonal laws that don't care about our preferences.

Other demons are old feeling tones from a long time ago. They arise out of our history and conditioning.

For example, I grew up in a family with a flat emotional affect. I thought that placidness was normal and the feelings swirling through me were defects. Attempts to stifle them contributed to a diffuse, chronic, low-grade depression. I was in my late 20's before I realized there was more to life than shades of grey.

It took me a dozen years of therapy, bodywork, and meditation to finally break the clinical depression.

Some years later I went to Thailand to learn meditation from Ajahn Tong, a Thai forest master. Every week or two he asked me to meditate around the clock without

sleeping for three or four days at a stretch. As the mind became more and more peaceful, a pervasive sense of aloneness emerged.

It didn't help that 95% of the people around me didn't speak English and my family was on the far side of the planet. But it didn't feel like an adult loneliness. I felt abandoned and helpless, like a baby left alone in a cold darkness.

These were the hidden origins of the clinical depression I had broken fifteen years earlier. These were the subtle roots deep inside. It was quietly overwhelming.

We all have our stories. Some stories are worse than mine. Some are not as difficult. But this side of enlightenment we all have imbalances. As the mind quiets down in deep meditation, these soft, distant voices may be heard for the first time in years.

They are the demons in the night that Jacob felt. How do we relate to them?

I spoke to a monk. He smiled empathetically and said, "Yes, I once touched such a place. It was so terrible that I ran out of my kuti (meditation hut) and across the rice field to get away. But the feelings traveled with me. So I went back to my kuti to meditate. There was no escape. I had to face them sooner or later. Why not face them now."

Encouraged by his words, I went back to my kuti to meditate. Rather than run from the loneliness, I tried to open to it with kindness and compassion. Gradually, with time and many ups and downs, the ancient loneliness that had gripped my heart began to loosen.

This is how I think it works:

Underneath fear is hurt. It may be the hurt of abuse or abandonment or failure. There are many varieties of suffering. But beneath fear there's always hurt or the anticipation of hurt.

Under hurt is tenderness. Without sensitivity, we wouldn't hurt.

Beneath the tenderness is spaciousness. Without openness, there would be no tenderness.

The spaciousness is the equanimity and quiet joy we seek. It's the demon's blessing. We can't find it by running from the fear or running from the hurt or numbing out the tenderness.

The enveloping peacefulness won't jump up and down and wave its arms to get attention. That's not its nature. It is quiet and patient.

We can only relax through the layers of fear, hurt, and tenderness to find that immeasurable peace that has been waiting quietly all the time.

It's up to us to find the wisdom and courage to relax through the disturbances to find what's always been here.

Many years later, while leading meditation retreats, I saw different versions of this process in other yogis. One might come to me and say, "Horrible images seep into my meditation: dark, bloody, gut wrenching. I feel like I'm going crazy. How can I get rid of them? I don't want them."

If I'm confident in their basic emotional stability, I say, "What you want it not relevant. The only thing that's relevant is what's true. And the truth is these images and feelings are arising.

"I don't think the meditation is creating them. It's just revealing them. They've been hiding. Your awareness is getting strong enough to see into dark shadows."

At this point, I like to quote a children's story, *Where the Wild Things Are*, where Maurice Sendak wrote, "And when he came to the place where the wild things are, they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible

claws till Max said, 'Be still' and tamed them with the magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once."¹

Then I suggest to the yogi, "If you feel up to it, you can go back into meditation and call the fear's bluff. You can look into its yellow eyes and say, 'Thank you for showing me that deep holding. I'm not going to fight you. I'm not going to run any more. So go ahead and do your worst.' Then open your heart and relax as best you can into the fear. Surrender into it and see what happens.

"Don't pay attention to what you're mind says about the fear. That's not helpful for relevant. Just open to the pre-verbal sensations of the fear itself and let them flow through you. Fear will generate lots of stories to justify itself. You can ignore those and just soften into the feeling itself.

"See what happens."

You don't have to do this all at once. You can open bit by bit, little by little. As you get your sea legs in these larger energies, you'll naturally relax and open more and more.

This may take you through the fear, hurt, and tenderness into the great luminous spaciousness which is the demon-angel's blessing.

So far, no one has gone crazy. And some have felt a transformative relief. Most fear is just resistance to fear. As we open to what's here, the mind-heart's natural luminosity emerges out of the dark clouds.

