

# HOME IS HERE

*Practicing Antiracism  
with the  
Engaged Eightfold Path*

Liên Shutt



North Atlantic Books  
Huichin, unceded Ohlone land  
*aka* Berkeley, California

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## SKILLFUL EFFORT

### Activating Wholeness

WHEN I FIRST MOVED to a convert monastery in California, I came with a large group of new “ongoing students,” those planning to stay long term, working the center’s summer resort season to earn practice credits toward the winter’s intensive monastic retreat time. As the various vans unloaded us and introductions were made, a white man asked me, “Where are you from?”

“San Francisco,” I replied.

“No. No. Where are you *really* from?” he persisted.

Even though I was annoyed by this typical questioning as an example of white supremacy’s framing of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners,” in an effort to be accommodating in this predominantly white new environment, I went ahead and gave him what I suspected he wanted to hear, answering, “Vietnam.”

To which he responded with, “I was there in the war. I saved your people.”

Once again, as it was a new place in which I knew I would be living closely with him all summer, I bit my tongue, not replying from my own Vietnamese American perspective on the role of the United States in that war.

As more summer students arrived in the next few days and similar questions of where I was “really from” continued to arise, if this vet was in the group, he would repeatedly add his claim of being a savior in Vietnam.

After a few days of this, I tried to talk with him about it, sharing how, for many Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans I know, the U.S. presence in Vietnam was not always wanted. Even if it was desired, his framing of U.S. soldiers’ part in the civil war in Vietnam as having “saved your people” was patronizing. The United States had its own political and economic motivations and stakes in Vietnam and Southeast Asia at the time, and so it was much more layered than the myopic view he was espousing.

He refused to consider my point of view and repeatedly insisted that “America saved your people.” Met with his staunch stance, I started to avoid him. A few more weeks went by before I realized how much effort it took to go out of my way to avoid him in the small valley that made up the monastery in the midst of the Ventana wilderness. That, and the tightness of anger mixed with angst that came up every time I thought about his behavior, showed me that the time and energy it took from me was more than I was willing to let continue. From then on, whenever he made his claim throughout the rest of the summer, I didn’t take it on. Some people may think of this as a defeated example, but this is what many Vietnamese Americans have to do to conserve our energies.



In our conditioned way of thinking, most of us think of effort as just about action. In Buddhism, Skillful Effort is included with Skillful Concentration and Skillful Mindfulness as part of the Samadhi, or Meditative grouping of the Eightfold Path. Skillful Effort, then, is much more about *how to work with our emotional and mental energy to engage with our experience*, in meditation and in life. To bring us back to the Net of Indra analogy, you can think of Skillful Effort as practicing to negotiate how we use our energy to manifest, restore, or maintain wholeness and connection: first in meditation and then in our lives.

In terms of the teachings, Skillful Effort is defined as awareness that is choiceful and purposeful so that it is in alignment with a desired

motivation. In the last chapter on Skillful Motivation, we discussed how we've inherited our racial karmic "seeds" through conditioned thoughts and beliefs. Following this with how we can skillfully work with emotional and mental energies will be very useful.

I'll first present Skillful Effort's four instructions for how we can work with our energies skillfully in meditation. As there are many different kinds of meditation, take these as broad, applicable ways of working with the four instructions. Then I'll apply the four instructions to the above experience to illustrate how we can use our energy when working with white supremacy culture's impacts. Lastly, I'll address a group of challenging energies called the Five Hindrances. I'll present these Hindrances as a framework of emotional and mental energies we may have been taught as ways to react to experiences of racialization or racism. I find that being able to view my habitual responses to racialization or racist incidents *as learned reactive energies* can support nonidentification and thus offers me a higher chance of being able *to respond with intentional presence and actions*.

When these energies are viewed as taught and conditioned, it increases our ability to observe, be with, and work with a memory or incident *as a series of processes* instead of only being caught in their contents. Doing so decreases our habitual tendencies to get stuck in the turning over and over again of what happened and how we, or others, could have done things differently. Additionally, as the teachings of the Five Hindrances also present ways of working with these energies, we'll see how they can provide approaches to transform unskillful karmic habitual tendencies into skillful ones.

