NAMING THE DEMONS

The noonday demon of laziness and sleep will come after lunch each day, and the demon of pride will sneak up only when we have vanquished the other demons.

In ancient cultures shamans learned that to name that which you feared was a practical way to begin to have power over it.

We have words and rituals for many of our great outer events, birth and death, war and peace, marriage, adventure, illness, but often we are ignorant of the names of the inner forces that move so powerfully through our hearts and lives.

In the last chapter, we talked about the general principle of turning difficulties into practice. Recognizing these forces and giving them a name is a specific and precise way to work with them and develop our understanding. We can begin to name and acknowledge many beautiful states that grace our lives: joy, well-being, peace, love, enthusiasm, kindness. This is a way to honor and nurture them. In the same way, naming the difficulties we encounter brings clarity and understanding and can unlock and free the valuable energy bound up in them.

Every spiritual path has a language for the common difficulties we
encounter. The Sufis call them Nafs. The Christian Desert Fathers, who practiced nearly two thousand years ago in the deserts of Egypt and Syria, called them demons. One of their masters, Evagrius, left a Latin text of instructions for those who meditate in the wilderness: "Stay watchful of gluttony and desire," he warned, "and the demons of irritation and fear as well. The noonday demon of laziness and sleep will come after lunch each day, and the demon of pride will sneak up only when you have vanquished the other demons."

For Buddhist meditators these forces are traditionally personified as Mara (the God of Darkness), and at retreats they are frequently named the Hindrances to Clarity. New students inevitably encounter the forces of greed, fear, doubt, judgment, and confusion. Experienced students continue to wrestle with these very same demons, although in clearer and more skillful ways.

Whether difficulties or pleasures, the naming of our experience is the first step in bringing them to a wakeful conscious attention. Mindfully naming and acknowledging our experience allows us to investigate our life, to inquire into whatever aspect or problem of life presents itself to us. Give each problem or experience a simple name, as Buddha did when difficulties would appear before him. Buddha would state, "I know you, Mara." In his instructions on mindfulness, he directed meditators to note, "This is a mind filled with joy," or "This is a mind filled with anger," acknowledging each state as it would arise and pass away. In the space of such awareness, understanding grows naturally. Then, as we clearly sense and name our experience, we can notice what brings it about and how we can respond to it more fully and skillfully.

In developing the naming practice, stay focused on your breathing unless a stronger experience arises to interrupt your attention. Then include this stronger experience in the meditation, feeling it fully and naming it softly for as long as it persists—"hearing, hearing, hearing" or "sad, sad, sad." When it passes, return to naming the breath until another strong experience arises. Keep the meditation simple, focusing on one thing at a time. Continue to name whatever is most prominent in each moment, being aware of the everchanging stream of your life.

At first, sitting still and naming may seem awkward or loud, as if it interferes with your awareness. You must practice naming very softly, giving ninety-five percent of your energy to sensing each experience, and five percent to a soft name in the background. When you misuse naming, it will feel like a club, a way to judge and push away an undesirable experience, like shouting at "thinking" or "pain" to make it go away. Sometimes, in the beginning, you may also feel confused about what name to use, looking through your inner dictionary instead of being aware of what is actually present. Remember, the practice of naming is much simpler than that; it is just a simple acknowledgment of what is present.

Soon you will be ready to bring the practice of naming and inquiry directly to the difficulties and hindrances that arise in your life.

Of course, you will inevitably encounter many other hindrances and demons, and will even create new ones of your own. Sometimes they will besiege you in combinations, which one student called "a multiple hindrance attack." Whatever comes, you will need to begin to see these basic difficulties clearly as they arise.

GRASPING AND WANTING

Grasping and wanting are two names for the most painful aspects of desire. Because our language uses the word desire in so many ways, it is helpful to sort them out. There are beneficial desires such as the desire for the well being of others, the desire for awakening, the creative desires
that express the positive aspects of passion and beauty. There are painful aspects of desire—the desires of addiction, greed, blind ambition, or unending inner hunger. Through meditative awareness we can bring an attention that can sort out and know the many forms of desire. As William Blake stated

Those who enter the gates of heaven are not beings who have no passions or who have curbed the passions, but those who have cultivated an understanding of them.

