Skillful Means for Concentration

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:03:05

Tonight I'd like to talk about the factors that support concentration and the factors that get in our way.

Before I get into that, I want to reiterate what Philip said last night about how to listen to a Dharma talk, particularly on a concentration retreat. See if you can stay connected with your breathing and just let the words come through. Not that you're not paying attention to the words—you can pay attention to both the breathing and the content at the same time. But there's no need to try to hold on to the words. Trust that what you need will land. And if something feels like it's a little too much or it's not landing in a way that makes a lot of sense to you, just let it go. There's a lot of information in this talk, and you don't need to hold on to all of it by any means.

I'd like to start with some words of the Buddha. Speaking to his monks, he said: "Abandon what is unwholesome, O monks. One can abandon what is unwholesome. If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. Cultivate what is wholesome, O monks. One can cultivate the wholesome. If it were not feasible, I would not ask you to do so."

This term "wholesome" in this sutta is a translation of the term *kusala*, which is often translated as wholesome but is also translated as skillful. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, in particular, translates it as skillful. He says that somebody who is cultivating a skill, such as a carpenter, would be talked about as being a *kusala* carpenter. So the term in Pali apparently was used in this way of meaning skillful. We can look at this term in terms of what is skillful for us in cultivating concentration—the skill of the Eightfold Path, with cultivating concentration being the cultivation of the factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The skill of that cultivation is understanding what is helpful to let go of and what is helpful to cultivate.

The states or qualities that are helpful to let go of are our old friends, the hindrances. I know many of you have probably heard many talks on the hindrances on retreats before, and I am going to talk about the hindrances, but this is not going to be a standard hindrance talk. I'm going to approach it from a slightly different direction. So those are the qualities that we want to abandon—abandon the hindrances.

Qualities that we want to cultivate with respect to concentration include several sets of lists. One set in particular is called the jhanic factors, the factors of concentration. These two lists of qualities—one that is meant to be abandoned and one that is meant to be cultivated—actually work together. As we abandon the hindrances, we are simultaneously cultivating these factors of concentration. And as we cultivate these factors of concentration, if our attention is going towards cultivating them, then simultaneously these hindrances are being abandoned. So there's a very powerful process at work between these two

lists. I'm going to talk about both sides of this equation tonight.

The Buddha talked about the hindrances with respect to how we can denourish them. We can think about these two lists in terms of denourishing the hindrances and nourishing these qualities of concentration—essentially feeding the supportive qualities and starving the unwholesome, unsupportive qualities.

I'll start with the hindrances. You're all familiar with these states from your meditation practice—the states that essentially hinder our ability to get concentrated, that hinder our ability to settle and stabilize in the present moment, that hinder our ability to have a sense of well-being. These states of sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt.

The Buddha used an analogy for the hindrances that I really appreciate. He had a brilliant mind, and the analogies that he used were very apt. If we can understand his analogies, it can help us understand something about what he is talking about. He talked about the hindrances as being like a banyan tree.

Some of you may know what a banyan tree is, but I'm going to describe it and how it functions, because it helps us to understand something about how the hindrances work. The banyan tree begins its life as a seed deposited in the crook of a tree, probably by some fig-eating bird, because the banyan tree is a species of fig. This fig seed gets deposited in the crook of a tree and begins to send out shoots, roots that are seeking the ground. As these roots hit the ground, they stiffen and get thick, forming a kind of latticework. Every place these roots touch each other, they get even stiffer. The roots of the banyan tree are now starting to compete for nourishment with the tree that is hosting it. As the tree gains nourishment from the soil and from the sun, more roots come out, and it forms a latticework that essentially surrounds the original tree.

—strangling it, preventing it from receiving its own nourishment, eventually killing that tree. And in its place stands this structure of a tree whose trunk is formed entirely of this latticework of what were once roots.

This is how our hindrances function. They nourish themselves in our minds. And as they nourish, they strengthen and strangle the wholesome, beautiful qualities within us. So we need to take care with what we feed, with what we nourish in our minds. We want to find ways to let go of the hindrances, to remove their source of nourishment.