## THE FOUR INSTRUCTIONS OF PACE

Most often the four instructions for Skillful Effort are presented as prevent, overcome, cultivate, and maintain. As these are guides for how to be skillful with your energy, being able to memorize the four is useful, so I'm offering them a bit differently, as an acronym, PACE: **P**revent. **A**bandon. **C**ultivate. **E**xtend.

To pace yourself is to do something in a way to avoid overexerting yourself and to sustain your stamina, so the word echoes the sense of how we can be skillful with effort. Skillful Effort's four instructions are further divided into two divisions: unskillful and skillful. Traditionally, these pairings are worded as "unwholesome and wholesome," but as those can sound judgmental, I'll be using "unskillful and skillful" and "not useful and useful." The framing of "not" is first because these instructions stress how we can be proactive to *prevent* unskillful effort. Here's how the two divisions work with the four instructions as laid out by PACE:

Practicing with effort that is **unskillful**:

Prevent it from arising.

Abandon it when it is present.

Practicing with effort that is **skillful**:

Cultivate its arising.

Extend it when it is present.

## Prevent

When we go to a retreat or meditation center, we receive the rules or advice for meditation. Many of these are to prevent distractions. For instance, when I teach my meditation course to the general public, I say, "Don't do it on your bed!" It's preventative to not use it as a place for meditation because that's where we sleep. For Zen practitioners, since we are instructed to have our eyes slightly open, we face a wall because then there is less stimulus. In the Insight tradition of meditation, usually you're seated in rows, so the instruction is to close your eyes to prevent being distracted by activity around you. In both traditions, during retreats, you keep your eyes down as much as possible once off your cushion to prevent the dispersion of meditative concentration and mindfulness.

Working with our energy in meditation is key. While the Buddha did say that we can meditate while sitting, standing, walking, or lying down,

the seated posture is most emphasized because it is considered the position that offers us the best balance of energy to achieve clarity of awareness: the balance between having to expend a lot of energy to stay standing up or the collapsed energy that's often the result of lying down for an extended period of time.

Balancing our energy while working with the impact of white supremacy is also crucial. While true for everyone, for people of color, this is especially so. For many of us, having to choose practice over being able to express our whole selves is a common and pervasive position we are put into within white-centered practice spaces.

## Abandon

When an unskillful thought or emotion arises, how do we abandon it? We really need to be very ardent in our effort. As indicated before, the classic translated word for this is “overcome,” which gives you a flavor of how hard it can be to abandon and, by extension, what degree of ardency is called for.

For instance, at the beginning of a meditation period or retreat, most of us have to make diligent efforts to not be distracted. As I tell many beginners, the first ten minutes or so of your meditation is to just stay on a posture or breath point as your meditation anchor.\* It doesn't matter if there's a dog barking next door, or if you have a vision of what you think is divine, you need to abandon letting yourself get interested in that. “Paying attention to whatever is going on” can be a meditation instruction, but to achieve one-pointed concentration, what is needed is to have the ability to stay on a *chosen* object of awareness. Paying attention to anything else at this point is “unskillful” toward the establishment of concentration and thus needs to be abandoned. Usually any undirected activity in the very beginning of any meditation period, besides staying or returning to your anchor point, is still just distraction.

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\* Like the Practice Pause in chapter 2, “One-pointed Concentration Breath Meditation.”

## Cultivate

Whenever unskillful mental or emotional qualities are overly strong, we can turn to cultivate skillful qualities. To “cultivate” in this context is simply to direct or redirect our attention to positive or easeful qualities. Generosity and virtuous conduct are two qualities that the Buddha often put at the beginning of many lists of practices for this reason. Metta, karuna, and the other Brahma Viharas are qualities the Buddha prescribed as “antidotes” to challenging emotions. We will cover these in the Five Hindrance section later in this chapter and throughout the book.