In beginning to name the demons, we can especially look for the difficult sides of desire, the grasping and wanting mind. When the wanting mind first arises we may not recognize it as a demon because we are often lost in its allure. Wanting is characterized as a Hungry Ghost, a ghost with an enormous belly and tiny pinhole mouth, who can never eat enough to satisfy his endless need. When this demon or difficulty arises, simply name it as “wanting” or “grasping” and begin to study its power in your life. When we look at wanting, we experience the part of ourselves that is never content, that always says, “If only I had something more, that would make me happy”—some other relationship, some other job, some more comfortable cushion, less noise, cooler temperature, warmer temperature, more money, a little more sleep last night—“then I would be fulfilled.” In meditation the voice of wanting calls to us and says, “If only I had something to eat now, I’d eat, then I’d be satisfied, and then I could get enlightened.” The desire of wanting is the unconscious voice that can see an attractive meditator sitting nearby and imagine a whole romance fulfilled, a relationship, marriage, and divorce, and only half an hour later remember that we’re meditating. For the voice of wanting, what is here now is never enough.

**Naming the Wanting Mind**

As we work to observe the wanting and grasping without condemning it, we can learn to be aware of this aspect of our nature without being caught up in it. When it arises we can feel it fully, naming our experience “hunger,” “wanting,” “longing,” or whatever it is. Name it softly the whole time it is present, repeating the name every few seconds, five, ten, twenty times until it ends. As you note it, be conscious of what happens: How long does this kind of desire last? Does it intensify first or just fade away? How does it feel in the body? What parts of the body are affected by it—the gut, the breath, the eyes? What does it feel like in the heart, in the mind? When it is present, are you happy or agitated, open or closed? As you name it, see how it moves and changes. If wanting comes as the demon hunger, name that. Where do you notice hunger—in the belly, the tongue, the throat?

When we look, we see that wanting creates tension, that it is actually painful. We see how it arises out of our sense of longing and incompleteness, a feeling that we are separate and not whole. Observing more closely we notice that it is also fleeting, without essence. This aspect of desire is actually a form of imagination and accompanying feeling that comes and goes in our body and mind. Of course, at other times it seems very real. Oscar Wilde said, “I can resist anything but temptation.” When we are caught by wanting it is like an intoxicant and we are unable to see clearly. In India they say, “A pickpocket sees only the saint’s pockets.” Our wanting and desire can become powerful blinders limiting what we see.

Do not confuse desire with pleasure. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying pleasant experiences. Given the many difficulties we often face in life, enjoyment is wonderful to have. However, the wanting mind grasps at the pleasure. We are taught in this culture that if we can grasp enough pleasurable experiences quickly one after another, our life will be happy. By following a good game of tennis with a delicious dinner, a fine movie, then wonderful sex and sleep, a good morning jog, a fine hour of meditation, an excellent breakfast, and off to an exciting morning of work, happiness will last. Our society is masterful at perpetuating this ruse. But will this satisfy the heart?

What happens when we do fulfill wanting? It often brings on more wanting. The whole process can become very tiring and empty. “What am I going to do next? Well, I’ll just get some more.” George Bernard Shaw said, “There are two great disappointments in life. Not getting what you want and getting it.” The process of such unskilful desire is endless, because peace comes not from fulfilling our wants but from the moment that dissatisfaction ends. When wanting is filled, there comes a moment of satisfaction, not from the pleasure, but from stopping the grasping.

As you name the wanting mind and feel it carefully, notice what happens just after it ends, and notice what states then follow. The issue of wanting and desire is a profound one. You will see how often our desires are misplaced. An obvious example is when we use food to replace the love we long for.
Through the practice of naming, we can sense how much of our surface desire arises from some deeper wanting in our being, from an underlying loneliness or fear or emptiness.

