

ABC anchor **DAN HARRIS** talks meditation with **SHARON SALZBERG, JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN & MARK EPSTEIN**

SHAMBHALA SUN

BUDDHISM CULTURE MEDITATION LIFE

NOVEMBER 2014

Get off the wheel of **Habit**

How to free yourself from habitual patterns of thinking, relating, and acting.

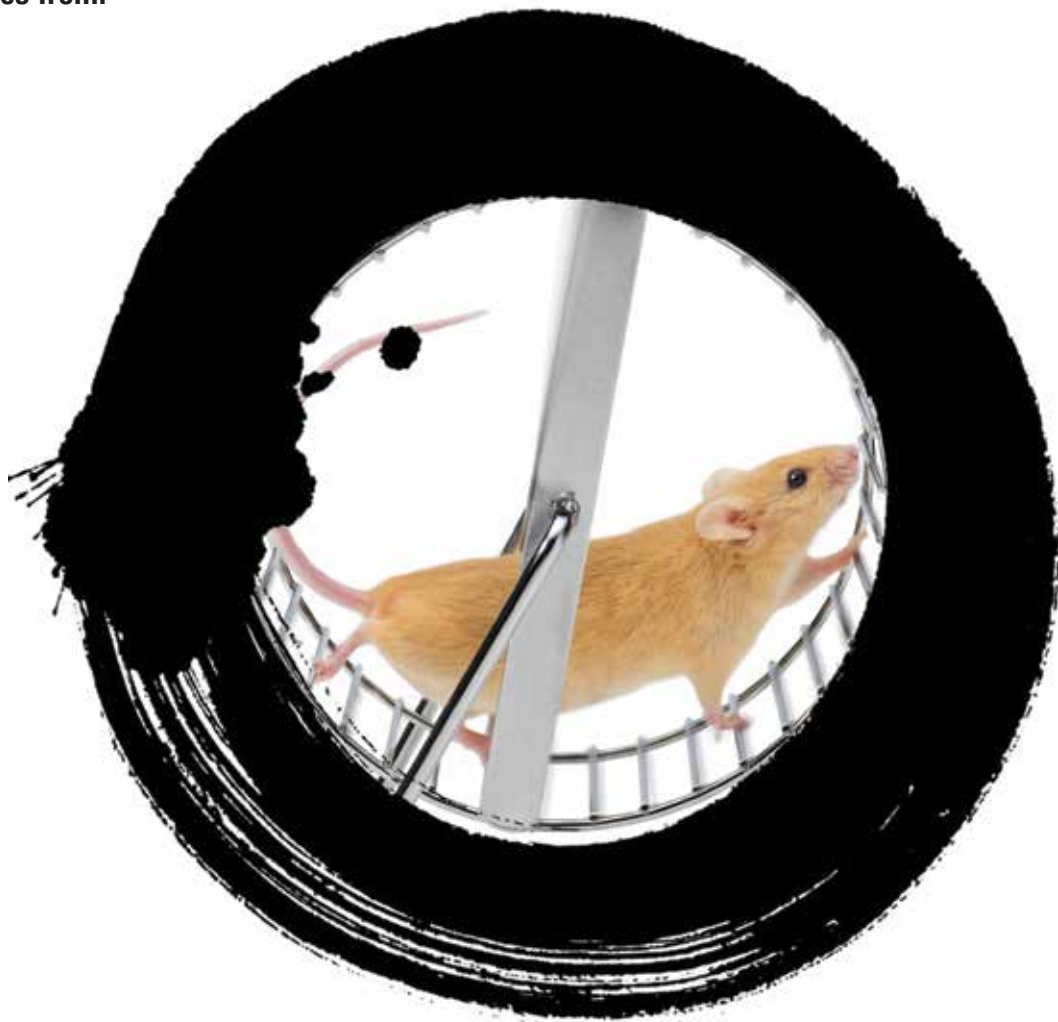
It's the whole point of Buddhist meditation. (They don't call it the Wheel of Life for nothing.)