Cultivation of easeful mental and emotional qualities during meditation offers us a chance to practice knowing, connecting with, and resting in them with intention. This strengthens our ability to access these qualities in moments of challenge or distress, such as when working with old or present experiences of racialization or racism. Additionally, the more we are able to know and access easeful qualities, the more confident we become that they are emotions and mental states *available* to us *at will*, thus empowering our sense of agency for self-regulation.

## Extend

When skillfulness is present, how do you extend it? One way is to notice in your body, emotion, or mind when you are in the midst of a positive or skillful state or experience. Many of us think that to meditate is a series of “doing.” Rather, the opposite is true; instead of thinking what else you’re “supposed to do next” while meditating, once you’ve applied a meditative tool or method, just stop and be. I often tell my students to just rest as a way of extending.

In terms of antiracist work, we need to be able to rest and extend our awareness of well-being and ease as a countermeasure to the impact of hurt and harm from racism. Many of my friends who are teachers of color and I have been saying, “Rest is revolutionary!” Systems of oppression are continuously telling us we’re lacking in some way and so need to strive, thus to unplug from such expectations can be a form of skillful resistance.



For instance, the Model Minority trope presents Asian Americans as having overcome white supremacy's racism because of hard work and advances in education and economics. In doing so, it created the expectation for many Asian Americans to be high achievers, making strenuous effort pushing through personal needs and challenges to progress higher and higher. The myth was also used as a way to pit other races, especially Black folks, against us with messages such as, "If they, in working hard, have 'made it,' why can't you?" and thus promoting the old American myth of individualistic "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" as a distraction from the machination and impacts of structural racism.

If you've cultivated metta or one of the other Brahma Viharas, extending is remembering to let yourself feel their qualities, acknowledging and resting in the positive result of your practice. Extending is useful as a reminder to us that when unpleasantness or difficulty *isn't* present, that's a moment to realize that we *are* in a positive or healing moment. This supports us to remember that, even under oppressive forces, our lives are also full of ease, joy, and connections, reminding us to rest in the completeness or wholeness of our being. We need to remember that we are here to thrive, not just survive.



As is true of any instruction, an example of a skillful response may fit in more than one category. Remembering consequences—thinking through an event's possible results—can be both a prevention and a cultivation practice, depending on context. Once we start to know our habit patterns of thoughts and emotions, we can realize that what usually serves as a cultivation practice may be used as a prevention practice. For instance, if you are experiencing a lot of self-judgment as you start a meditation, instead of starting with following your breath to establish concentration, you can begin with metta phrases as a way to give your mind a positive quality to counter the self-judgmental thoughts, supporting you to settle down and be grounded.

Skillful Effort is using energy that is purposeful, useful, and appropriate toward your goals. Suzuki Roshi, in a 1969 talk, explained that "the

way we behave, the way we do, should always be renewed according to the time [and] according to the place you live. On each situation, we must find how to live [and] practice our way. This is right effort.” Discerning what is Skillful Effort in any given situation is, in Suzuki Roshi’s words, a practice that “will be continued forever.”<sup>1</sup>

Continual practice with the four instructions connects us to energetic wholeness, activating Skillful Effort in interactions within ourselves, with each other, and with the world.

## PRACTICE PAUSE

— *Mindful Writing* —

### Restorative PACE, with an Example

Here are the steps, and then I’ll give you an example:

1. Clearly state the action you want to investigate.
2. Evaluate one **unskillful** outcome from this action.
3. Reflect on a way you want to change this energy.
4. State the theme you want to address.
5. Identify the restorative, or **skillful**, motivation or quality desired.
6. Apply **PACE**.

**Example:** Using the memory at the beginning of the chapter:

1. **Clearly state the action:** Answering people’s conscious or unconscious racist questioning of my Americanness.
2. **Evaluate one unskillful outcome from this action:** Using energy to give in to white supremacy culture’s expectations when asked, “Where are you *really* from?”
3. **Reflect on a way you want to change this energy:** Stop using energy as a defense.
4. **State the theme you want to address:** How to best use my energy when faced with conscious or unconscious racism.