Often when people start their spiritual practice, the wanting mind will become more intense. As we take away some of the layers of distraction, we discover that underneath are powerful urges for food or sex, or for contact with others, or powerful ambition. When this happens, some people may feel that their spiritual life has gone awry, but this is the necessary process of unmasking the grasping mind. We get to face it and see it in all of its guises, so that we can develop a skillful relationship to it. Unskillful desire causes wars, it drives much of our modern society, and as unknowing followers, we are at its mercy. But few people have ever stopped to examine desire, to feel it directly, to discover a wise relationship to it.

\[\text{ANGER}\]

The second common demon we will encounter is more obviously painful than desire. While desire and the wanting mind are seductive, the opposite energy of anger and aversion is more clearly unpleasant. At certain times we might, for a short while, find some enjoyment in it, but even then it closes our heart. It has a burning, tight quality that we can’t escape. As the opposite of wanting, it is a force that pushes away, condemns, judges, or hates some experience in our life. The demon of anger and aversion has many faces and guises, and can be found in forms such as fear, boredom, ill-will, judgment, and criticism.

Like desire, anger is an extremely powerful force. We can easily become caught up in it, or we can be so afraid of it that we act out its destruction in more unconscious ways. Unfortunately, too few of us have learned to work with it directly. Its force can grow from annoyance to deep fear, to hatred and rage. It can be experienced toward someone or something that is present with us now or that is far away in time or place.

We sometimes experience great anger over past events that are long over and about which we can do nothing. We can even get furious about something that has not happened but that we only imagine might happen. When it is strong in the mind, anger colors our entire experience of life. When our mood is bad, no matter who walks in the room or where we go that day, something is wrong. Anger can be a source of tremendous suffering in our own minds, in our interactions with others, and in the world at large.

\[\text{Naming Anger}\]

All of this can be understood when we begin to name the faces of anger as it arises. We can feel for ourselves how fear, judgment, and boredom are all forms of aversion. When we examine them, we see that they are based on our dislike of some aspect of experience. Naming the forms of anger presents us with an opportunity to find freedom in their midst.

At first, name the state softly, saying “anger, anger” or “hate, hate” as long as it persists. As you name it, note how long it lasts, what it turns into, how it arises again. Name it and notice how anger feels. Where in the body do you sense it? Does your body become hard or soft with anger? Do you notice different kinds of anger? When anger arises, what is its temperature, its effect on the breath, its degree of pain? How does it affect the mind? Is the mind smaller, more rigid, tighter? Do you sense tension or contraction? Listen to the voices that come along with it. What do they say? “I’m afraid of this.” “I hate that.” “I don’t want to experience that.” Can we name the demon and make our hearts big enough to allow both the anger and the subject of the anger to show us their dance?

Printed on this page, it may look easy to name our experience and sense it with a balanced attention, but of course it is not always so easy. At one California retreat I taught years ago, there were some therapists
who had been schooled in the primal scream tradition. Their way of practice was one of release and catharsis, to scream and let their feelings go. After meditating for a few days, they said, "This practice is not working." I asked, "Why not?" They replied, "It's building up [our inner energy and anger], and we need a place to release it. Could we use the meditation hall at a certain hour of the day to scream and release, because otherwise it gets toxic when we hold it in."

The suggestion that we made was that they go back, name it, and simply be aware of it, that it probably wouldn't kill them. Since they had come there to learn something new, we asked them to continue to meditate and see what might happen. They did. After a few days they came back and said, "Amazing." I said, "What is amazing?" They said, "After naming it for some time, it changed." Anger, fear, desire—the process of all of these forces can be studied. They arise according to certain conditions, and when they're here, they affect the body and mind in a certain way. If we are not caught up in them, we can observe them as if they were a storm and see that after they are here for a time, like a storm, they pass away.

As we listen, we can also sense the origins of anger. Almost always the roots of anger are in one of two difficult states, which arise just before the anger appears. We become angry either when we are hurt and in pain or when we are afraid. Pay attention to your own life and see if this is true. The next time anger and irritation spring up, see if just before they arose you felt fear or hurt. If you pay attention to the fear or pain first, does the anger even appear?