This is what happened to me in South East Asia. The Doug who came home from Thailand was not the Doug who went there. I still have plenty of neuroses. But

when I came back I knew freedom was tangible and closer than I imagined.

Elation

The next hindrance the Buddha describes is elation. Some translate the term as "jubilation" or "excitement." Basically it means having too much energy. The energy may feel very good, but we are happy to the point of wanting to think about it or describe it to others. We like it and hold onto it.

These days as my meditation settles in, my body often chuckles as it relaxes. It's involuntary. And it's not a problem. It becomes a problem only if I obsess about it.

The first remedy for elation is to six-R. Let go of the storyline. Then let the good feeling soak into your bones.

It also helps to intentionally open to some of the quieter awakening factors: equanimity, tranquility, and investigation. They can help balance the mind-heart.

Staleness

In verse 21 the Buddha talks about inertia or inaction as a hindrance. Perhaps it's more helpful to think of it as staleness. It's a sort of "ho hum-ness" as the mind just goes dully through the motions of meditation without real interest. It's a form of boredom.

One remedy is to take more interest in the meditation — really see what's going on. Another is to take a break. On longer retreats Bhante would come pick me up every week or two to take me and a few other yogis out of the meditation center for the day. We'd drive through the Missouri Ozarks and visit deep hot springs or historic sites — something to break up the routine.

The next day when I went back to meditation practice, the mind felt refreshed and ready to go.

¹ Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, (Harper & Row, 1963).

Staleness can seem a lot like sloth and torpor. And it is somewhat. These hindrances are not completely separate phenomena.

However, staleness is something that is more likely to occur when we've been meditating so much that it has drifted into inertia. We're doing the practice okay, but progress has slowed down and we've lost the sense of freshness.

Taking a break from the routine or just going off and having some fun may do the trick.

Excessive Effort

The next hindrance is excessive effort. Excessive effort leads to excessive energy. This often comes from a desire to make something happen or to push something away. We are putting more into controlling experience than into observing it. The most common mistake Western yogis make is trying too hard.

It can help to be less of a meditation student and more of a field naturalist. A good naturalist is more interested in quietly seeing what the animals do than in shaping their behavior. A skillful meditator is more interested in seeing what the mind does than in shaping it. We remind ourselves, "What happens doesn't matter." This helps us let go of the subtle pushing.

Sometimes the excessive effort can creep up so slowly that we don't notice.

During the first few years of my meditation training, I felt I was making progress. It felt good. Then an inner swirling showed up on longer retreats. I felt spun around and around. I even had vertigo.

To get rid of the feeling, I tried to hold onto the sensation of the breath to steady myself. But that made it worse. In fact, everything I did made it worse except distracting myself with wandering

thoughts. My progress was coming to a halt.

After about a year of this (I'm a slow learner) I wondered what would happen if rather than struggle against the whirlwind, I surrendered into it. What if I just let it take me for a ride? I wasn't confident this would help. It would be like standing on the deck of a ship in a storm and letting go of the railing. But everything else had failed, so that was the only other option I could think of.

So I relaxed into the storm. Almost immediately, it slowed. That excited me. The excitement started the whirling again. But I was beginning to learn that relaxing into the sensation allowed the storm to relax.

This is similar to relaxing into fear. Relaxing into fear or swirling allows them to spread out and get bigger and bigger. As it grows, it thins out. Eventually it dissolves like a mist evaporating in the morning sun.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya asks, "What do meditation, going to sleep, and going to the toilet have in common?" The answer is: they all work better if we don't try too hard.

Weak Effort

The opposite of excessive effort is too little effort. This is less common in the West and perhaps more common in cultures that are more devotional in temperament. However I do see it here.

It is similar to sloth and torpor. When we're physically tired the mind may grow dull through lack of effort. However the solution for weak effort is simply developing more interest in the object of meditation. We can also bring in some of the energizing awakening factors: energy, joy, and curiosity.

One evening on retreat, I couldn't sleep. My mind was just too alert. So I got

up to meditate. I ended up meditating through most of the night.

At 5:30, I was supposed to come to a group sitting in which we recited the refuges and precepts. I was very tired from lack of sleep. The 5:30 meditation period officially ran until breakfast time at 7:00.

I knew that after reciting the refuges and precepts, it was perfectly fine for me to go back to my kuti and sleep. But something in my German blood or my Taurus personality kicked in. I was determined to sit still until 7:00 even if I was on the edge of falling asleep.

