Factors that Hinder and Support Concentration

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:05:13

The concentration that we are cultivating here on retreat is the concentration of the Noble Eightfold Path, wise concentration, which is concentration that is supported by wise effort and wise mindfulness. This is actually quite important—that we know how we are aiming our minds, how we are cultivating our concentration.

Wise effort is crucial in that we are aiming our minds to let go of, to abandon the unwholesome, unskillful qualities of mind, those based in greed, aversion, and delusion. And we are cultivating and maintaining wholesome qualities of mind, those qualities that are based in non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—qualities such as love, kindness, generosity, and wisdom.

In talking about cultivating the wholesome and abandoning the unwholesome, the Buddha used an analogy of feeding and starving. He spoke of qualities of mind that we should nourish and encourage. These are the wholesome qualities of mind that we should feed. And there are qualities of mind that we should not feed, that we should denourish—that we should starve certain qualities of mind that lead to our suffering, that lead to our struggle, stress, and dissatisfaction.

Tonight I would like to talk about some of the qualities that we would like to let go of and abandon, and some of the factors that we would like to encourage in our practice of right concentration.

In particular, when discussing this feeding and starving analogy, the Buddha mentioned the list of the five hindrances as qualities that we should abandon, that we should actively find ways to denourish. These factors of mind lead not to our welfare and happiness, but to our struggle and suffering. Then there are several other lists that he encouraged us to cultivate and nourish: the qualities of the seven factors of awakening, the qualities of the five faculties, the four brahmavihāras—the qualities of kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Many, many qualities the Buddha mentioned that we should encourage and nourish.

Tonight I would like to contrast the five hindrances not with one of those familiar lists, but with another list that may not be as well known to you. If you have attended this retreat before, this list will be familiar, but it is not one we tend to discuss much on regular Vipassana retreats. It is the list of the five factors that support concentration, sometimes called the five jhānic factors. These factors actively counter the qualities of the hindrances, and so it is a good paired list to explore.

I would like to start first by exploring a little bit about the hindrances, though not in the usual detailed way of going through each one individually. I know that many of you, most of you, have probably heard

quite a few talks on the hindrances, and some of you might even be able to give a talk on them yourselves.

The five hindrances are sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt. It sometimes sounds like seven, but sloth and torpor are paired together, and restlessness and anxiety are paired together as a single hindrance.

The Buddha described these states as states that particularly hinder concentration. They get in our way in terms of settling the mind. You can see this in just looking at a few of them. If you think about restlessness, how restlessness works—it keeps the mind scattered and distracted, which is the opposite of the unified mind. A mind filled with ill will is not at peace, not at rest. A mind that is continually wanting things has a kind of unsettled quality to it. So we can see how these qualities actively obstruct the possibility of concentration.

It is useful to learn how to explore these hindrances and let go of them. In our mindfulness practice, we tend to turn towards them and explore them actively. In our concentration practice, we have a slightly different perspective. I would like to talk in general terms about how to work with difficult energies that obstruct and get in the way of concentration, rather than going through each one specifically.

First, I would like to offer an analogy that the Buddha used for the hindrances. He called the hindrances "encirclers of the mind," and he said they are like a banyan tree. Now, some of you may know what a banyan tree is, but most of us do not have daily encounters with banyan trees in our country. So I would like to describe to you what a banyan tree is, how it works, because the Buddha's analogies were very intuitive and very apt. They rely on your understanding something about the thing he is making an analogy about.

A banyan tree is a kind of fig tree that begins its life by having a seed deposited in the crook of another tree. What that seed does is send out roots—moisture-seeking roots that seek the ground. So it starts up in the top of a tree and sends out these roots. As those roots hit the ground, they begin to stiffen. They become firm. And they begin to create a kind of latticework of roots around this supporting tree.

And every place those roots cross, they get even stronger, until the point where the banyan tree has completely encircled its host tree and actually begins to compete with that tree for nourishment. It competes for light, for moisture. It begins to crowd out the area where the roots of the other tree could grow, and it essentially strangles the host tree, killing it. At some point, you end up with just this huge trunk—banyan trees can get quite large—that looks like a trunk because the roots fuse together. But instead of a regular trunk, there's this latticework of stiffened roots.

The hindrances are like this in our minds. There's this notion of competing for nourishment with wholesome qualities. As the hindrances get entrenched, they are taking our energy, they are obstructing and getting in the way of wholesome qualities. They are competing for the nourishment. And what I think is particularly apt about this analogy is the way the banyan tree sends out its shoots and the way that

where the roots cross, they actually get stronger. The hindrances are self-reinforcing. They support each other. They encourage each other. These are very powerful energies in our minds.