Anger shows us precisely where we are stuck, where our limits are, where we cling to beliefs and fears. Aversion is like a warning signal that lights up and says, "Attached, attached." The strength of our anger reveals the amount of our attachment. Yet we know our attachment is optional. We can relate more wisely. Our anger, conditioned by our viewpoint on that day, is impermanent; it's a feeling with associated sensations and thoughts that come and go. We do not have to be bound to it or driven by it. Usually our anger is based on our limited ideas of what should happen. We think we know how God should have made the world, how someone should have treated us, what is our just due. But what do we really know? Are we that in touch with the divine plan for the sorrows and difficulties, beauty and wonders that we are to be given? Instead of getting involved in how we want the story written, we can begin to face and understand the forces from which anger arises. As with desire, we can study anger and learn whether it can serve us skillfully. Is it ever valuable? Does it have value in protection, or as a source of strength? Is anger necessary to achieve strength, to set limits, or to grow up? Are there other sources besides anger for the strength we seek?

Many of us have been conditioned to hate our anger. As we try to observe it, we will find a tendency to judge and suppress it, to get rid of it, because it is "bad" and painful, or shameful and "unspiritual." We must be very careful to bring an open mind and heart to our practice, and to let ourselves feel fully, even if it means touching the deepest wells of grief, sorrow, and rage within us. These forces move our lives, and we must feel them in order to come to terms with them. Meditation is not a process of getting rid of something, but one of opening and understanding.

When we work with anger in meditation, it can become very strong. Initially, we may sense just a little anger, but for those who have learned to suppress it and hold it back, anger will then transform into rage. All the anger that has been held in the body will show itself as tension and heat in the arms, the back, or the neck. All the words that have been swallowed can arise, and powerful images, volcanic rage, tides of abuse will pour into our consciousness. This opening process can last for days, weeks, even months. These feelings are fine, even necessary, but it is important to remember how to work with them. When the demons become unmasked, you may feel you are going mad or doing something wrong, but in fact you have finally begun to face the forces that keep you from living in a loving and fully conscious way. We face these forces over and over. We will probably work with anger a thousand times in practice before we come to a balanced, mindful way of living. This is natural.

FEAR

The spirit of naming and discovery can also be brought to understanding fear, another form of aversion. Americans spend fifty billion dollars a year on security systems and guards. We get caught and lost in fear so often in our life, but rarely have we examined and dealt with the demon of the fearful mind itself. Of course, as we work with the fearful mind, we will initially become afraid. We will encounter this demon over and over again. However, at some point, if we open our eyes and our heart to the fearful mind and gently name it, "fear, fear, fear," experiencing its energy as it moves through us, the whole sense of fear will shift, and later will simply come the recognition, "Oh, fear, here you are again. How interesting."
and mind. See what story it tells and what opens up as you listen. When we finally stop running away or resisting it, then wherever we are can actually become interesting! When the awareness is clear and focused, even the repeated movement of the in- and out-breathe can be a most wonderful experience.

JUDGMENT

The same spirit of naming can be brought to the aversion we call judgment. So many of us judge ourselves and others harshly, yet have little understanding of the whole judging process. With meditative attention, we can observe how judgment arises as a thought, a series of words in the mind. When we don’t get caught up in the story line, we can learn from it a great deal about both suffering and freedom in our life. For many people judgment is a main theme in their life, and a painful one. Their response to most situations is to see what’s wrong with it, and in their spiritual practice the demon of judgment continues to be strong.

Naming Judgment

How can we work with the pain of judging? If we try to get rid of it by saying, “Oh, I shouldn’t be judging,” what is that? It’s just another judgment. Instead, acknowledge the judgment as it arises. Allow it to come and go. Sometimes it helps to give it a name. If your judgment reminds you of someone from the past, try saying, “Thank you, Dad.” “I appreciate your opinion on that, Carol.” “Thanks for your opinion, John.” Judgments are simply a prerecorded tape that plays through the mind over and over again. Try to have a sense of humor about your judgments—this will keep them in perspective relative to the rest of your life.

To understand the judging mind, we need to touch it with a forgiving heart. If it’s really difficult to get in touch with it, try the following exercise. Sit quietly for an hour and see how many judgments arise. Count each one. Someone walks in the door. “I don’t like them. Judgment twenty-two. I don’t like what they’re wearing either. Judgment twenty-three. Gee, I’m getting good at finding all these judgments. Oh, twenty-four. Yeah, I’m going to tell some friends about this. This is really a good exercise. Oops, I’m thinking too much. Oh, judgment twenty-five.” Then all of a sudden your knee starts to hurt. “I wish this knee pain would go away. Judgment twenty-six. No, I shouldn’t be judging. Judgment twenty-seven,” and so forth. We can spend a very fruitful hour meditating, just understanding the judging mind.