Helpful teachings & techniques from:

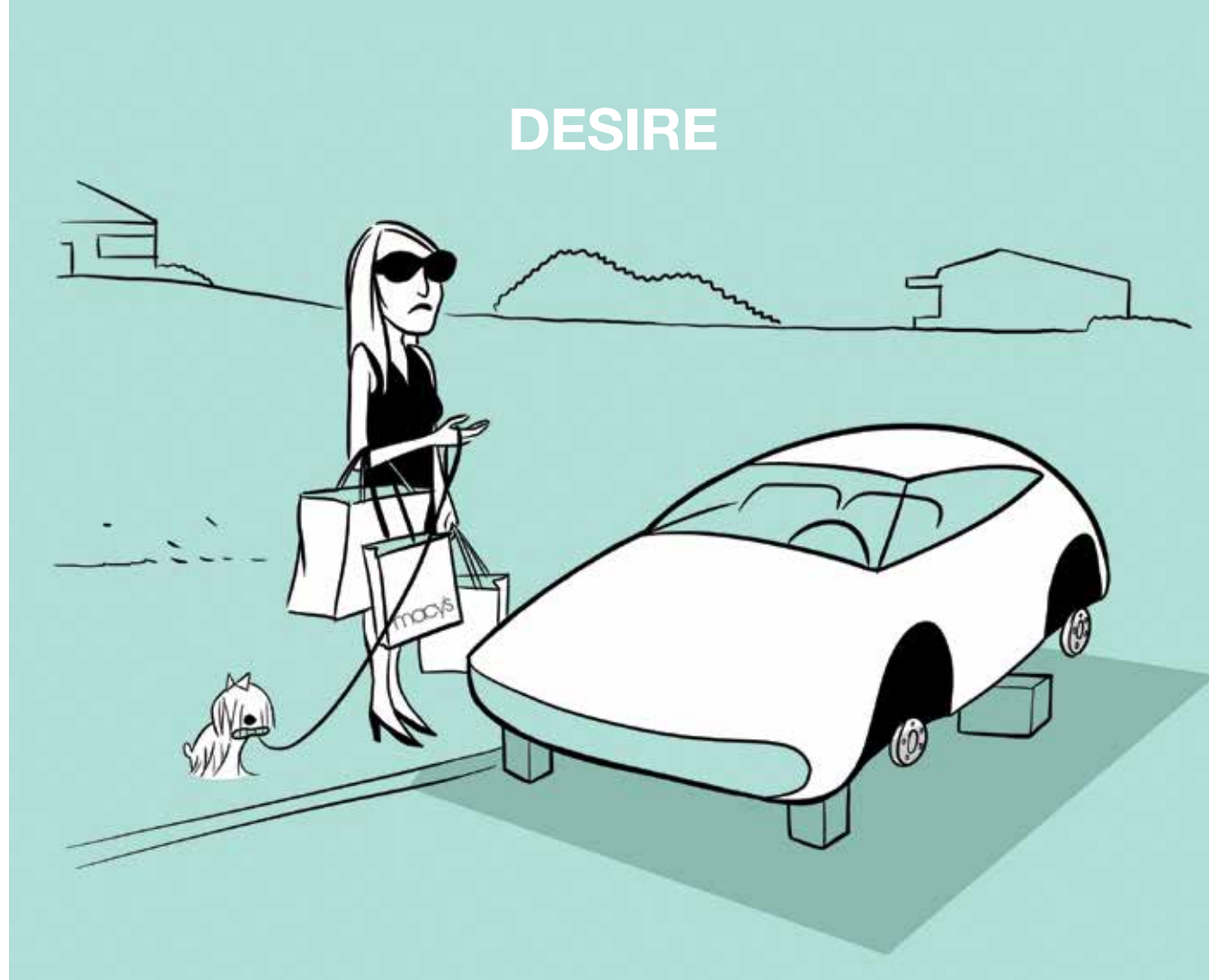
THICH NHAT HANH

SYLVIA BOORSTEIN

TSOKNYI RINPOCHE



DESIRE



Someone said, “Well, you people know what a worrier I am. I would have thought, ‘Today the tires, tomorrow the car!’ When I get over one worry, my mind is quickly scanning for the next possible thing to worry about.”