I'd like to speak for a few minutes about working with the hindrances in concentration practice, because we don't approach them in quite the same way that we do in mindfulness practice. In mindfulness practice, we're usually taught that when a hindrance gets strong, when a hindrance arises, we turn our attention directly to it. We meet it with mindfulness.

In concentration practice, the first approach to working with a hindrance is usually to let it remain in the background. Stay with the breath if you can, knowing that the hindrance is there, acknowledging it. It's

very important to recognize and acknowledge that the hindrance is present, not to deny that it's there, but to allow it to recede into the background while the breath remains in the foreground. We're not suppressing the hindrance, but we're also not giving it any attention.

In my own practice, on my very first long concentration retreat—it was a metta retreat—I finally began to understand what it meant to leave the hindrances in the background. When a hindrance would come up, such as anger, I'd be doing my metta phrases and then anger might arise. It was actually a relief at some point to realize I didn't have to turn toward that anger and work with it and meet it in any way. It was simply, "Oh yes, there's that anger. I can just stay with my phrases of metta." It takes a bit of an adjustment if you're used to vipassana practice, learning how to let these states simply be in the background.

We don't need to meet them directly in order for them to dissipate. I think from our mindfulness practice we develop a belief that if we don't meet the hindrances directly, somehow they will get stronger. The way I understand how this process of ignoring the hindrances works—letting them be in the background—is that we're still cultivating our mindfulness and concentration, but on the breath. The attention is directed somewhere; it's directed to the breath. And there's no place for the hindrance to feed from. The mindfulness and concentration are being cultivated on the breathing, while the hindrance is simply allowed to be in the background. Since the mindfulness is in the foreground with the breathing, there's nothing to nourish that hindrance. It will essentially dissipate because it is an impermanent state of mind.

Basically, this is learning how to skillfully say "not now" to the hindrances without aversion—just turning away, just recognizing, "Yes, I see you. Not now."

This is not always possible. Sometimes the hindrances have more momentum than that. They are stronger and have more of a pull on us. If they're a bit stronger, one way to work with them is the approach Philip mentioned last night, thinking about this foreground and background of attention. The way I was just describing working with the hindrances is having the breath in the foreground and the hindrance in the background. Sometimes if the hindrance is stronger, that may get reversed. The hindrance may be in the foreground, but you can keep track of the breath in the background, infusing the state of mind—the difficulty, the anger, the desire, the sleepiness, the restlessness—with the breathing. You're staying connected to the breath even as you're meeting and being aware of the hindrance.

If the hindrances become stronger still, we may have to work with them more directly. There are a couple of different approaches to this, one being the use of what might be called antidotes to the hindrances. For instance, if ill will is arising, you can use the metta practice we've been starting to work with in the afternoons. The metta practice is said to directly counter ill will. You can bring the metta practice into your heart and mind and cultivate that quality, which will directly oppose the ill will. If sense desire is present, you can contemplate impermanence, which is said to counter sense desire. If you are dull and sleepy, you can do several things. One of the classic reflections for sleepiness is to reflect on your mortality—on the fact that you actually have a limited amount of time in which to practice. There are

various antidotes for working with the hindrances, and I'll talk more about working with specific hindrances later.

And then there's our old friend mindfulness practice. If the hindrance is really calling your attention, if you feel it's not possible to be with the breath, not possible even to bring up an antidote, not possible to breathe through the hindrance—turn directly to the hindrance with mindfulness. The choice of when to do this is really personal, really individual. It's something each of us has to learn to navigate on our own: when do we need to let go of cultivating mindfulness of breathing in favor of turning more directly to the hindrance? That's something you need to explore for yourself.

Try playing with these various approaches and see what works for you. Over time, you'll get familiar with how your mind works around these hindrances with respect to cultivating concentration.

