

Geneva: So here we are, week 5 already. We've set our intention to work with the hindrances, and the Gradual Training gives us a set of guidelines, a path to follow. Mary and Jean introduced us to the two overarching hindrances, sensual desire and ill will. These are the two biggies—the two faces of the craving that leads to suffering, dukkha.

Our practice gives us a way to go from a state of suffering to seeing how suffering is created. To do that, we have to be willing to see. The hindrances are most harmful when they are unseen, and they will remain unseen unless we're willing to acknowledge their presence. But we need to be able to attend to them in a skillful way. It's all about wise attention. Getting to know the hindrances without self-identifying with them. Our suffering is directly proportional to the amount of self-identification we attach to our experiences.

Tonight we'll focus on the dual hindrance of sloth and torpor. Mary's going to start by sharing some of the Buddha's words on the subject and flesh out what this hindrance is all about.

Mary: So let's start out with what the Buddha says about sloth and torpor—and this is from the Satipattana Sutta, the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness. He says: “If sloth and torpor is present in him, he knows, there is sloth and torpor in me. If sloth and torpor is not present in him, he knows, there is no sloth and torpor in me. He knows how unarisen sloth and torpor can arise, how arisen sloth and torpor can be removed, and how future arising of the removed sloth and torpor can be prevented.” MN 10 (Anlayo, translator)

So what is sloth and torpor. Sometimes translated as dullness and drowsiness, or laziness and drowsiness. It's difficult, and really not necessary to distinguish between them. They have the same kind of energy, and the remedies for both are the same. Plus, they're usually lumped together. Taken together, they're often described as mental and physical sluggishness. Just watch a slug for a while, and you'll get the idea. As for practicing with them, the Buddha says to first of all know if they are present in oneself, or to know if they are absent. I'm guessing that we've all had some experience with sloth and torpor. Right? So how do you know them? In the mind, in the body. In one or two words what do they feel like for you.

Geneva: The Buddha gives 2 similes for sloth and torpor. In one from the Sumyuta Nikaya (46:55), the Buddha has us imagine a bowl of water covered with algae and weeds so thick that you can't see your reflection and no light can penetrate to the water below. The surface is dull and slimy, and it's completely dark underneath. When I picture it, I imagine that the water underneath the slime could actually be clear and still, but I'll never know because I can't see it. And I think that how it is for the mind—it's always clear and still, but it can become obscured or buried, polluted really, by the hindrances.

Mary: The Buddha also says that sloth and torpor is like being in prison. I imagine that a prison in the Buddha's days would have been a small, dark, musty cell, perhaps with shackles. And in this simile, it's dullness and drowsiness that imprison the mind and body, permeate us, so that we can't even think or move. And even when we have the key to the prison door, we're unable to use it.

So, everything you've said, and the similes, is what sloth and torpor feels like when it's present. Buddha also says to know how the unarisen sloth and torpor can arise. How do they arise—when we're sitting on the cushion, and in daily life? Sometimes, of course, we're really sleepy. We've been busy with doing things, and thinking, planning, organizing, and the doer part of our mind has used up most of our energy. (*Ajahn Brahm*) In that case, we probably need to nap and not fight the drowsiness.

But then, as you probably well know, there are times when we're rested and awake and alert, and drowsiness and sleepiness just creep in, or they hit us all of a sudden. So then what? We could choose to hang out with them for a while. To acknowledge them as a physical-mental process—not me or mine.—but a process that can be looked at and investigated. And Geneva's going to talk about investigating S & T.

Geneva: When we first notice that our mind has become clogged with sloth and torpor, we often react with frustration or aversion—just like when we notice that any other unwholesome mind state has arisen. Or maybe we focus on how tired we are, how spaced out we feel, how unfocussed the mind is. We might feel overwhelmed. And we fight it. Right there, these reactions take a great deal of energy, and they leave even less energy available to bring to mindfulness. This is what the Buddha means by unwholesome or unwise attention. As Ajahn

Brahm notes (p 39), the most profound and effective way of overcoming Sloth & Torpor is to make peace with the dullness and stop fighting it!....The Buddha advocated investigation, not fighting.