5. **Identify the restorative, or skillful, motivation or quality:** Conserving energy for my own well-being of being grounded in my location as an American no matter the conditions.

6. **Apply PACE.**

Practicing with effort that is unskillful: Using energy that gives in to white supremacy culture's expectations when asked, "Where are you really from?"

- **Prevent** it from arising:
- First response: avoid such people. But it's not always possible. Plus, doing so takes energy *from* me that I'd rather put toward thriving versus defending. Thus, the clarified *useful response* to practice with is to *prevent the loss of my energy as a reaction to another's racialization of me.*
- **Abandon** it when it is present:
- For me, the clarity of the useful response from Prevent led to a natural outcome to this second instruction: to abandon the conditioning to "be nice" when in the midst of white supremacy culture settings. Put another way, I have to *abandon the conditioning that my location as an Asian American means I need to put white people's comfort above my own.*

Practicing with effort that is skillful: Conserving energy for my own well-being.

- **Cultivate** its arising:
- *Cultivate reclaiming my energy* by remembering this is *the other's* conditioned ignorance of the racist implication of their question, or, such as the case of this memory, their conscious desire to perpetuate racism. Cultivate energy for my own well-being by being grounded in my location as an American no matter the conditions. Also, cultivate (versus avoid) settings in which I am affirmed, or at the very least, not the target of direct racial hatred.

- **Extend** it when it is present:
- *Remembering to rest in the reclaiming of energy toward well-being as a way to extend having engaged in a skillful effort.* I can also extend my groundedness on this by accessing antiracist settings.

While the memory used happened a while back, I've used it for this PACE example for several reasons. Obviously this is a common, typical experience of Asian Americans with the perpetual foreigner stereotype. Additionally, it had specificity to my experience as a Vietnamese American. Additionally, it is useful to apply PACE to an old experience as it inherently already has the distance of time so that there's less charge. I also chose an experience in which there is some aspect of having executed a habitual response that has a sense of not having gone as well as I would have liked.

Because the format of PACE begins with "unskillful," I find it to be especially pertinent as a restorative tool. I would typically turn away from actions I've labeled as "failed." Revisiting an old challenge with the mindfulness tool of PACE offers us a chance to clarify our *motivations* for how to meet chronic, oppressive situations with graceful agency. After applying PACE, it's likely that not all four instructions will be remembered the first time a similar incident comes up. However, just having the clarified motivation for the outcome will likely remind you of one or more of the ways to prevent, abandon, cultivate, and extend. With repeated Skillful Effort practice, your own formulation of the four instructions of PACE becomes more easily remembered, increasing your ability to redirect and transform old habitual energies.

For me, Skillful Effort's four instructions of PACE have been a life-affirming tool. It so clearly lays out a method that is inspiring and practical at the same time, supporting me to be able to assess and practice balancing my energies to be able to be fully engaged in my life, including anti-oppression work. May it be of similar support to you.



## WORKING WITH THE FIVE HINDRANCES ENERGIES

The Five Hindrances are mental states that keep us from being fully present. The Pali word is *nivarana*, meaning “covering” or “that which covers.”<sup>2</sup> The Five Hindrances are sensual desire, aversion and ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and skeptical doubt. Traditionally they are included in the Meditative grouping of the Eightfold Path and are taught as qualities that hinder the achievement of deep concentration, hence their name.

We can also see that they are qualities we can have at any time. My guess is that, at least once, while reading this book, you have had one or more of these states. Or, recalling a meeting or class you’ve been to, have you not had one or more of these states? They are normal states that all of us experience. The problem is that we often take them to be more than what they are—simply states of mind that come and go like all states. This is why I like to say that they are a problem when we’re *careless* about them. They hinder us when we are not careful to remember them for what they are but instead take them on as solid moods or even as personalities.