It's really helpful not to think of the hindrances as being any kind of failure in the concentration practice. It's true that when the hindrances are present, concentration is not so strong. But we can cultivate concentration through working with the hindrances, through all of these ways that I've suggested. Even turning mindfulness towards the hindrances is cultivating concentration. So the relationship we bring to this practice, the relationship that we bring to working with the hindrances—rather than feeling like, "Oh, I can't do this, I'm never going to be able to do this"—is just meeting this moment, just meeting here and now as it is.

In concentration practice, as I mentioned a little while ago, cultivating the qualities of concentration themselves, these factors of concentration, actually supports a letting go of the hindrances. It's a very natural process that as concentration develops, the hindrances recede. Essentially, the hindrances are abandoned through the cultivation of concentration.

There are five factors of concentration. Philip mentioned these last night in his talk, just briefly: the factors of aiming and sustaining attention, *vitakka* and *vicāra*; the factor of rapture, of *pīti*; the factor of happiness, of sweetness, of *sukha*; and the factor of unification of mind, of one-pointedness, of *ekaggatā*. Each one of these factors is understood to counter one of the hindrances. So as these qualities get stronger in our concentration, very naturally the hindrances begin to recede.

This process is at play in both directions. By letting go of the hindrances, if we're actively working with them, we're cultivating these factors through mindfully staying with the breath through a hindrance. We're cultivating that ability to connect and sustain with the breathing. By cultivating the ability to connect and sustain with the breathing, we're actively letting go of the hindrances. This is a very powerful dynamic in concentration practice.

These factors of concentration essentially bring the mind together into unification. These five factors are understood to be present in what is called access concentration, or neighborhood concentration. At the point where these factors are unified in access concentration, the hindrances are suppressed. They are

temporarily suppressed—they're not gone for good—but as these factors become strong and balanced, the hindrances fall away. This is a really pleasant state. It's called the bliss of seclusion, the seclusion from the hindrances. And it feels really nice when the hindrances fall away.

This is access concentration. It's also sometimes called neighborhood concentration because it's in the vicinity of, in the neighborhood of, the absorption states, the jhāna states, which we'll talk more about in coming nights. These five factors are present in access concentration, working to suppress the five hindrances. And then, moving into the absorption state, they're also said to be present in that first absorption state, the first jhāna, in a very powerful way.

I'd like to explore these factors with you, to describe them so that you might get to know them a little bit, and also to talk about how they work together—which ones we can actively use to cultivate concentration and which ones are actually results. Of these five, aiming and sustaining, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, the first two, are the ones that we can actually actively initiate in our practice: aiming our attention at the breath and sustaining our attention on the breath. The other three—the rapture, the happiness, and the unification of mind—are a result of the concentration practice. They occur because causes and conditions have come together for them to arise. So they're more of a result.

I'm actually going to spend quite a bit of time talking about these first two, because that's where we create this container of concentration, through using these qualities of aiming and sustaining the attention.

Vitakka and *vicāra*, these two qualities, are usually talked about as a pair. There are a few places in the suttas where they're talked about separately, but with respect to concentration practice, they're usually discussed together. They work together. *Vitakka* is the initial movement of directing the attention, often called initial application of mind, or aiming—directing the attention. Basically, this is about directing the attention towards the breathing in this practice of concentration that we are working on in this retreat. Aiming the attention at the breath.

Vicāra is a sustaining of attention. It's usually understood to mean holding the attention with, or sustaining the attention on, the breath—holding the attention on the object. As a pair, these two qualities bring together right effort and right mindfulness, these two aspects of the Eightfold Path that support the cultivation of our mind and support the cultivation of concentration. These two together bring together right effort and right mindfulness. This is our practice.

create our container of concentration through applying our attention and sustaining our attention.

There are some analogies offered in the suttas around vitakka and vicāra. Vitakka is understood to be like the striking of a bell. Vicāra is like the sustained sound that follows. You can't have the vicāra without the vitakka initially, but the vicāra exists—the sustained ringing of the bell exists—even though we're not continuing to strike.