Finally someone said, “My mind doesn’t do any of those things. It blames. Mostly, it blames me. It is as if I have a built-in peer review committee always ready to criticize. I wonder who appointed them?”

By this time we were all laughing, realizing we had accidentally put together a list of the traditional five “afflictive energies.” These are five habitual ways people react to challenging circumstances that cloud clear judgment.

In traditional Buddhist texts, these energies are called the Five Hindrances, because they block access to sound decision-making. Here is the classic list:

- *Desire* (sometimes called “lust,” which somehow sounds worse)
- *Aversion* (in all its permutations, from annoyance to rage)
- *Sloth and Torpor* (which sounds sinful and intentional, in contrast to fatigue, my preferred term)
- *Restlessness* (which manifests as fretting or worrying)
- *Doubt* (which is linked with insecurity, self-blame, and lack of confidence)

From Getting Mad to Going Shopping:

What’s Your Pattern?

Buddhist teacher **SYLVIA BOORSTEIN** on 5 styles of habitual reaction—and how to free yourself from yours.

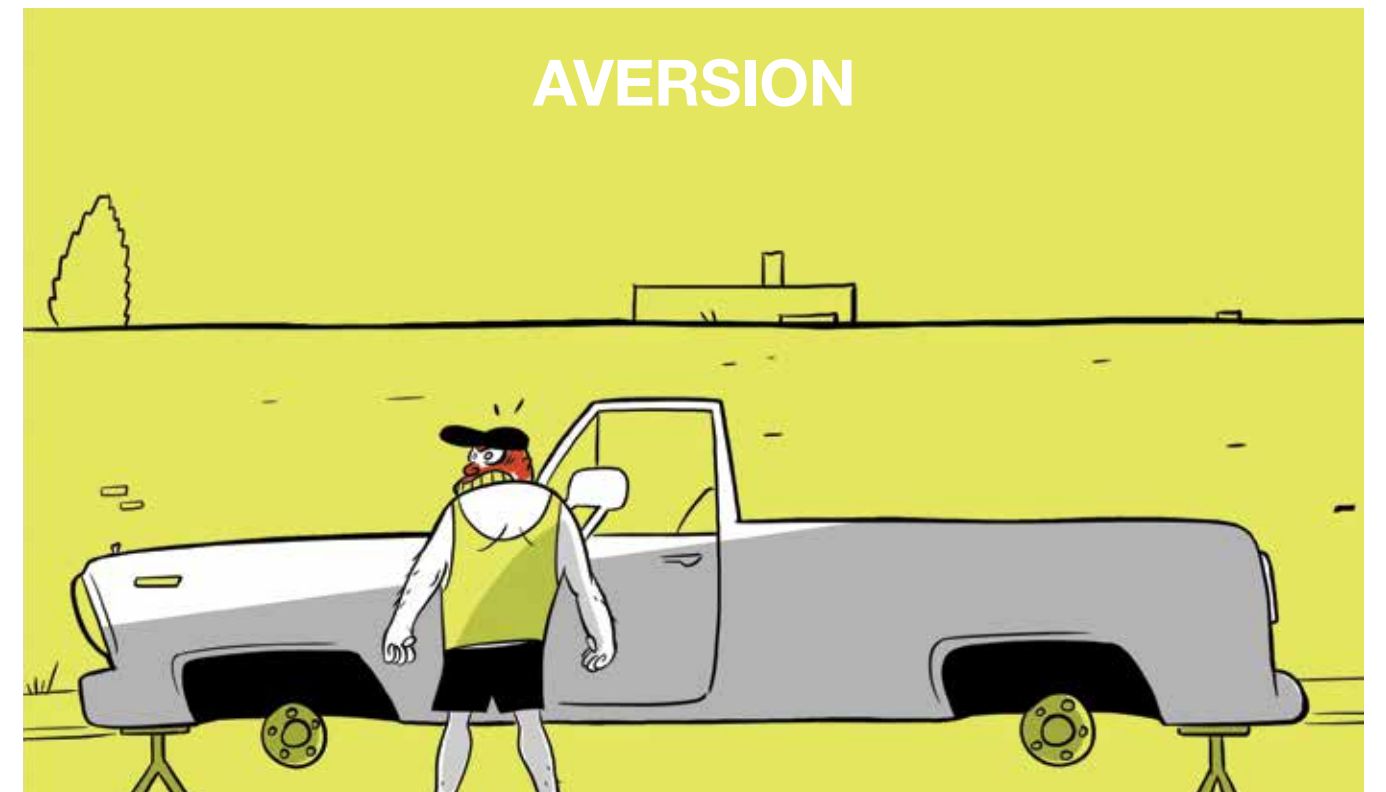
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDRÉ SLOB