As such, let’s see how the Five Hindrances can be states that keep us from being able to stay with racial memories or experiences, thus keeping us from being able to appropriately or skillfully work with or respond to those experiences. In particular, we will examine how the Hindrances can solidify into identities that we take on or impute onto others in hurtful or harmful ways.

### Sensual Desire

This first category of the Five Hindrances is called sense desire or sensual desire. The desire itself is not a problem. In the teachings, it is said that a sense of “self” easily arises when a desire is activated through one of our senses. In Buddhism, we have six senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touch, and mental formation. As you can see from the list, five out of six are what most of us think of as sensory. Bodily comfort is a big part of our life.

This is why we spend so much time making sure we have the right cushion or that the meditation hall is the “right” temperature. Most retreat centers I go to have rules about how no one can open or close windows or touch the thermostat unless you’re the designated person to do so.

While this category of the Five Hindrances is also called “sense desire,” the term *sensual desire* points directly at how, when we engage with our senses in an obsessive way, *that* is when they become a hindrance. For instance, let’s say you smell french fries while you’re meditating. Smelling is a sensory experience. However, you start thinking on and on about how you’re going to eat french fries after the meditation period, and not just any french fries but the ones from the restaurant across town, and find yourself planning for ways to go get some, what route you’d take, or whom you’d go with. Now you have gone into sensual desire in a way that has hindered you from establishing concentration in that meditation period.

As applied to a sense of self, this Hindrance can “cover up” an identity that we are uncomfortable with. For years, what kept me from moving during meditation most was my concern over my self-image and what I thought others would think of me if I moved: “She’s not a good meditator.” The irony, of course, is that most people either have their eyes closed or are too focused on their own identity fears to notice.

In the realm of race, we can see this as an idealized sense of self, such as the wish to not seem like “a racist person” as that is commonly deemed as being “bad.” Racism’s hold over many of us occurs both in imputation of identity and, with that, often an assigned character judgment. For instance, in the past several years, it has become clear that “white fragility,” or the state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable for a white person as they are afraid of being seen as “racist,” triggers a range of defensive moves.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, it keeps white-identified people from not only seeing their part in racism but also limits them from interactions with BIPOCs and to being with their own humanity.

To illustrate its characteristics, each of the Five Hindrances have a water analogy to go with them. Sensual desire is compared to dye in water—the dye colors the water, making it hard to see clearly. Like dye in water, idealization or concretized identity colors our perception. Racialization is

based on stereotyping what kinds of identity each race “should” be. This is why so much of our work is to notice when we have taken on and solidified self-identities or when we’re imputing concretized identities onto others. Either way, we limit ourselves and each other. So we practice *abandoning* such unskillful thinking or beliefs, applying the *a* in PACE.

I know someone who went through a six-month Buddhist training to work with white privilege and entitlement. They learned that saying, “I’m an ally,” isn’t useful because it implies that you’re “done” with race work, like you’ve reached a goal and so can say, “I’m not a racist; I’m an ally.” It’s not an identity or a place to reach. Instead, saying, “I’m *acting* as an ally,” with the emphasis on the verb, reflects that it’s an ongoing process and that one keeps reengaging with it. Mistakes will be made in antiracist work, and so being open to keep on engaging is the key. This is a practice of *cultivating* skillfulness for what has not yet arisen, applying the *c* in PACE.

## Aversion and Ill Will

With identification, or selfing, blaming and shaming often also co-arise. The second Hindrance is aversion and ill will, known as hatred in some lists. The energy in the water metaphor is that of boiling.

I used to live where there was a hot spring. It was lovely to feel its heat, but if you got too close to the water’s source, you could get burned. Or, if you stayed in the hot water too long, you would get heat exhaustion. This again points us toward how if we’re careless with the Hindrances, then harm can happen. The arising of feelings and thoughts of harm is something humans do. *What* we do with it is the key. Seeing clearly through strong, difficult states provides us the pause and agency to act in nonharming ways.