This aiming of attention is often thought of as a kind of narrowing down of attention. When we think

about aiming our attention at a particular experience, often that's how we understand it. We're paying attention at the nostrils, at our sternum, or at our abdomen. And we think about needing to narrow down our attention so that that's the only thing we're paying attention to, as if somehow we can block out everything else.

This is not actually such a helpful way to think about vitakka, at least in my own experience of how concentration most skillfully settles down. When I think about narrowing, it becomes a kind of forcing—a forcing into. So I'd like to offer a few different ways to think about this aiming of the attention. Some gentler ways, perhaps.

One way is something I mentioned in one of the meditations yesterday. The breath is sometimes a very delicate creature. It's like one of those little rodents outside scurrying among the bushes. If you approach it too directly, it's just going to disappear. We sometimes have to be very, very light and very quiet with our attention, approaching the aiming of our attention as if we are looking at something from the side. If you go out at night—we can't do it tonight, the stars aren't out—but if you're looking at the stars sometimes, and you're trying to see a star that's kind of faint in the sky, you'll notice that if you try to look directly at one of those faint stars, it disappears. But you move your eye just slightly to the side and it pops into view. This is the kind of thing I find helpful in turning my attention to such a delicate experience as the breath—not trying to look at it really directly, but allowing the experience to come in from the edges. Observing it as if through our peripheral attention.

Another way I have found helpful to aim the attention at the breath is to use what I might call a request, an intention, or an invitation. In my settling into the meditation, rather than trying to point my mind at the breath or direct my attention at the breath, once I find a relaxed container, I drop the invitation into the mind: "May the attention rest with the breathing." And then I just sit back and see whether that invitation allows a kind of natural connection. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. If it can allow that kind of natural connection, you can begin to learn how the mind more naturally pays attention to the breathing without being forced into it through an act of will.

Another way is allowing the breath to come to you—settling back rather than turning your attention to the breath. Settling back and inviting the breath to come to you. A receiving of the experience of breathing.

With vicāra also, we have a tendency to have an attitude of needing to hold on to the breath, a feeling that we have to latch our attention to the breath and hang on for all we're worth. And again, that approach will wear you out. It can work to create a concentration, but it's a kind of brittle concentration. This practice is like running a marathon. And that holding on is like sprinting. If you try to run the distance with a sprint, you're going to exhaust yourself.

So a more gentle, relaxed approach to this sustaining of the attention. Initially, it's more about short moments many times. Just a short meeting of the breath. Say, just enough energy to stay with half a breath. That's about maybe two seconds. Right now, just wherever you are in the cycle of your breath,

how much energy does it take to meet half a breath? And then, do it again.

This is vitakka and vicāra working together. The aiming of the attention to incline the mind to pay attention to half a breath. And the vicāra, the sustaining, just for a few seconds. And then doing it again. And doing it again. And doing it again.

In this way, this is how you can keep the mindfulness and the concentration going, because it won't wear you out to just keep doing this. It's a very light touch, really light. Moment after moment, meeting the breath.

There's an analogy that I like to use around how this vitaka and vichara works in our practice. You've all seen these scooters that little kids use—these little two-wheeled scooter things that are narrow. To get going, to get the momentum going, you have to tap your foot down on the ground. So to get started, you have to tap pretty frequently, otherwise you're going to wobble and fall over. But after a while, you can ride for a longer time because the momentum has built up from the tapping.

The tapping is like the aiming of the attention. Initially in our practice, we need to aim more frequently, just seeing how long it sustains for, trying to sustain just for short periods of time. But as the momentum builds, we don't need to aim quite as frequently because that sustaining has built a momentum—like the scooter. After tapping for a while, you can ride for a while.

And with the scooter, you begin to get a sense of when it's getting wobbly. When do you need to put your foot down again and tap again? Likewise, we can start to get a sense of that in our meditation. When is the sustaining of the attention getting a little wobbly? When do we need to redirect, reconnect more carefully with that aiming of the attention back to the breath?