EMILY, A LONG-TIME PARTICIPANT in my regular Wednesday morning Buddhist class, told us about a distressing experience she’d had the previous day. “I couldn’t believe it,” she said. “I came out of my apartment building and there was my car, just where I’d left it the night before, but lower. All the tires had been stolen. I got so upset that I walked the three blocks to Macy’s and bought the silk pajamas I’d been coveting.” People laughed sympathetically, acknowledging Emily’s discomfort and appreciating the unexpected remedy she’d chosen. “After that” Emily continued, “I went home and called the police.”

“I’m surprised you went shopping,” another person said. “I would have found the building manager and given her a piece of my mind. I pay high rent to have good security. I probably would have been in a bad mood all day. It always takes time for my mind to settle down.”

Someone else said, “I feel like I can’t tolerate that kind of sudden stress. When something like that happens, I feel exhausted before I even start to deal with it. I would have gone into my apartment, called work, and told them I needed the rest of the day off.”

AVERSION



When I tell the story about this class, it usually elicits an enthusiastic response: “Yes, that’s me! Matter of fact, I have *two* of those five response patterns. Can a person have more than one?”

“In fact,” I respond, “we each have all those habitual patterns of response in varying combinations in response to different circumstances.”

On one notable occasion, though, a man who had recently joined the class said, “I don’t understand any of this. I would have phoned my work to tell them I’d be late. Then I would have phoned the police, my insurance company, and an auto repair to get the car towed and serviced. Then I would have taken the bus to work. What’s the matter with these people?”

Everyone laughed, and I probably did too. But I was very careful in my response, because no one had been wrong in identifying how they responded to stress and nothing was “the matter” with anyone.

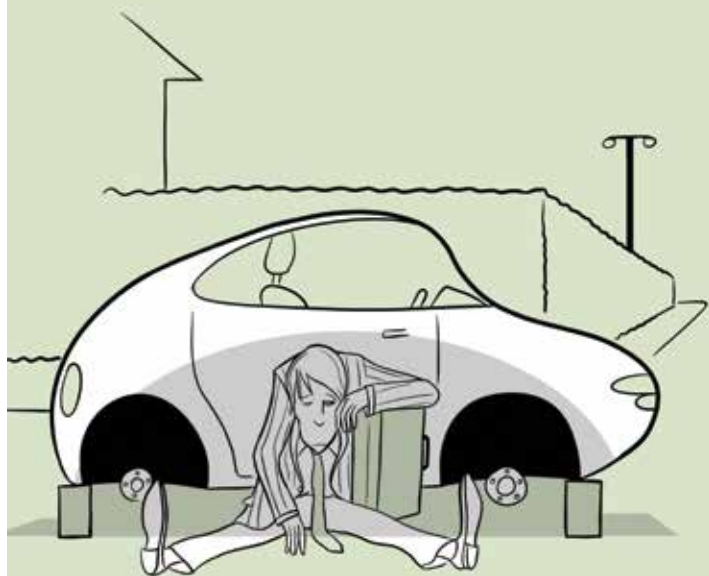
I replied, “I think most of us here would have done that too. What people are describing is what they *felt* like doing, what thoughts flashed through their minds before they did the obvious sensible thing.” The silk pajama story served as a prompt for people to notice what their minds habitually bring up in response to stress and difficulty.

MY MOST PROMINENT default position, the one that’s been the most painful all my life, is restlessness, an agitation of mind that manifests as obsessive worrying. Long before I knew about restlessness as a recognizable, commonly shared form of confusion, I knew I had it. I worried about things that were sometimes genuine concerns (which required attention, but not obsessive fretting) and I worried about imagined concerns, things that had not yet happened but could. When I describe to people the kinds of worst-case scenarios my mind can construct out of minimal data, many heads nod in rueful recognition of this familiar experience.