BOREDOM

Another form of aversion that we can learn to be mindful of is boredom. Usually we are afraid of boredom and will do anything to avoid it. So we go to the refrigerator, pick up the phone, watch TV, read a novel, busy ourselves constantly in an attempt to escape our loneliness, our emptiness, our boredom. When we are without awareness, it has a great power over us and we can never be at rest. Yet we need not let boredom run our lives this way. What is boredom when it is experienced in itself? Have we ever really stopped to look at it? Boredom comes from lack of attention. With it we also find restlessness, discouragement, and judgment. We get bored because we don’t like what is happening or because we feel empty or lost. In naming it, we can acknowledge boredom and let it be a state to explore.

Naming Boredom

When boredom arises, feel it in the body. Stay with it. Let yourself be really bored. Name it softly as long as it lasts. See what the demon is. Note it, feel its texture, its energy, the pains and tensions in it, the resistances to it. Look directly at the workings of this quality in the body
To become conscious, we must fully allow each difficult state we have rejected—the judging mind, the desiring mind, the fearful mind—to come and tell us its story until we know them all and can let them back into our heart. In this process of dealing with the demons, we need a container of wisdom, awareness, and compassion, a still point in the midst of the movement of mind. As we accept the impersonal and habitual nature of the demons, we can see the gold they conceal. We may notice directly how aversion and judgment arise from a deep longing for justice or strength, or from a clarity and discriminating wisdom that cuts through the illusions of the world. When we know the demons for what they are, they release their other powers and we find clarity without judgment and justice without hatred. Through a heartfelt attention, the pain of anger and hate can lead us to a deep awakening of compassion and forgiveness. When we feel anger toward someone, we can consider that he or she is a being just like us, someone who has also faced much suffering in life. If we had experienced the same circumstances and history of suffering as the other person, might we not act in the same way? So we allow ourselves to feel compassion, to feel his or her suffering. This is not just a papering over of anger: it is a deep movement of the heart, a willingness to go beyond the conditions of a particular point of view. In this way our anger and judgment can lead us to the true powers of clarity and love we seek.

SLEEPINESS

The next most common demon to learn to name is a subtle one, the quality of sleepiness and dullness called sloth or torpor. This arises as laziness, tiredness, lack of vitality, and fogginess. Our clarity and wakefulness fade when the mind is overcome with sleep, and our life or our meditation become unwieldy and cloudy. In our life we experience tiredness because of the breakneck speed of our culture, or because we have lost touch with our body. We experience laziness or reluctance in the face of difficult tasks.

Sleepiness usually comes upon us gradually. As we sit, we can feel the sleepiness begin, like tendrils of fog, curling around our body and then whispering in our ear, “Come on, let’s just take a little snooze.” The mind then becomes scattered and depleted, and we lose heart for what we have undertaken. This can happen many times in meditation. Much of our living is done while we are only half awake. Large portions of our life have been spent in sleep and sleepwalking. Meditation means waking up. So we can begin by bringing mindfulness to the sleepiness.

Naming Sleepiness

Be aware of how the body feels when it’s tired: the heaviness, the softening posture, the sense of heaviness in the eyes. Of course, if we’re sleepy and nodding off, it is difficult to see. Still, observe as much as you are able. Pay attention to the beginning, middle, and end of sleepiness, and to the various components of the experience. See the impersonal conditions that cause it. Is it tiredness or resistance? Sometimes just bringing an interested awareness to sleepiness itself will dispel it and bring clarity and understanding. Other times it will recur more strongly.

As we encounter it and name this demon, we will see that sleepiness has three causes. One is the tiredness that signals a genuine need for sleep. This often arises at home after a long day, when we sit after a period of great busyness or stress, or in the first days of a retreat. It is a signal that we must respect the needs of our body. Our life may be out of balance, and we may need to work less and spend more time in the country. This kind of sleepiness passes after we take some rest. The second kind of sleepiness comes as a resistance to some unpleasant or fearful state of body or mind. Sometimes when it is hard to feel something, when we don’t want to remember or experience something, we get sleepy. A third kind of sleepiness is a result of becoming calm and quiet, but without enough wakeful energy for clear concentration.