Aversion, ill will, and hatred are pretty obvious as part of white supremacy culture and racism. But what about righteousness? As an activist and a “fighter for social justice,” I have had a lot of righteous anger. My root teacher, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, tells a story in her book *Seeds for a Boundless Life* about a life-changing moment when she was able to recognize her righteous anger. She was an activist all her life, so participating in

marches and rallies was very common for her. During an anti-Vietnam War rally, she found herself face-to-face with a riot cop and recognized a way to understand their shared humanity.

[T]he policeman was trying to protect what he thought was right and good from all of the other people who were trying to destroy it—and I was doing the same thing. Since I had no basis for understanding the experience of shared identity with someone whom I had considered completely “other”. . . I began to search for someone who would understand it. . . . That’s how I came to be an ordained monastic.<sup>4</sup>

What qualities do we want our antiracist work to have? Hatred? In righteousness there can be a lot of blaming and shaming. The movement of aversion is to push away. Certainly our healing from racism and antiracist work is about pointing out or acting in ways to move toward or resolve something or someone being harmful, but we can do it in ways that do not perpetuate hatred. What is the energy that is in service of us not othering others just because they other us? Are we going to do that to them? Can there be a sense of conviction that doesn’t include aversion, ill will, and hatred? Instead, can it be from unconditional friendliness? Are we behaving or speaking in ways that are inclusive? The practice to overcome aversion and ill will is to cultivate connection.

## PRACTICE PAUSE

### Mindful Reflection on Defusing Othering

- Imagine yourself across from someone whom you are having difficulties with. Choose an easy “difficulty,” as this is an exercise to build skillfulness, not to “get through” anything or to “fix” yourself or the other person.
- Now, turn your attention inward.



- What is a mildly strong emotion you're experiencing when you think of this?
- Now bring your attention to a body location.
- What's one sensation you're experiencing that's difficult to be with?
- How can you attend to that sensation to ease it?
- Let yourself do it. Maybe a deep breath, dropping the shoulders, or opening a fist?
- Now imagine really looking at that person.
- Imagine they are doing the same exercise. What might they discover?
- What might be similarities in both your experiences?

As stated in chapter 4, "Skillful Motivation," metta is often emphasized as the practice to work with ill will. One of the translations of metta into English is "unconditional friendliness." For me, to be willing to see the commonality of our experiences even though we don't agree (even in passionate ways) is the epitome of practicing "unconditional friendliness."\*

## Sloth and Torpor

Now, if the water metaphor for the Five Hindrances is a body of water, sloth and torpor is the section of the pond in which algae and water plants grow so thick that it's hard to see the water itself. Sloth is heaviness and torpor is dull mental qualities.

When I'm at the Russian River in Northern California, I kayak most days. Due to the climate crisis, California has experienced extreme drought the past few years. With each year, the river water levels have gone down lower and lower. At a certain point, the algae and water plants bloom and become very dense, a thick carpet of green slime, making it hard to paddle

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\* See the "Metta and Karuna Meditation" Practice Pause in chapter 4.

through. It takes a lot of effort, my arms straining with each stroke. At the same time, the algae and water plants are luscious, bright green.

When my arms are too sore with the effort and I stop paddling, the kayak comes to a dead stop with not even the slightest advancement from the last stroke. The immediate stillness feels settling. The complete motionlessness feels very attractive. It feels so easy to just give in, to stay right there and never do anything ever again. It's hard to think about anything else except to give in to this thickness of inactivity. This is sloth and torpor. It is a state where I am pulled into the sense that it's a letting go, imagining it's a kind of nirvana, where I'm suspended and don't have to make any more effort. It is enticing, but if having the energy to have clarity of awareness is our aim, then it's a false settledness.

In terms of racial dynamics, sloth and torpor can manifest as tiredness from having to struggle to just survive in the midst of intense racist conditions. However, like all the Hindrances, the condition itself isn't the issue. We want to find out what the sloth and torpor are covering up. Sometimes during a retreat we might want to take a nap to see if it's simply body tiredness. However, if you find that doing so doesn't give you energy after, then it's time to investigate (the practice instruction of the First Noble Truth) to see if it's the result of feeling discouraged or the lethargy of defeatedness.