Rather than force myself to sit there, I decided to see what would happen if I invited joy into my sitting. I wasn't forcing it, just inviting it.

My energy came up just fine and I had a clear and still meditation with a fair amount of joy. It felt balanced.

After breakfast, I went back to my kuti and slept for two hours.

The moral of this story is not to try harder when we're tired. It's never to try harder. But if the effort is weak, bringing in more energy can bring the mind into balance. If we can bring in more energy or curiosity or joy, they may enliven our system.

And if they don't, then a nap is good.

Longing

In verse 24 the Buddha talks about longing. Longing is soft and sweet desire. Often it is longing for something wholesome, like equanimity, compassion, ease, heart, or even nibbāna. There is nothing wrong with the objects of these desires.

But the desire itself can be a problem. The trick is to take our attention off the longing for a vacation, a good sitting, an open heart, or whatever. Rather, let the attention come to the longing itself. See it

as clearly as we can. And six R to return to the primary object of meditation.

This allows the longing to expend itself without us getting entangled in it.

Variety of Perceptions

In verse 25, the Buddha talks about a variety of perceptions. The key word is often translated as "perception of diversity." But the diversity is not the problem. The problem is that the mind keeps moving from one thing to another.

This may show up as desire to have a different spiritual friend or desire to do several different kinds of practices at once or the urge to think about Buddhist concepts or wanting something more entertaining. Sometimes the mind is a little bored and looks for amusement. This is a form of restlessness — a dull expression of too much energy.

The solution is to relax and six-R the subtle restlessness.

Other times the mind is just following its natural inclinations. So let's look more closely at these inclinations.

Evolution bred curiosity into the human brain. Our pre-human ancestors were scavengers. To survive, they needed a wide knowledge of where food and dangers were in the environment. Those with a natural curiosity were better at mapping the world around them. They were more likely to survive long enough to pass on their inclinations.

One sign of curiosity is youthful play. The young of intelligent species enjoy imagining different scenarios and acting them out. The human brain enjoys thinking. It's part of its design.

We have the nature of scavengers. When the mind jumps around from topic to topic, elaborates on stories, imagines different possibilities, envisions various situations, it's just doing its job. It's not

helpful to fight this fundamental property of the human organism.

However, having a mind that jumps around is not conducive to peace, wisdom, and compassion.

There is a simple solution that we have seen with other hindrances. If the mind is busy thinking, we can let go of the thoughts and stories and notice how the thinking feels. If the awareness feels tense, relax and six-R. However, if the mind genuinely feels good — if it's enjoying the variety — we don't have to stop it. Rather, we can shift awareness from the thought content to the enjoyment itself. If it's a good feeling, it's a wholesome quality. There's no need to get rid of it. Instead we can let it soak into our bones.

If the mind is grasping for good qualities, the grasping is a hindrance to be relaxed. But if it's just an uplifted feeling, we can savor it. It's what the mind-heart wants and it is wise and helpful to let it soak in.

As this happens, the mind-heart will naturally soften and expand. The thought content will gently dissolve.

Excessive Meditation On Forms

The last hindrance the Buddha mentions in this sutta is called "excessive meditation on forms." This is in the same family as excessive energy and excessive effort.

Excessive meditation on form is too much seriousness. The awakened mind is light, clear, uplifted, and peaceful. Sometimes we can get too serious. This

may cause the practice to get thick and heavy.

The simplest solution is to just see the seriousness and smile. This is a smiling practice. The lighter the mind, the clearer it becomes.

We can also shift our attention off of the object of the meditation that we are taking seriously and on to the serious attitude itself. Bringing clear awareness to the seriousness helps it lighten up.

It feels like taking our foot off the gas. We trust that things will arise in their own time. We don't push the river. We cannot hurry the mind-heart's natural unfolding. But by taking it too seriously, we can slow it down.

Closing

We tend to view hindrances as if they were demons in the dark, party poopers, or mangy dogs with muddy feet. We tend to view them with aversion, tightness, confusion, or aggression.

In wisdom practices there are no hindrances. In one-pointed practice, hindrances take us off our one point. But in wisdom practice, whatever arises is just fine if we can see it clearly and impersonally.

The bottom line is: be aware of your attitude toward your experience. If the attitude is unwelcoming, see it kindly. Release it, relax and smile. When we can receive a powerful demon with the same openness as a beloved friend, then we are free.

Ah so.