

Intro to Mindfulness Pt2 (2) Hindrance of Aversion

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Hello, on the second of five days of discussing the hindrances. This is building on the Introduction to Meditation series that we just finished with the idea that, once you have the basic instructions for mindfulness practice, one of the most important next steps is to understand what interferes or hinders your mindfulness practice. Doing this helps to settle the things that interfere so it's easier to be present. Wonderfully, we also learn the art of making whatever hinders our mindfulness, our steadiness, and our calm the object of awareness.

Anything that can be made the object of mindfulness can be related to peacefully, without clinging or hostility. The beautiful and inspiring thing about mindfulness practice, at least for me, is that it is possible to find freedom in relation to whatever you can be mindful of. The ability to find freedom in anything in the world of experience means that freedom can be all-encompassing. It can be 360-degree freedom.

This freedom is not aloofness or disconnection. In one sense it's the opposite. It's learning how to not be entangled so that we can be connected with warmth, kindness, love, and goodwill toward ourselves and the world around us. That's an ideal maybe, but it's the direction we're going.

One thing we need to learn is how to turn our mindfulness toward the ways that we are aversive – the ways in which we have ill will, irritation, hostility, or annoyance toward ourselves, our experience, other people, or the world itself. In English, the word “aversion” generally represents some form of hostility or anger, where we want to get rid of something in a hostile way.

Some people walk through the world with an attitude of that kind of hostility and ill will. They're looking for what is wrong, and for something to be critical of and angry about. There is almost an atmosphere of aversion they walk with in the world. For others, aversion comes up periodically, maybe a good part of the day, but it's not an overarching attitude in which they live.

The aversion can be quite strong. Certain events can give rise to so much anger that we're really feeling a lot of animosity towards someone or some situation. Some of us sometimes might have a certain degree of animosity or ill will toward our computers. I don't know if that's exactly the right word, but there's stress, strain, and anger, and our eyes have darts in them when we can't figure out the technology. So we can have ill will with inanimate objects too, and assign blame and criticism elsewhere.

These things exist for human beings. The radical art of mindfulness is to fold this aversion into our mindfulness. This means: “This too. We're going to be aware of this too.” Being aware of it doesn't mean we participate in it. We can be aware as if we're stepping back away from it, turning around and looking at it, and saying, “I see you. This is aversion. This is hostility. These are darts of the eyes, which are going out to stare at something and indicate, ‘You: I'm angry with you.’ This is how it is. This is how the tension in the body builds up.”

But we look at it. We look at it with kindness. We look at it with freedom, with non-reactivity, without being caught in its grip. Aversion – wanting to get rid of something or wanting to get away from it because it's so terrible – can be a tremendous stress and strain. It can be a way of causing harm to ourselves. It might not seem that way because what's happening might be really uncomfortable for us and seem as if it is harming us. Sometimes that's true.

But sometimes it's our reactivity, our values, our fear, or our pride that are being made uncomfortable. Or our desires are not being met. Sometimes when we are attached to desires and they aren't being fulfilled because something thwarts us, we get angry at what thwarts our desires. All of that represents an entanglement.

There is a healthy form of aversion. There is a healthy way of saying, "No," that arises out of love. If the word "love" is too sweet or too grand, our "No" can arise out of goodwill. It can arise out of friendliness and generosity of spirit. It can arise out of wanting the best for everyone concerned. It can arise out of goodness or wisdom.

We say, "No. I'm not going to be involved with aversion that way. I'm not going to be involved in those thoughts." Or at least, "No. I don't condone this. I don't want to invest myself in this. I might not be able to stop having those thoughts, but I don't have to be those thoughts. I don't have to fall into them and believe them." This can be done with love. When something is happening in the world where we need to say, "No," – for example, "No" to what someone is doing, can that be done with love, as opposed to hostility and aversion?

What are we trying to accomplish when we are aversive? What are we trying to accomplish when we have hostility and animosity? Is it simply to protect ourselves and to push the other person away? Is it retribution – to cause them to feel uncomfortable, for them to get the message, to cower, or feel hurt, or to be a little more submissive? What is it that we're trying to do with the aversion? Is it necessary? Is there a better way? Is there a better way to say, "No"?

Is there a way of saying, "No," that doesn't break the connection, fracture relationships, diminish other people, or see them only through the lens of how they are wrong? Is there a way to see them instead as valuable people with whom it's possible to have a warm, kind, friendly relationship if they would allow it? We can say, "No" with confidence. This is a "No" that keeps the door open and clearly shows that we're willing to be in a relationship if they are different, but they feel that the "No" is not angry or hostile.

This is not easy to do. Dharma practice is a Dharma of saying, "Yes," to whatever supports freedom in us. We say, "Yes," to whatever helps nourish and encourage the best qualities of who we are to come forth in the world. Sometimes that "Yes" requires us to say, "No" to certain things. "No, I'm not going to be hostile. No, I'm not going to scare this person with my anger. I'm not going to shut this person down with anger in a way that diminishes them or shuts them up. Yes, I would like to be present. Yes, I'd like to say 'No' in a way that respects them, where I get care for myself appropriately, but I also haven't shut this person out of my heart."

This is easier said than done, but it can be learned. It can be learned by anybody in such a way that we can take care of ourselves. Dharma practice is a practice of taking care of ourselves. In the process of doing that, we learn how to say "No" to making things worse. If we get our way by being angry or hostile to somebody or something, chances are that in the bigger picture, we're making the whole thing worse.

How do we take care of ourselves and others? How do we take care of things so they're better? This is the art of Dharma practice. The simplest formulation of this, a little slogan you can take with you, is: "Don't make it worse." If what you're going to say is going to make the situation worse, don't do it. Rather, make it better. With Dharma practice, over time we become wiser and wiser about what the nature of worse is. We learn the full implications of what we do and how it comes back at us and affects us in our relationships.

Over time we also learn what makes things better. Learning to say "No" to making it worse can be an act of love, not an act of hostility. Saying "Yes" to making it better does not have to be greed or clinging. In the bigger picture, this "Yes" to what makes it better, is a "Yes" that leaves us more free and protected in a good way.

Today may you explore your relationship to what fits under this general category that I'm calling "No," when you have a "No" attitude to anything. Can you avoid making it worse? Can you avoid the hostility in that "No"? If it's necessary to say "No," can you explore how to do it with love and goodwill? If this is the way you learn to become wise about the second hindrance, the hindrance of aversion, it will be time really well spent. Thank you.