So it's really helpful to set up the container, to take the time to set up the container of the meditation with a relaxed attention. Vitaka and vichara together can be used to create a container of relaxed attention, or they can be used to create a fairly tight, rigid container. It's up to you how you use these, how you explore this. If you notice that the way you are aiming and trying to sustain the attention is making the mind feel tight, it's helpful to let go, to back off, to relax.

One game I like to play with myself at times in the practice—because I tend towards over-efforting, towards too much holding on, too much tightening around—I sometimes ask myself, how little effort do I need in order to stay connected? And I just back off the effort a little bit, seeing where the relaxed attention can stay in contact with the breathing. It's the contact we need. We don't need it to be grabbed on. It just needs to meet it very gently. Meeting it.

Taking the time to set up that container where the mind is meeting experience in this relaxed way is well worth the time. In my own practice, I've found that starting with this relaxation, settling back very much with a spacious full-body awareness, allows the mind to settle and relax from that space. Then gently guiding the attention towards the breathing. If I see that the attention tightens down on the breathing, I

back off. I go back to relaxation. Going back and forth between that relaxation and inclining the mind back to touch with the breathing.

Doing that practice, slowly the mind begins to educate itself in how to focus on an experience in a relaxed way—how to direct the attention towards the breathing without gripping on it. That's been my experience. I really find it helpful to take a substantial amount of time to set up that container, that container of a very skillful vitaka and vichara. From there, the rest of it unfolds.

So take that time. Don't be in such a hurry to grab onto that breath and try to sustain that attention. Be more gentle about it, more relaxed.

Vitaka, this quality of aiming the attention, is said to counter sloth and torpor. How many of you felt sleepiness in the last day? It's a big companion, particularly on these first days of retreat. It's going to be present. It's not a failure in any way. It is just part of the terrain, partly just from coming into retreat from our busy lives. Of course we're going to be worn out.

Take some short naps. That's really helpful. A short ten- or fifteen-minute nap a couple of times a day can be very supportive for concentration practice as we're adjusting to the settling of energy.

the practice itself, as I think has been mentioned a couple of times, can make us sleepy also. The settling of the mind, the concentration—as the concentration settles, the mind can get kind of dull if there's not enough energy to balance that. Energy and concentration need to be balanced in this practice for the concentration to really deepen.

So if energy is not quite balanced with concentration, we're going to have something called sinking mind. The mind will just... it feels like you're fine, everything's going fine, and suddenly it's like—that's a sign that the energy is not quite matching the concentration.

It's helpful to use this quality of vitakka, of aiming, very consciously when the mind gets a little bit dull or sleepy. This is one of the factors we do have some control over. So using that, perhaps using a little bit more precision with paying attention to the breath, aiming the attention. What's the very first experience? What's the very first sensation that lets you know the in-breath is beginning? Using that bit more precision when the mind is dull can bring up the energy.

It's really helpful, particularly if you're experiencing something like sinking mind, to make very small adjustments. It's almost as if the concentration magnifies what happens in our minds somehow. And so if you do something kind of large—like, oh, I'm really sleepy, I'm feeling so dull, I'm going to take a really brisk walk to bring up the energy—you may find yourself with way too much energy. Some very small things can be helpful. Just open your eyes. Just try to aim a little bit more carefully. Maybe take one or two longer, slower, deeper breaths to bring a little bit more energy in. The small adjustments actually can make quite a large change in our energy levels.

The quality of sustaining the attention, the vicāra, is said to be the antidote to doubt. We experience doubt in many things. We experience doubt particularly—one of the main places we experience doubt in meditation is doubt in ourselves, our own ability. We start thinking about the fact that everybody else seems to be able to do this and I can't.

When we're lost in doubt, we've lost connection with the experience. We're not even in the vicinity of the breath. So this quality of sustaining the attention is the counter to that. If we can just meet our breath and stay there for a few moments, then meet our breath and stay there, there won't be room for those thoughts of doubt to come in. As long as there's connection to experience, the doubt begins to recede.

So try this—basically needing to stay connected. If you're experiencing doubting thoughts, see if you can engage the willingness to try. Just, yep, there's doubt. Can I just connect with this next breath? Can I sustain my attention on this in-breath? Connect with this out-breath, sustain my attention on the out-breath. Be willing to try that.