SYLVIA BOORSTEIN is a psychologist and leading teacher of Insight Meditation. Her many best-selling books including *Pay Attention*, for Goodness’ Sake and *Happiness Is An Inside Job*. She will be teaching at the Shambhala Sun’s meditation retreat at the Omega Institute, August 26 to 30, 2015.

SLOTH



Imagine this scene:

I was traveling with my husband in a foreign country, before there were cellphones, and we planned to meet at a particular restaurant for lunch. I arrived on time, at noon. He wasn’t there yet.

I waited a minute, maybe two, and then I thought, “What if something bad happened to him? What if he got lost? He doesn’t speak the language. What if he took ill? He is old. What if he is missing and no one can find him? I suppose I could call the American embassy. If something terrible happened I’d need to call our family...”

Only a few minutes passed before he strolled into view, happy to tell me about his morning’s adventures.” I felt dismayed to find myself caught, yet again, in a gratuitous mind-storm.

Each experience like this solidified my view of myself. “I am a world class worrier,” I would think, “and I guess I’ll need to deal with this forever.” Calling myself “world class” was an attempt to make light of my uncomfortable habit. I wouldn’t do that now. Every afflictive mind tendency that becomes a habit is painful.

Here’s a second scene from the pre-cellphone era:

I was waiting with other parents for a ski bus to return from a day in the mountains. Aboard were sixty eleven-year-olds, one of whom was mine. The bus was fifteen minutes late. As we stood together in the winter evening darkness, it began to rain.

Ten more minutes passed. I thought, “How come these others parents, like the one who just said, ‘Let’s get something to eat while we wait?’, are not thinking that if it’s raining here, it’s snowing in the mountains, and quite likely there has been an accident?”

I was aware of the frightening thoughts I was having, and the pain of having those thoughts. I was also aware that the other parents did not take every situation of ambiguity to a dreadful conclusion. I felt envious.

PHOTO BY MARGOT DUANE

OVER THE YEARS I have made the shift from thinking, “I am stuck with this mind and these tendencies forever” to trusting, “I can be different! I’m not sure these thoughts will stop, but I can stop being held hostage by them.”

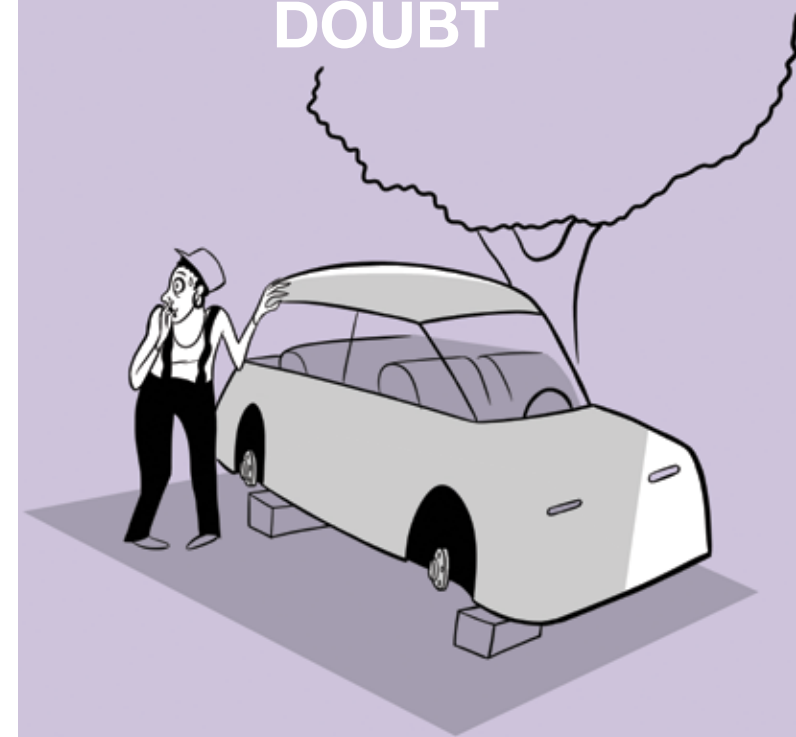
I began by deliberately not identifying myself with my habitual pattern. To voice my confidence in the possibility of change I began to say, “I’m thinking of myself as a recovering fretter.” As a diligent practice, I became particularly vigilant about the arising of frightening thoughts. I describe this practice as “mindfulness of alarming thoughts.” Being genuinely mindful requires that I acknowledge the thoughts with a balanced mind. Whenever I am able to intercept the thoughts in the tiny space in my awareness *before* fear enzymes flood through my body, I can recognize that they are only thoughts and I don’t have to believe them. Then the thoughts just become thoughts. They don’t stir up a commotion. This is tremendous progress.