The moment you realize that your mind has been in the grips of sloth and torpor, it's as if a spell has been broken. Congratulations! If you have enough awareness to be able to recognize sloth and torpor, then you can use that awareness to start investigating what this mind state is like. You might reflect on the similes: does the mind feel smothered by weeds? Has it been taken prisoner, no longer free to act on its own? You've identified some ways the body can feel when sloth and torpor have taken hold. I notice it especially in my hands—they feel like dense, heavy lumps of clay that have been stuck on my thighs.

Mary H. and Jean have reminded us that the hindrances are our teachers, pointing the way to the work that needs to be done to free the mind. You can investigate: “What do I need to learn from sloth and torpor right now? What do they have to teach me?” You might discover that you are bored. Boredom is an attitude; it's not a quality inherent in any phenomenon. I've noticed that when I'm bored during meditation, I'm not actually bored with meditating, but with what I'm paying attention to instead of the meditation object.

In both our practice on the cushion and in the rest of life, sloth and torpor may follow in the aftermath of prolonged bouts of sensual desire or ill-will, when the mind is depleted from directing so much energy unwisely (Fronsdal, P 55-59). I had a clear experience of this about midway through a two-week retreat. Things had been going pretty well, and my mind had grown quite still. But one afternoon I got caught in a feedback loop of ill-will. It just kept repeating over and over, like a broken record. Eventually of course, it passed, and I felt completely drained. A giant wave of sloth and torpor hit me. But this time I was able to make the connection. It was a direct consequence of my actions. I just had to let it be.

It could be that sloth and torpor arise from ways you've learned to cope with difficult situations that you have felt powerless to change: by turning away mentally, zoning out, or shutting down emotionally. You can investigate whether this strategy necessary or helpful in the present moment. Here's a recommendation Gil Fronsdal makes for investigating sloth and torpor that I have found helpful (p 59): You can ask yourself: “If I weren't feeling so sleepy and dull right

now, what would I be experiencing?” This contemplation might reveal ways or reasons you use sloth and torpor—avoidance, escape, protection, etc.

Mary: So often investigation alone is enough to dispel S&T. It energizes us. But we have to be careful that investigation doesn't turn into proliferation of thinking and more thinking and more thinking in circles that confuse us and actually perpetuate the drowsiness or dullness. The Buddha says that the main condition for drowsiness (or any hindrance) is unwise attention to it. Dwelling on it. That's one thing to consider. Another consideration is this: if we're primarily practicing Samadhi, or concentrating the mind, we have to be free from sloth and torpor in order to cultivate and sustain the serenity and tranquility. If investigation itself doesn't clear away the S & T, we may want to try other ways of dispelling it.

We'll share some of the ways that work for us when we're meditating. Ways of cultivating more energy and interest to counteract the drowsiness and dullness:

1. One is to remember inspiring or interesting parts of the Dharma—for example, the 4 Noble Truths, or some lines from a chant or from the Metta Sutta or some other sutta. And it helps to recite them to ourselves, if we can.
2. It also helps to practice with light. I do this by getting in touch with any brightness that I can feel inside my mind or body, and expanding it; and if I can't find any then imagining bright light inside me, like fire or the moon or the sun; and if that doesn't help then opening my eyes and looking directly at the brightest light I can see—an electric light or a candle—and bringing that light inside and expanding it.
3. Sometimes I give myself a pep-talk, whatever comes to mind, like come on, do your best, make good use of this time, wake up, you can do it, and so forth, not in a harsh, judging way, but in a way that's kind and encouraging. And good-humored. Really, what this is about is recalling the intention to be awake, to be present. And resetting that intention. Committing to it.
4. Metta for yourself—remind yourself of your good qualities, your worthiness, how much you want to free your mind, etc. I find this especially helpful if my energy has been depleted from attacks by any of the other hindrances.