That willingness actually is the beginning, the seed of faith. The willingness to engage in the practice is connected to the confidence that the practice will support us. So that also counters doubt—the willingness to engage.

The next factor of concentration is rapture, pīti. This is delight and joy that comes accompanied by a lot of interest. Sometimes pīti is defined even as rapt attention or joyful interest. It comes about basically through vitakka and vicāra, sustaining the attention on the breath in this gentle way. The mind starts to get interested in the breath.

One of my teachers talks about ways to support this interest in the breath—that as we stay with the breath, if we can find ways to make the breathing comfortable, then the mind will want to stay with the breath. He uses this analogy, my teacher Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Tan Jeff—and this comes from his own teacher, Ajahn Fuang—that if you want to catch an eel, eels are pretty slippery. If you want to catch an eel, you need to give eels something they like. And so you put a jar in the river with some dead animal in the bottom of the jar, which is what eels like to feed on. You just put the jar in the river and the eels will go right in there.

He says it's like that with the breath. You need to give the mind something that it likes, an enjoyable experience of the breathing. And so actually in concentration practice, it's fine to play with the breath, to explore ways to make the breath more comfortable, more pleasurable. As we cultivate this kind of comfortable, pleasurable breath, the mind gets more and more interested in staying with the breathing. And this quality of rapture begins to come about.

It can be accompanied by very pleasant experience—a lot of bodily experiences, often a fairly energetic quality, quite a bit of energy. It can be felt as tingling or goosebumps. It might be felt as flashes of energy or feelings of energy rushing through the body. It might feel like showering waves, like being pounded by

the surf. That doesn't sound pleasant, but it's actually quite lovely—this feeling of waves of rapture washing through you. You might feel like you're filled with lightness, or like a bladder that's suffused with pleasure.

So rapture has these aspects of energetic experience in the body, pleasurable experience, interest in the object of attention, and a feeling of being nourished—a feeling that the body and mind are being refreshed by the experience. For me, it feels like all the cells in the body are just drinking up this wonderful elixir.

This is a result of our practice. It's not something we can make happen. We cultivate the sense of interest through turning our attention to the breathing, cultivating the pleasant, pleasurable aspects of the breathing. We can appreciate the breath, as Philip was talking about—the life-giving breath, the beautiful breath. All of these things will support and cultivate this interest, which will then in turn support the mind's ability to more fully connect and sustain attention on the breathing.

We can tend to be pulled to the sensations of rapture. They can be strong sensations, and they can also be very interesting. The sensations of rapture can be like, "Ooh, that feels interesting," and it can pull our attention away from the breath. It's really helpful to see if you can stay with the breath while the rapture is beginning and coming into being. The rapture itself is nourished by the attention to the breathing. So if you turn the attention away from the breathing to the rapture, you're essentially cutting off a large source of the nourishment for that rapture.

See if you can stay connected with the breathing while the rapture is happening, allowing the rapture. For me, it seems almost like working with a hindrance—allowing the rapture to be in the background, staying connected with the breathing in the foreground, not letting the mind get pulled to the rapture. But paradoxically, unlike with the hindrances when we do this, letting them be in the background and the breath in the foreground, the hindrances recede. With rapture in the background and the breath in the foreground, the rapture builds. It strengthens the rapture.

The presence of rapture counters ill will. When the mind is in such a state of interest in what's happening, it's not interested in exploring the sides of things that make it dislike what's happening. Ill will is a state of disliking what's going on. When we're in the state of rapture, there's a very natural interest in our experience. The mind is quite happy, contented—states that naturally oppose ill will.

The fourth factor of concentration is sukha, happiness. This is a kind of mental pleasure, a sweetness—the contentment we've been talking about. Sukha is present with rapture; it's present within the rapture. But it's a subtler experience, and so it's often obscured by the energetic quality of the rapture. Sukha itself is not quite so energetic. There's actually more of a tranquility to sukha. And so it often becomes more apparent as the energy of rapture begins to subside.