The sleepiness that comes as a resistance should not be confused with laziness. We are rarely lazy—we are simply afraid. The demon of sloth and torpor follows the strategy of the ostrich, thinking, “What I don’t look at won’t hurt me.” When sleepiness arises and our body is not actually tired, it is often a sign of resistance. We can ask ourselves, “What is going on here, what am I avoiding by falling asleep?” Many times we will discover an important fear or difficulty just underneath it. States of loneliness, sorrow, emptiness, and loss of control of some aspect of our life are common ones that we fall asleep to avoid. When we recognize this, our whole practice can open up to a new level.

Some sleepiness can also be caused by the development of strong stillness and calmness in the mind. Our active and high-stimulus culture has not accustomed us to dealing with times of quiet and calm. Our mind may think it is bedtime! So when we begin to become concentrated but have not balanced the mind by arousing an equal amount of energy, we can be stuck in a calm but dull state. This requires the naming of dullness and a rousing of energy. When faced with this form of sleepiness, name it, sit up straight, and take a few deep breaths. When sleepy, meditate with your eyes open wide. Stand in place for a few minutes or do walking
meditation. If it’s really bad, walk briskly or walk backward, splash some water on your face. Sleepiness is something we can respond to creatively.

RESTLESSNESS

Restlessness, the opposite of sleep, manifests as the fourth powerful demon, called the Pacing Tiger. With restlessness we feel agitation, nervousness, anxiety, and worry. The mind spins in circles or flops around like a fish out of water. The body can be filled with restless energy, vibrating, jumpy, on edge. When restless, we feel as though we simply have to get up and pace around, turn on the TV, eat, do anything but stay in our body. Like sleep, restlessness can come as a response to pain and sorrow that we don’t want to feel. It can also come as the demon worry. We sit down to meditate and the mind gets caught in fears and regrets, and we spin out hours of stories. In all forms of restlessness, our meditation becomes scattered, and it is difficult to stay present.

Naming Restlessness

When this state arises, name it without judgment or condemnation. Note softly, “restless, restless,” and let your body and heart be open to experience this aspect of human life with wisdom. Feel it fully in the body. What is this energy? How strongly does it vibrate? Is it hot or cold; does it expand or contract the body and the mind? What does it do as you open it to, as you name it? How long does it last? What story does it tell?

Let yourself experience restlessness without getting caught up in the content of its story. It can be terribly unpleasant; the body filled with nervous energy, the mind spinning with worry. It is not “my restlessness” but “restlessness,” an impermanent state born out of conditions that are bound to change. If it gets very intense, say to yourself, “Okay, I’m ready. I’ll be the first meditator to die of restlessness.” Surrender to it and see what happens. Like everything else, restlessness is a composite pro-
cess, a series of thoughts, feelings, and sensations, but because we believe it to be something solid, it has a great deal of power over us. When we stop resisting and with mindful attention simply allow it to move through us, we can see how transitory and insubstantial the state actually is.

When restlessness is very strong, in addition to naming you can try the practice of counting your breaths—one to ten, then start again at one—until the mind comes back to balance. If it helps, breathe more deeply than usual, as a way of collecting and softening the body and mind. Understand that restlessness is one of the normal cycles of practice. Accept it and you will develop insight and understanding and an inner sense of ease or comfort. When you make peace with restlessness, its deeper energy will become available to you. Restlessness is only the surface level of a beautiful wellspring of energy within us, an unrestricted flow of creativity. This creativity can move through us in wonderful ways when we become a clear channel, when we have learned to be spacious with all things.

DOUBT

The last of the five common demons to test our practice is doubt. Doubt can be the most difficult of all to work with, because when we fall prey to it, our practice just stops, we become paralyzed. All kinds of doubt can assail us; doubts about ourselves and our capacities; doubts about our teachers; doubts about the meditation itself—"Does it really work? I meditate and all that happens is that my knees hurt and I feel restless. Maybe the Buddha really didn’t know what he was talking about." We might doubt that the path we have chosen is the right practice for us. "It’s too hard, too serious. Maybe I should try Sufi dancing." Or we think it’s the right practice but the wrong time. Or it’s the right practice and the right time, but our body’s not yet in good enough shape. It doesn’t matter what the object is, when the skeptical, doubting mind catches us, we’re stuck.