This is a hindrance of low to no energy. It's the kind of energy state of having given up to go down with the sinking ship. You feel like abandoning yourself into the lull, to be pulled into a collapsing of energy that seems so restful. Especially when our experience of racism is an onslaught day after day, giving up can be enticing as a means of escape. As such, it can be a form of disassociation or disengaging from what's happening.

This can feel good in the moment, but it's not what skillful practice is about. Without energy to practice, especially as a means to investigate, we stay ignorant. Skillful Effort supports clearly perceiving the conditions around us. What can support us to stay connected or feel energetic in our lives? How can we add energy?

At first, it may be upping your effort to resist the pull of sloth and torpor, to resist an internal or structural pull to just keep things as they

are. Sloth and torpor may be a form of resistance to what is, a way of running from being with it. That's why it's important to be able to clearly identify what is off-kilter or needs to be worked with. Being able to name what is disrupted or torn is a way to overcome the lull of being stuck in an unhealthy status quo.

Engagement and cultivating curiosity are great ways to bring in energy. In activist work, when you're feeling stuck or discouraged, this means becoming curious about different ways or a different kind of energy you can use to engage with where you feel stuck. For example, if you're feeling isolated or alone, getting together with people with similar values or aims toward that issue can be a way to add energy. It could be for a specific action or just for a friendly gathering as a means of connection for uplift. Joining rallies, marches, protests, or organizations that are doing meaningful work can give you a sense of communal empowerment.

## Restlessness and Anxiety

At the other end of the pond, restlessness and anxiety are compared to the choppy water kicked up by strong winds, making it hard to see clearly the water's surface or what's underneath. The opposite of sloth and torpor, this is the Hindrance of having too much energy. You're so agitated you can't sit still or think clearly. The practice instruction for restlessness and anxiety is concentration, to keep on refocusing on what is here, what is present, and what you *do* know instead of focusing on imagined threats or fears.

It is true that lack of safety can be a very real issue. For Asian Americans, anti-Asian hatred has impacted us particularly in recent years. A Pew survey conducted in April 2022 reports 63 percent of Asian American adults say "violence against Asian Americans in the U.S. is increasing" and "about one in five . . . worry daily (7 percent) or almost daily (14 percent) that they might be threatened or attacked because of their race or ethnicity . . ." For those who responded that they "worry rarely or more often, about a third of Asian adults (36 percent) say they have altered their daily schedule or routine in the past twelve months due to [these] worries . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Restlessness and anxiety about our safety is completely understandable as a response to fear. This is not a way of invalidating our fears. The key is to bring awareness as to whether this fear for safety is a *current* need. It can be useful to take a moment to investigate and ask yourself some questions about your fears, to ground into both your own presence and the present.

## PRACTICE PAUSE

### — *Mindful Writing* —

#### Investigation of Fear

Settle into yourself by taking a few deep breaths. Then ask yourself these questions, one by one, taking a deep breath before writing your answers. Let yourself say whatever needs to be said, trying not to edit as you go along:

- Identify an ongoing or recurring fear that you have, or a fear you are feeling right now.
- Does this fear or anxiety have validity *in this moment*, or is it habitual hypervigilance that's **taking my energy away** from being present with myself *now*?
  - If yes, how?
- Is it **taking me away** from the situation I'm in *now*?
  - If yes, how?
- Is it **keeping me from being connected** to those I care for and love *now*?
  - If yes, how?

Settle into the answers. Really feel them “land” in the body as a truth for you right here and right now. Feel it like a root anchoring you to the earth.

Based on the information you discovered from answering these questions, continue answering the questions below. However, before

you continue, discern if now is an appropriate moment to figure out what kinds of boundaries, if any, you will need to make or adjust to attend to your level of safety. It is always okay to take care of yourself and wait for a more appropriate time.

Remember to take deep breaths before writing replies:

- Is what I'm experiencing enough for now?
- Can I, or can this, wait until later?
- Am I remembering I can say no?
- Do I feel safe to say this is not right?
- Is this an appropriate time to protect myself?
- What do I need to do to connect to safety?