I had hoped in my early years of practice that my tendency toward alarm would disappear. That didn’t happen. Perhaps these habitual tendencies are coded in our genes. Perhaps they are patterns we learn in our families, or from our culture. Because I am a psychologist, I selected elements of my childhood experience to present a plausible story for why my mind

RESTLESSNESS



DOUBT



makes up worries. But validating my habit with a story didn’t make it better. What helped was years of recognizing and not responding to afflictive tendencies. Now, worry thoughts happen less, and when they do, they have much less power. That, for me, is liberating enough.

In the end, it isn’t about never having afflicting habits arise. They are part of being human and having complex lives. Treating afflictive habits like mildly annoying cousins who visit from time to time reduces their power. I’m sure that is true across the spectrum of afflictive energies, not just my habit of restless worry. I’m also sure that a relaxed mind—one that is steady enough to absorb the initial startle of an afflictive energy, alert enough to identify it clearly, and determined enough not to give in to it—is the key to working with any disturbing habit. We can follow the Buddha’s example.

IMAGINE THE BUDDHA sitting under the bodhi tree on the night of his enlightenment. He is absolutely resolute and determined to free his mind of all confusion. According to legend, Mara, the personification of ego, arrives to thwart his plan. Accompanying Mara are all the forces that confuse the mind. The Buddha, recognizing that his mind is about to be challenged, says, “I see your armies, Mara, and I am not afraid.”

Visualize, if you can, this wonderful scene as it unfolds. The forces of Mara unleash spears and arrows which turn into flowers as they encounter the field of poised benevolence that surrounds the Buddha. Mara then creates a display of erotic temptations which dissolve in the field of radiant ease that surrounds the Buddha. Mara disappears and the Buddha declares his enlightenment.

The Buddha gains wisdom because he is peaceful. Equanimity is the prerequisite for liberation. The Buddha's ability to remain poised, to counter potential distress with blessings of goodwill, demonstrates the end of suffering. His behavior represents his central teaching, "Peace is possible."

The Buddha is said to have placed his hand on the ground as Mara appeared, in a gesture that signified, "I have a right to be here."

As human beings, we also have the right to recognize challenge, choose to override our instinctive impulses, and liberate ourselves, moment to moment, from falling into the confusion that is suffering. We too can recognize hindrance habits as unwholesome and override their lure. We can modulate aversive feelings so that our views are expressed as useful responses. We

can resist the impulse to disengage when participation is appropriate. We can recognize irrelevant alarming thoughts as the creations of fantasy that they are and put them aside. We can recognize self-doubt (although it is the subtlest of energies and masquerades as truth) and ignore it.

There is a variety of special trainings or practices for developing each of these skills. But the universal remedy, which is effective in responding to confusion of any sort, is the training of the mind that the Buddha demonstrated under the bodhi tree.

This training involves the practices of wise effort, wise concentration, and wise mindfulness. Wise effort is the ongoing determination to choose responses that are wholesome. Wise concentration is building, through lifestyle choices and meditation practice, enough stability in the mind to maintain

equanimity through the ever-changing challenges of life. Wise mindfulness is the continual, non-coercive awareness of changing experiences, which is, in itself, the practice of peace.

