

Hi everyone, welcome and thanks for coming tonight. For those who don't know me, my name is Zac and I use he and him pronouns. I am a white 37 year old male with long medium brown hair that's tied back today and I'm wearing a black t-shirt. Although it's not visible on my camera, I'm seated on a gray and black manual wheelchair. I live with both genetic and acquired disabilities and I've been disabled my whole life, even though I recently started identifying as so.

Tonight I'd like to talk about doubt and the Five Hindrances. I often hear teachers say that their talks are based on things that they're working on in their own life. And doubt can be a really big obstacle for me. So keep in mind that I'm teaching you this not as an expert, but as someone who's working with it myself. My talk is based on a course by Gil Fronsdal, who founded the Redwood Insight Meditation Center. I found Gil's talks about the Five Hindrances to be really helpful. And the course is available for free on Gill's website, and I suggest you check it out if you're interested in learning about this topic more in depth.

So what are the Five Hindrances? Traditionally, the hindrances are mind states that get in the way of mindfulness and meditation. However, they can also be applied to any endeavor a person wants to engage in.

The Buddha listed five different hindrances. Desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and finally doubt. These five are a rough framework of thought patterns that are hindering to us. But you may have identified some additional mind states that get in the way of your own practice. When you start to practice with the hindrances, and notice them arising, It's important to keep in mind that they're not bad.

Our goal is not to eliminate these thought patterns, or to feel badly when we notice they're present. They're very natural things to arise, especially when dealing with challenges in life. It's helpful to think of the hindrances as uninvited guests. One reason for this is that the hindrances themselves are not actually what hinders us.

All kinds of thoughts can arise in our mind when we're meditating, practicing mindfulness, or just simply being. These thoughts may even have no basis in our beliefs or values. When we can just allow these thoughts to pass us by, they're not really a problem. But what is a problem is when we start to cling to a thought and buy into the story that comes along with it. You can think of the hindrances as traps for thoughts that we can get stuck in. It's the compulsion that comes with the hindrance that gets in our way.

For example, if we're meditating and think, it's a super hot day, I could really go for an ice cream. This would be an example of desire. If we just let that desire pass through us, We're not really hindered by our desire for ice cream. But if we start thinking about what flavor we would like, and how we would like to try the new ice cream shop in town, it becomes something that we start clinging to. We might even prematurely stop our meditation so we can go get ice cream.

Instead of making an enemy out of hindering thoughts, the goal is to understand them, and even befriend them. We want to know what it feels like when they're here, so we can address them before we get lost in their trance. It's easy to get caught in a hindrance without even realizing it. So awareness is key.

When we're aware that a hindrance is present, we can then work with it in a constructive way. So instead of getting frustrated when you encounter a hindrance, see it as an opportunity to practice. If it's normal to have hindering thoughts, why do we want to minimize their impact rather than just allowing them to exist?

When we learn to work with the hindrances, we can observe what it's like when we're not caught in them. When we notice that we're not caught in a hindrance, it can lead to feelings of delight. The Buddha said the absence of something is significant. Thich Nhat Hanh has a teaching along similar lines. He says, "When we're having a toothache, we know that not having a toothache is a wonderful thing. Yet when we don't have a toothache, we're still not happy. A non toothache is very pleasant." Recognizing we're not being caught by a hindrance that was previously distracting us can lead to delight.

Now that we have an overview on what the hindrances are, I'd like to focus on the fifth hindrance, which is doubt. After I wrote my first Dharma talk, I began to panic a bit over whether I could continue to produce informative and useful talks. I'm far from an advanced practitioner, and I questioned whether I was worthy of teaching. I don't bring this up looking for validation, but as a way of being relatable. I'm sure most of you have struggled with doubt at some point in your lives, or maybe it's a regular thing that you struggle with.

Doubt is a particularly challenging hindrance. While the first four can take us away from our practice in the moment, doubt can cause us to give up entirely. If we start to doubt our practice, we might just stop practicing altogether. If we believe that we're incapable of doing something, it's common for us to stop trying.

Gill explains this by saying, "The issue with doubt is not so much the doubt itself, but the way in which it causes us to hold back."

Doubt is something that comes up for everyone in their lives, but I think we as disabled people can be particularly vulnerable to doubt for a few reasons. In terms of practice, some non disabled people, especially within the medical community, oversell mindfulness and meditation. It's almost as if they view it as a cure all. If you approach mindfulness from the mindset that it will resolve whatever you're struggling with, you're going to be disappointed and encounter doubt, because it doesn't work that way. Mindfulness can be a great support, but it won't make your pain, or anxiety, or whatever you're dealing with disappear. It can help you navigate your struggles better. But they'll still be there. I like to think of mindfulness as something that can soothe, but not cure. Which leads me to my second point.

Pain and anxiety add challenges to practicing. Mindfulness may be greatly helpful at some times, and less so at others. This fluctuation can cause doubt that you're doing it correctly. Or maybe make you believe that mindfulness is no longer an effective tool for soothing yourself. But this ebb and flow is perfectly natural.

We can also experience doubt in ourselves. I've also always done things a little bit differently than other people. It's common for disabled people to accomplish goals on a different timeline than our non-disabled peers. Our goals may happen in different ways. Or we may have entirely different goals. Capitalism places value on people based on how productive they are. And that doesn't apply to many of us in the conventional sense.

All these external messages can cause us to doubt ourselves and our value.

So what are some ways of navigating doubt? A first step, with any hindrance, is to name your experience. An example is, you could say, "Doubt is here". Recognizing what we're experiencing is so important because it allows us to acknowledge our current experience and apply skills to it. When recognizing, we want to apply non judgmental awareness.

This means we aren't adding a second arrow of blaming ourselves for what we're experiencing. If you're feeling doubt, you're feeling doubt and that's okay. Don't take it personally. Similarly,

we don't want to identify with what we're feeling. You're not a doubtful person, but a person experiencing doubt.

While we don't have control over our thoughts that arise in our minds, we do have some control over what we pay attention to. While denial is an unwise form of attention, when we notice doubt, we can acknowledge its presence, thank it for its input, and move our attention to something else. Due to the way that practice works doubt will inevitably slip back in, and we'll have to redirect again.

There are lots of things that we can pay attention to in a given moment, so it doesn't really mean that we're tuning out our experience either. Just dropping into sensations in the body or a breath can give us some space from the doubt that we're experiencing. The Buddha said, "I know of no other single thing that has the power to bring on doubt than unwise attention."

Another way of handling doubt is with confidence. Confidence can come from internal and external sources. One form of internal confidence is relying on past experiences. For example, you could say to yourself, "My practice has been supporting me before, and although it's not supporting me as much as I would like right now, I'm confident it'll return." Another way to think of this is having confidence in the teaching of impermanence. Because if you're going through this phase where it's not working as strongly for you as before, that's something that's impermanent.

External confidence can come from reminding yourself of people who believe in you. While writing this talk, I made a list of all the people who believed in my goal of teaching. Seeing this list made me more confident in myself. Our view of ourselves can be so clouded by internal doubt, and other people can't really see those doubts, so it can be easier to find external confidence rather than internal.

I've broken this talk into two parts, and will teach the second part next month. Where I will be telling you about how doubt can be used as an ally to investigate some of these thoughts that come up and take away some of the power that they hold over us.

Thanks for listening everyone.