Naming Doubt

When doubt arises, name it and look at it carefully and objectively. Have you ever really observed the voice that says, “I can’t do it. It’s too hard. It’s the wrong time. Where is this getting me anyway? Maybe I should quit.” What do you see? Doubt is a string of words in the mind associated with a feeling of fear and resistance. We can become aware of doubt as a thought process and name it, “doubting, doubting.” When we do not become involved in its story, a marvelous transformation occurs; doubt itself becomes a source of awareness. We can learn a great deal from doubt about the changing, unstoppable nature of mind. We can also learn
what it means to be identified with and caught up in our moods and states of mind. When we are caught up in doubt, we experience a great deal of suffering, but the moment that we can feel it without grasping, our whole mind becomes freer and lighter.

What happens when we name doubt carefully? How long does it last? How long does it affect our body, our energy? Can we listen to its story with the same ease as if it were saying, “The sky is blue”? To work with doubt we must center ourselves and fully come back to the present moment with continuity, firmness, and steadiness of mind. Gradually, this dispels confusion.

Along with the naming, doubt can also be dissolved by developing faith. We can ask questions or read great books. We can reflect on the inspiration of the hundreds of thousands of people before us who have followed the path of inner awareness and practice. Spiritual practice has been valued by every great culture. To live with great wisdom and compassion is possible for anyone who genuinely undertakes a training of their heart and mind. What better thing to do with our life? While it is natural for the mind to doubt, our doubt can lead us to a deeper attention and a more complete seeking for the truth.

Initially, doubts may come as demons and resistance—“It’s not working today,” “I’m not ready,” “It’s too hard.” These could be called small doubts. After some practice we can learn to work skillfully with them. Beyond them rises another level of doubt, one which is truly useful to us. It is called the great doubt, the deep desire to know our true nature or the meaning of love or freedom. The great doubt asks, “Who am I?” or “What is freedom?” or “What is the end of suffering?” This powerful questioning is a source of energy and inspiration. A spirit of true inquiry is essential to enliven and deepen our spiritual practice, to keep it from being imitative. Working with this spirit, we find that buried under doubt is hidden treasure. The demon of small doubts can lead to the discovery of our great doubt and to a clarity that awakens our whole life.

In the process of naming the demons, we may find that they show themselves to us more fully. There are phases in practice when all we will see is desire or anger. We may doubt ourselves, thinking, “Oh dear, I am simply filled with desire or anger,” or “I’ve got so much doubt,” or “I’m so restless,” or “Fear is underneath whatever I do.” For a year or two in my own meditation all I saw was my anger, judgment, and rage. When I really touched it, it exploded through me. I spent almost a week without sleeping at one point, four or five of those days throwing rocks around in the forest and warning friends to stay away from me. Gradually, though, it subsided, gradually it lost its power.

As we go deeper in our spiritual life we find the capacity to acknowledge and touch the hardest places in ourselves. All around us, we encounter the forces of greed, fear, prejudice, hatred, and ignorance. Those of us who seek liberation and wisdom are compelled to discover the nature of these forces in our own heart and mind; we will experience how we get caught in them, but eventually we will find freedom in relation to these basic and primary energies.

Sometimes when the demons are most difficult, we can use a variety of temporary practices that function to dispel them and act as antidotes. For desire, one traditional antidote is to reflect on the brevity of life, on the fleeting nature of outer satisfaction, and on death. For anger, an antidote is the cultivation of thoughts of loving-kindness and an initial degree of forgiveness. For sleepiness, an antidote is to arouse energy through steady posture, visualization, inspiration, breath. For restlessness, an antidote is to bring concentration through inner techniques of calming and relaxation. And for doubt, an antidote is faith and inspiration gained through reading or discussion with someone wise. However, the most important practice is our naming and acknowledging these demons, expanding our capacity to be free in their midst. Applying antidotes is like using Band-Aids, while awareness opens and heals the wound itself.