In classes where I ask that people disclose, by a show of hands, which hindrance energy is their most prominent one, there are always five groups that identify themselves. Sometimes the people in each group meet together to share their experiences of what works best as responses to these uncomfortable tendencies. Participants report that they find the groups helpful. More than specific remedies, the discovery that other people are willing to share stories of their experiences, especially when a lack of consciousness has created serious difficulties in their lives, is reassuring, and normalizing, and inspiring.

It is helpful to identify hindrance energies not as character

flaw but as default positions of the mind under stress. This allows the mind to relax. "I have a mind that, under stress, thinks first of sensual soothing" is kinder than "I am a lustful person." "When I am startled, angry thoughts arise in my mind" is kinder than "I am an angry person." "At the slightest hint of ambiguity in a situation, dire possibilities fill my mind," is kinder, and less embarrassing, than admitting "I am a chronic fretter."

What helps is remembering, "This confusion is a temporary attack which will pass soon. It will pass faster if I'm kind to myself (because, after all, I am in pain) and if I don't solidify this experience into a fixed view." Reframing unpleasant energies (and all the hindrances are unpleasant) as transient, opportunistic phenomena doesn't preclude them from arising or immediately neutralize them. But it does make them workable. ♦



A Bad Day at the Airport What better place to work with your mind?

HERE IS A PRACTICE I have been working with for more than a decade. I recite, usually silently, these two sentences:

May I meet this moment fully.

May I meet it as a friend.

These blessing phrases cultivate and sustain a mind of peace and goodwill. For me, they represent the promise of practice. "May I meet this moment fully" expresses my faith that an alert

and balanced mind is a possibility for human beings. "May I meet it as a friend" reminds me that my mind's natural benevolence is my best refuge. Although most of my daily practice has always been the simple practice of alert attention to changing experience, I often begin periods of simple sitting with some repetitions of this two-phrase mantra as a kind of mood-setter, an incliner of my mind toward relaxing.

In recent years, I find this blessing comes to mind naturally in times of stress as I go about my life. Recently, I decided to track its activity through a particularly stressful day:

I arrive at the airport well in time for my early morning flight to Orange County, where an old friend has taken quite ill. I notice the flight is delayed. I feel myself starting to cry.

May I meet this moment fully.

May I meet it as a friend.

I realize that I am feeling sad because I love my friend, and am sad to be losing her. I think about how long we've been friends. The pleasure of that thought settles my mind.

Then, I hear the announcement that the flight has now been cancelled. I ask about the next available flight and am waved in the direction of a long line, where I'm told I need to wait for the next available agent. "If I wait in that line, it will be too late for the next flight. I already have a boarding pass," I say. "You need to be in that line," I'm told again.

I feel mad. I think, "I'll write that letter on behalf of all passengers who should be treated more respectfully!"

May I meet this moment fully.

May I meet it as a friend.

I realize that everyone needs to wait and that I feel particularly sensitive because I'm sad. A helpful person standing in line says, "If we phone the airline while we stand here, we can probably get faster service." I decide to do that. I dial. The phone rings and rings. I am feeling irritable.

May I meet this moment fully.

May I meet it as a friend.

I am told, electronically, that my call is very important to the

airline and that an agent will be with me soon. That message repeats many times. I hear my mind again composing indignant letters to Customer Service.

May I meet this moment fully.

May I meet it as a friend.

My mind calms down and I realize that I am disappointed with myself because my friend is sick and I am indulging myself in indignation. "Really, Sylvia! What are you thinking?"

May I meet this moment fully.

May I meet it as friend.

The line progresses slowly. I repeat my phrases slowly, paying attention to what I am saying. I look around at the other travelers and wonder where they are going. In my mind, I begin blessing them.

May you meet this moment fully.

May you meet it as a friend.

It is my turn at the ticket counter just at the point that my phone call is answered and so I hang up. I realize I've calmed down. The agent is courteous. I learn that all the flights until mid-afternoon have been cancelled because of the thunderstorms. I rebook for the next day.

The airport bus for my trip home arrives just as I emerge from the terminal in time to board it. I'm grateful, and a little bewildered from the morning of hurrying up and waiting and ultimately going back home. But I'm all right. Just a little tired.

May I meet this moment fully.

May I meet it as a friend.

I travel without difficulty the next day to be with my friend. ♦

—SYLVIA BOORSTEIN

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