In our concentration practice, as Sally mentioned this morning and as we've actually mentioned a couple of times already, the first approach to working with hindrances is that we have to recognize they are present. We do have to acknowledge them. We have to know that they're there. If we don't know they're there, they can be operating in the subconscious mind and may create a kind of agenda around how we're even doing our concentration practice. I'm sure you've seen this kind of thing happen where you're trying to stay with your breath and there's a striving or a holding or a pushing that's motivated by wanting. If that hindrance of desire is not seen, it is being strengthened. It's being cultivated. So we need to recognize when the hindrances are present.

When we see them present, typically in our Vipassana practice we tend to let go of what we've been paying attention to and turn our attention directly to the hindrance itself. That's not the first approach with concentration practice. With concentration practice, we acknowledge the hindrance, we recognize it, and in that recognition, we set it aside or let it be in the background. We see if we can keep our attention with the breath, letting the hindrance be present, acknowledging it, knowing it's there, but seeing if we can keep the attention to the breath in the foreground with the hindrance in the background—clearly knowing that the hindrance is in the background. There's a setting aside, a sense of "not now."

This takes some practice and skill, actually. At least for me, it wasn't something obvious about how to do. Having done a lot of Vipassana practice, I was very familiar with turning towards the hindrances and was a little afraid to let them be in the background, thinking they might rear their heads or get stronger somehow if I wasn't actively attending to them with mindfulness.

But I discovered on my first concentration retreat—a month-long metta retreat—that when I got this instruction to notice the hindrances arising but just see if I could stay with the metta phrases, something shifted. I would notice anger arise and try to let it be in the background. Over the course of that month of metta practice, I realized how much of a relief it was to just think, "Oh yeah, there it is. There's anger. I don't really have to do anything with it. I can just let it be and stay with the metta phrases."

What we can discover with this is that there's another way these hindrances can diminish. My understanding of how this works—why letting it be in the background is a skillful strategy for working with hindrances in concentration practice—is that our attention, what we are nourishing, what we are feeding as we attend to the breathing, are the wholesome qualities that cultivate concentration, the settled stability of mind with the breath. Knowing that the hindrance is in the background, it's as if that hindrance doesn't have any place to send its roots to get nourishment, because the mindfulness and attention are with the breath. Hindrances tend to feed on non-awareness. When awareness is present and being attended to, even if the hindrance is left in the background, mindfulness does not allow much unawareness for that hindrance to tap into to nourish itself.

So we can see that when we have this setting aside, when we let the hindrance be in the background, the hindrance can essentially diminish on its own because it is an impermanent quality of mind. It is a factor that feeds on thoughts and energies. Ill will and sense desire, for instance, typically feed on thoughts and emotions. If we're taking our attention and placing it on the breath, there's not much room for the nourishing factors of thought and emotion to feed into that hindrance.

This is terrain we need to learn to navigate over time, this letting be in the background. But it is a very helpful tool to learn how to use. It takes some trust to do that. And we need to be honest with ourselves about whether we can let this hindrance be set aside.

This setting aside—or as Sally used the phrase this morning, "just not now"—that's one I use for myself: not now. And there's a way I explore how I'm saying "not now" to the hindrance. Is it, "Oh, there's anger... not now." Or "There's restlessness... not now." Or is it "*Not now*"—with a kind of energy of pushing it away?

We need to be really honest with ourselves about whether we can set the hindrance aside without an aversive quality, without a repressing quality. This is not about repressing the hindrance. It's not about that at all. It's more about letting it be, just not attending to it—what the Buddha might call a skillful ignoring of the hindrance.

At times, we can't just set it aside or let it be in the background. Hindrances have more energy than that. They're pushing themselves into our face. When that happens, we can approach from other directions, still trying to stay with the breath, but perhaps with half the attention on the hindrance and half on the breath. Maybe thinking of breathing through the hindrance—really consciously having the hindrance present in your mindfulness while allowing the breath to infuse it.

This is more of an approach you might take when the hindrance is a little stronger. I find it particularly helpful when hindrances are strong in the body, because the breath is an experience in the body. When restlessness gets strong in the body, you can think of allowing a spaciousness to breathe through the restlessness. Or perhaps with anger, having a sense of pressure and tightness and contraction around the heart—can you breathe through those sensations? This can apply also to working with pain. If you're finding pain in your body, you can have a sense of breathing through the pain.

Sometimes the hindrance is even stronger, where we can barely be in touch with the breath. Philip talked about this last night—the difficult mind state may be what's front and center. We're pretty much aware of and attending to the hindrance, but touching into the breath as we can. Just maybe every few seconds: ah, there's a breath, okay, and there's the anger, the desire, the wanting, the sleepiness. Every now and then we can touch into a breath, but more of our attention is on the hindrance. This is like the hindrance being in the foreground and the breath in the background—again, trying to stay connected with the breath as we can.

And of course, sometimes hindrances get strong enough that we simply cannot find the breath. I remember at one point, when I was doing metta practice as my concentration practice, the hindrances got so strong that I couldn't even remember the metta phrases. At that point it's like, okay, I need to turn towards this.