When we become skillful at naming our experience, we discover an amazing truth. We find that no state of mind, no feeling, no emotion actually lasts more than fifteen or thirty seconds before it’s replaced by some other one. This is true of joyful states and painful ones. Usually we think of moods as lasting a long time, an angry day or a sad week. However, when we look really closely and name a state such as “anger, anger,” then all of a sudden we discover or realize it’s no longer anger, that after ten or twenty soft namings it has vanished. Perhaps it will turn into an associated state like resentment. As we name resentment, we notice it for a while, and then it turns into self-pity, followed by depression. Then we observe the depression for a little while and it turns into thinking, and then that turns back into anger or relief or even laughter. Naming the difficulties helps us name the joyful states as well. Clarity, well-being, ease, rapture, calm, all can be named as part of the passing show. The more we open, the more we can sense the ceaseless nature of this flow of feelings and discover a freedom beyond all changing conditions.

The purpose of spiritual life is not to create some special state of mind. A state of mind is always temporary. The purpose is to work directly with the most primary elements of our body and our mind, to see the ways we get trapped by our fears, desires, and anger, and to learn directly
our capacity for freedom. As we work with them, the demons will enrich our lives. They have been called “manure for enlightenment” or “mind weeds,” which we pull up or bury near the plant to give it nourishment.

To practice is to use all that arises within us for the growth of understanding, compassion, and freedom. Thomas Merton wrote, “True love and prayer are learned in the hour when love becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone.” When we remember this, the difficulties we encounter in practice can become part of the fullness of meditation, a place to learn and to open our heart.

**MEDITATION ON MAKING THE DEMONS PART OF THE PATH**

Choose one of the most frequent and difficult demons that arises in your practice, such as irritation, fear, boredom, lust, doubt, or restlessness. For one week in your daily meditation, be particularly aware each time this state arises. Carefully name it. Notice how it begins and what precedes it. Notice if there is a particular thought or image that triggers this state. Notice how long it lasts and when it ends. Notice what state usually follows it. Observe whether it ever arises very slightly or softly. Can you see it as just a whisper in the mind? See how loud and strong it gets. Notice what patterns of energy or tension reflect this state in the body. Soften and receive even the resistance. Finally, sit and be aware of your breath, watching and waiting for this demon, allowing it to come and go, greeting it like an old friend.

**MEDITATION ON THE IMPULSES THAT MOVE OUR LIFE**

The inner forces of your life, the forces of reaction and wisdom, move through you as a source of all your action. Before every voluntary action and movement of our body there is a thought, an impulse or direction that comes from our mind. Often this impulse is subconscious, below the level of awareness. You can learn about how you respond to these forces and impulses by observing their action within you. As you observe this process, the interrelationship of your body and mind will become clear. In this you will discover a whole new capacity to be free and at ease in the face of difficulties.

A simple way to learn about how impulses operate is to focus on the ones that pull you to get up from meditation. In your daily meditation practice, make a resolve that for one week you will not get up until a strong impulse to do so arises three times. Sit as you usually would, being mindful of your breath, body, and mind. But do not set a fixed time for the end of your meditation. Instead, sit until a strong impulse tells you to get up. Notice its quality. It may arise from restlessness, from hunger, from knee pain, from thinking about how much you have to do, or the need to go to the bathroom. Softly name the energy that has arisen and with it sense the impulse to move. Feel it carefully in your body, naming, “wanting to get up, wanting to get up,” staying with it for as long as it lasts. (This is rarely more than a minute.) Then after this impulse has passed, notice what it feels like now and if your meditation has deepened from sitting through the whole impulse process. Continue to sit until a second impulse to arise pulls you strongly. Notice the whole process in the same way as before. Finally, after a third time of carefully being with the whole impulse process, allow yourself to get up. The depth of your attention and centeredness will gradually grow through this practice.

If you wish, you can extend your observation to other strong impulses, noting the whole process of wanting to scratch an itch, to move while sitting, to eat, or to do other things. Being aware in this way will gradually teach you to stay centered, to have a capacity to take a few breaths and feel the changing responses to situations in your life rather than reacting to them automatically. You will begin to discover a center of balance and understanding in the face of the forces of your life.