5. Reminding ourselves of the purpose of just sitting there with our eyes closed, watching our breath. Asking ourselves, what is my purpose for meditating? Make it a contemplation.
6. Walking meditation can also help clear the mind and wake up the body. Maybe a little counterintuitive, but if sloth and torpor are frequent visitors during sitting meditation, a brisk walk before you sit can be very energizing.
7. Also, paying close attention to the subtleties of posture while meditating. I use posture as a meditation object quite a bit. Often you can catch sloth and torpor before they settle in by noticing that your body is starting to sag, or your head is starting to drop to your chest.
8. It can be helpful, too, to remind yourself that sloth and torpor are like any other mind state, and we all are subject to them now and then.

Mary: There's a sutta about dispelling S&T. The Moggallana Sutta. (Anguttara Nikaya.7.58.) I really like this sutta, I think because Moggallana is so human, and the Buddha is really kind to him. Moggallana was a senior monk, and eventually he became one of the Buddha's most trusted teachers. So in this sutta, Ven Moggallana was meditating near a certain village, and he was falling asleep. And just then, the Buddha appeared in front of him and said, "Are you nodding, Moggallana? Are you nodding?" And Moggallana says, "Yes, lord."

"Well then, Moggallana," and the Buddha suggests ways to help him stay awake. Some of these we've already talked about: reciting the dharma, perceiving light, walking. In addition, he says to pull your earlobes and rub your limbs with your hands, and wash your eyes with water. It's interesting that the Buddha suggests these things in a certain order. He's saying, try this, and it's possible that by doing this you'll shake off your drowsiness. But, if by doing this you don't shake off your drowsiness, try this next thing, and so forth, and then if none of these things work, recline on your right side, and set your mind on getting up (I imagine as we'd set an alarm clock), and as soon as you wake up get up quickly. So if you're nodding off, maybe think of Moggallana. And imagine the Buddha appearing in front of you and saying kindly, "try this, and then try this."

But sloth and torpor isn't just a hindrance to being alert in meditation, it's also a hindrance to being awake in the rest of life.

Geneva: For most of us, there are some activities in our daily live that we find tedious or overwhelming. Perhaps you approach these activities with resistance, resentment, even dread. And then, doesn't it seem to take FOREVER to get through them!

I thought about this one evening as I sat down to prepare two seemingly bottomless shopping bags full of green beans for freezing. I was already tired and the task seemed huge—so many beans! Then I started looking at the beans. Quite beautiful, smooth and green. I started to cut up the beans into more or less uniform lengths. Each bean required its own set of decisions about where to make the first cut, and how many pieces it should be cut into, and I noticed that no two beans are quite alike. Then I thought about the conversation I'd had with the farmer who grew the beans out in Everson, and who, no doubt, had a hand in picking them. She was thrilled to have me take them off her hands so she wouldn't be stuck with them when the market closed for the day.

By the time I reached the bottom of the second bag, I found myself feeling around for just one more bean. I felt a sense of happiness at having completed the task, and I really wouldn't have minded if there were more beans. Mary has an example too.

Mary: I started taking violin lessons a while ago, and I have to practice tons of exercises. And the other day when I was practicing one of them, I was so bored and drowsy that I could hardly hold up the violin. Right after that, I was practicing a lovely Haydn quartet and immediately I was wide awake and happy. It was amazing. Then I came across a passage in the quartet that was really difficult, and when I went back over it I thought, wait a minute, that exercise that bored me half to death is just like this difficult passage; that exercise might be useful, it could even serve a purpose. So I went back to the exercise and this time, it was quite interesting. So from that experience, I was reminded of 2 things: drowsiness and dullness of mind can be caused by aversion and discontent; and seeing the purpose in what feels boring helps remove the drowsiness and dullness.