Settle into the answers, letting them land in your body as a truth for you right here and right now, anchoring you to the earth.

Similar to working with sloth and torpor, concentration is also a great antidote for restlessness and anxiety. You want to be able to find the steadiness that concentration provides to support reconnection with your motivation or what's important to you. This helps us to ground ourselves. From stability, it's more likely wholeness-based options will arise for you. Perhaps you can focus your energies toward working on a topic or cause that's important to you. Being with like-minded people can be connecting, so joining groups to bond together can be helpful. However, with this Hindrance, take care to find a group that provides you grounding, producing an outlet for your excessive energy, versus one that riles it up further.

## Skeptical Doubt

Connecting to steadiness also supports overcoming skeptical doubt. The hindrance of skeptical doubt is not just regular doubt. You'll know it by its obsessive, pervasive energy. It tends to be ongoing, often in circular or

preoccupied thinking. The analogy is sludgy muddy water that prevents clarity. The energy is fragmented. Oftentimes when we're confused or overwhelmed, that's when skeptical doubt really kicks in. Concentration is an antidote, helping us to be steady enough to be able to acknowledge what is really here.

For instance, to be grounded enough in simply acknowledging being overwhelmed and confused can stop skeptical doubt in its tracks. Asking for help or support can be a useful response. At times, skeptical doubt covers up a fear or resistance to commitment. Investigating what's important to you can provide the grounding you need when doubt is running rampant.



As you can see, many of the ways to work with the challenging states of the Hindrances involve practicing the easeful and connecting qualities of the Brahma Viharas or the meditative factors of the Eightfold Path.

We can also call on Skillful Mindfulness when we investigate and ask questions to clarify presence, goals, or values. Skillful Mindfulness offers two ways to work initially with all the Hindrances. First, whenever you sense the energy of any of the Hindrances, just stop and acknowledge it. This helps you to notice it as a *drive* and not get caught in its content. Second, notice when it's *not* present. While all Five Hindrance states are part of our conditioning, most of us will have a "favorite" one that is our most go-to conditioned reaction. Remember that the Hindrances are not a problem in and of themselves; it's when we're *careless* about their presence and believe that they *are* enduring or are personalities: our own or another's. Thus, when that Hindrance and its energy is not present, it can be a big relief, like a weight off your shoulders that you're no longer stuck to that energy or identity anymore.

The Hindrances are like energetic fields we can get pulled into. Skillful Effort's PACE provides comprehensive ways to evaluate and have the tools to unstick yourself from the Hindrances.



Often, when we have a sense of being made Other, we can have reactive fear and keep thinking, “I’m not good enough,” internalizing the idea that wholeness is outside us as opposed to knowing that wholeness is right here inside us. Our practice is to return and stay connected to wholeness.

We can think of the Five Hindrances as preset destinations on a GPS system. If you have inherited someone else’s car or you buy a used car, there might be presettings in the GPS to their home or wherever they went most often. Even in a new car, there’s preset language based on what has been determined as the dominant language of the car’s market.

In essence, we are often conditioned by all these preset directions—our habitual energetic drives for how we should react versus skillfully respond. They’re like the Hindrances, these settings we’ve inherited, and we can’t get away from them. We may be able to reset the settings, but as long as we’re using any GPS or guidance system, they come with their own settings. Even if you throw out or disconnect the GPS system in the car, if you get lost and need directions, the maps or people you look to for directions come with their own “presets.”

In everyday life, we have to be much more active in our commitment to investigate how we are using our emotional and mental energies. Due to a preprogrammed system, it can lead us to reenact or create new hurts and harms, disrupting the wholeness that is life. Through practicing Skillful Effort, we can work with how we are unskillful or skillful. Then, with repeated practice, we’re able to interrupt these drives, these preprogrammed instructions, so that we can set the course for ourselves to go where we wisely choose to go, to be with others from a more authentic and wholeness-motivating place.