The commentaries in the Visuddhimagga offer an analogy that helps us understand the distinction between rapture and this sweetness—between piti and sukha. Rapture is compared to the state of joy and

interest of somebody who's crossing a desert, very thirsty, and sees an oasis in the distance and knows that nourishment and liquid and refreshment are coming. The state of happiness, sukha, is compared to that person having reached the oasis, taken a drink, and now resting in the shade. There's no longer that sense of urgency or energy around having that drink, no longer that strong interest in the drink because the drink has been taken. There's a tranquilizing, a calming of that energy.

Again, it's not something we can do. It's a result of the practice of setting this container, this relaxed, attentive container. The continuity, the relaxation, connection with the breath supports these other qualities arising.

Sukha is said to counter restlessness and anxiety, the fourth hindrance. We can see how restlessness is a kind of excess of energy—both physical and mental restlessness are a kind of excess of energy. And sukha is moving into a tranquilizing of body and mind, so it directly counters that.

We can have a tendency to grasp at sukha. It is so pleasant. My own phrase for this when it comes about in my practice is "the oh yes state." Oh, yes.

It's real. Why would I not want to be in this space? Really, really pleasant. So it can, again, pull our attention. So again, let it be in the background. Allow the connection with the breath to remain in the foreground.

The last of the factors of concentration is ekagata. One-pointedness is the literal translation of this term, but it is often also referred to as unification of mind. This actually points to two ways of understanding this factor. One-pointedness refers to the understanding of concentration that develops as we direct our attention to a single object—simply paying attention to one experience. Unification of mind, on the other hand, can come about more as a stability of mind, even though there may be other experiences present besides this one object. This stability of mind, this unification of mind, is the kind of stability that gets developed in our Vipassana practice. The ekagata that we're developing here is more what we encourage through stabilizing on one object—just choosing our breath and staying with it. Ekagata is often used as a synonym for concentration.

It contains a balance of mind. Basically, there's nothing that we want to change when the mind is unified, when it is in this space of one-pointed attention. The mind feels balanced. It feels contented. No problem. So nothing that we want to change, nothing that feels like it needs to change—that points to the hindrance this state counters. It counters sense desire, the state of wanting, the state of wanting something, to have something that we don't have, the desire to possess things.

As we practice concentration and these factors come together, we begin to experience states of pleasure, of bliss, of balance that are beyond sense pleasure. We really start to see that way more satisfying than sense pleasure are these states of rapture, of happiness, of balance of mind. That "oh yes" feeling I talk about—way more satisfying than having a piece of chocolate.

From the Dhammapada: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness one may realize a greater happiness, let the wise one renounce the lesser, having regard for the greater."

And another passage from the Buddha: "Even though a disciple has seen clearly as it actually is, with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasure provides little gratification, much suffering and much despair, and how great is the danger in them, as long as she does not attain to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures—that is, the rapture and pleasure of concentration—or to something more peaceful than that, she may still be attracted to sense pleasures. But when a noble disciple has seen clearly as it actually is with proper wisdom, how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, much despair, and how great is the danger in them, and he attains to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sensual pleasures, then he is no longer attracted to sensual pleasures."

So the state of concentration, in particular this quality of one-pointedness, allows us to let go of the grosser kinds of happiness that come from sense pleasure for a more refined kind of happiness.

As I said earlier, the cultivation of these concentration states essentially allows us to set aside the hindrances. We abandon the hindrances for the period of time in which we're in the state of concentration, bringing this beautiful bliss of seclusion. As we are entering into the state of concentration, we are learning about how the hindrances arise, how we can skillfully avoid them. We're learning about what supports the cultivation of this skillful state of concentration. Essentially, we're really learning about the skill of meditation, the skill of creating concentration. And it is a skill. It is something in which we can all gain skillfulness.

We cannot actually create concentration itself, but we can cultivate the qualities that nourish it. We can let go of the qualities that counter it—essentially watering the field of our minds such that concentration will naturally arise.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.