Geneva: Kind of funny—in both cases we were reacting to situations we put ourselves in—choices we had made earlier. I think these two examples show ways to work skillfully with sloth and torpor. Mary found a way to counteract boredom and aversion, by gladdening the mind and remembering the purpose of her practice. The beans example illustrates how you can increase

your energy level when you feel fatigued or overwhelmed, by focusing more precisely on smaller details. I think for both of us, there was a moment when we recognized that we didn't want to just slog through the task. In other words, we didn't want to suffer. So the mind saw its opening and found a way out. It can be as simple as that, just setting the intention to point your attitude toward a more wholesome state. The mind will find a way.

The influence of sloth and torpor can ooze into many aspects of our daily lives. In one of her dharma talks, Ayya Khema identified procrastination a form of sloth and torpor. I think we're all familiar with the many creative disguises that procrastination comes in: waiting until there's more time, until conditions are perfect, until all the stars are aligned, etc... When I procrastinate, I suffer. There's a low-level inner nagging going on the whole time, maybe just below awareness, but it's there, siphoning off energy. What if I directed that energy toward resolving to complete the task as quickly and effectively as possible?

Joseph Goldstein and other teachers make an important point about sloth and torpor, and I think it's a good reminder to treat the hindrances with respect when they pay a visit. It may be connected to a deeper pattern or tendency of withdrawing from difficulties, retreating from challenges, never going forward to meet experiences but always pulling back. It may be felt as lack of direction or focus. No energy to act. One example that comes to mind is zoning out in front of the TV/computer screen for hours instead of doing something (anything!) more constructive (like listening to a dharma talk on the hindrances...). We do it because it's easy and takes no energy, and because it's MINDLESS.

There's another situation in which sloth and torpor may arise, which might seem different from the examples we've given so far. And that is when things get really easy or comfortable, and we are lulled into coasting on autopilot. We become complacent. We drift along in a pleasant fog. In sitting practice, this mind state is easily mistaken for "good concentration". It's not. It's spacing out. In daily life, it shows up as an attitude that what we are doing is so easy and so familiar that "we don't even have to think about it anymore." And maybe we like that. If this kind of thinking arises, it can be helpful to take a closer look at what you're doing and your attitude toward what you're doing. Why don't you want to think about what you're doing?

Mary: So, in line with the Buddha’s words in the Satipattana Sutta about sloth and torpor, we’ve talked about recognizing their presence or the absence in oneself, some of the causes for their arising, and some of the ways to remove them. The Buddha concludes this section by saying, “and one knows how the future arising of the removed sloth and torpor can be prevented.”

Personally, I haven’t had any luck with totally preventing future arisings of sloth and torpor, but there certainly are ways of diminishing the likelihood of their arising. Briefly, these include some of the steps in the gradual training that John and I talked about a few weeks ago: .keeping the precepts, guarding the sense doors, contentment, and mindfulness—mindfulness especially of the early signs—a slight slumping of the body, a slight slithering of the mind. Other suggestions: reading books on the dharma, listening to dharma talks, and noble friends and noble conversation.

Well certainly we’re among noble friends here, thank you all for that—so now it’s time for some noble conversations.

EXPLORING SLOTH AND TORPOR: Small Group Discussions

Part 1

1. Take a minute or two to think about something in your life that drains your energy—something you do, a memory, a pattern of thinking, some event or object in your environment. Once you've identified an energy zapper, shift your attention to noticing how it feels in your mind and in your body to focus on this object.
2. Then each one take turns speaking for two minutes about the energy zapper you've identified. Again, as you're speaking, note any feelings or sensations that arise. And for the people who are listening, pay attention to your reactions to what you are hearing as well.

Part 2

1. When everyone has had a chance to speak, we'll repeat the experiment again, only this time asking you to take a minute or two to think about something in your life that energizes you, and notice how it feels in your mind and body to focus on this object.
2. Then each one take turns speaking for two minutes about the energy booster you've identified, noting any feelings or sensations that arise. Again, for the people who are listening, pay attention to your reactions to what you are hearing.

After everyone in your group has had a chance to speak about the energy zappers and energy boosters you've identified, we'll come back together to share some of your observations.