Learning how and when to apply these various levels is like navigating a continuum. We try to stay with the breath as we can, starting perhaps with the hindrance in the background and the breath in the foreground. If we find the hindrance is a little stronger, maybe we're trying to breathe with the hindrance. It might get stronger still, so the breath moves to the background and the hindrance to the foreground. And it might get so strong that the breath is just not possible to touch into, and we simply need to bring our practice of mindfulness to the hindrance. Many of you have had the teachings on turning towards the hindrance, observing it directly with mindfulness, so I'm not going to go into that tonight.

It takes skillful means, some discernment, to know when to apply the various tools along this continuum. One thing I'd suggest: let yourself notice whether, in working with one of these approaches, the hindrance is getting stronger. If you're being with the breath in the foreground and the hindrance in the background, and the hindrance doesn't seem to be getting stronger, just stay with the breath. That's fine. But keep your eye on it. Know that hindrance, know that it's present, and notice whether it's starting to creep up on you.

If we do need to turn towards the hindrance with mindfulness and let go of the breath, in that practice of cultivating mindfulness of the hindrance, we are still cultivating mindfulness. We're still cultivating the qualities of attending to our experience. So we are cultivating a form of concentration even as we attend to a hindrance. And we're also learning about our minds—cultivating the knowledge that helps us to let go.

This whole exploration of settling into concentration is not a week-long project. It's a long project of learning about your mind—learning how your mind struggles with itself, learning how your mind struggles with the practice. So as we come up against these things, it's not a failure, it's not a problem when we encounter the hindrances. It's our learning that needs to happen in this moment.

The learning that happens supports the cultivation of concentration because as concentration deepens, the hindrances fall away. And as the hindrances fall away, the concentration deepens. So the work on either side supports the work of concentration. The work of cultivating the deepening of concentration supports the letting go of the hindrances. The work of letting go of the hindrances supports the deepening of concentration. They're really interconnected.

You don't need to feel like you're somehow doing a lesser practice, or that you've taken a left turn and are no longer in the retreat because you're working with a hindrance. You're doing the work that needs to be done in the moment.

So as we cultivate concentration, there's the letting go of the hindrances that supports our cultivation of

concentration, and then there's the cultivation of concentration itself. Five factors come together to support concentration and to create the concentrated mind. These are the five jhanic factors.

There is *vitakka*, the aspect of aiming the attention at experience. *Vicāra*, the aspect of sustaining the attention on experience. There is *pīti*—rapture, interest, joyful attention, rapt interest. Then there is *sukha*—sweetness, pleasure, comfort, happiness. And finally *ekaggatā*, which is one-pointedness or unification of mind.

These factors come together to support concentration. As Sally mentioned, there are only a couple of them that we have direct ability to engage with. That's the first two: aiming and sustaining the attention, the *vitakka* and *vicāra*. The others are more a result that comes together as we maintain and sustain our attention in a skillful way—not grasping or pushing away, without qualities of the hindrances involved. As *vitakka* and *vicāra* come together in a skillful way, these other qualities follow along.

Each of these five jhanic factors is said to naturally oppose one of the five hindrances. As these factors get strong, the hindrances naturally fall away. Now, it's a temporary falling away—it's not that they're gone for good. When these factors are present in the mind, the hindrances are not present. It's like a temporary removal or seclusion from the hindrances.

These are beautiful factors to cultivate. They create a state of mind in which we are free from the hindrances. Sometimes this is called the bliss of seclusion, because we are secluded from these unwholesome states of mind. It feels really good when the hindrances are not present. It has a beautiful feeling to it.

All five of these qualities come together to create what we can call neighborhood or access concentration. This is the basic concentration where the hindrances are at bay and the mind is very steady and stable. From this point in the teachings, it's said that we can choose to either move towards insight practice—where that concentrated and stable mind can be applied to recognizing the changing nature of experience and have insight into impermanence, suffering, and not-self—or we can choose to move into more absorption states of concentration.

These five factors are present in neighborhood concentration, and they're also present in the first jhāna. Later in the retreat we'll talk more about the jhānas, so I'm not going to go into detail about that this evening. I primarily want to explore these factors that come together to create the foundation for concentration and for jhāna.

Since these first two, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, are the ones we have the most ability to engage with, I'm going to spend more time talking about them and give a lighter touch to the other three.

Vitakka is the aiming of the attention, the initial application of mind. *Vicāra* is the sustaining of the attention. As an analogy, they're compared to the striking of a bell. *Vitakka* is like the striking of a bell, and *vicāra* is the sustaining, the resonant quality of the bell as it rings.

So vitaka is usually interpreted to mean aiming the attention towards experience—in this case, towards the breath. Directing the attention, placing the attention. This is something we can do with an act of will. We can choose where to place our attention.

Vichara, the sustaining of the attention, is usually interpreted as a kind of being with, sustaining—a rubbing is the way my teacher Sayadaw U Pandita talked about it. A rubbing, a connecting with the experience.

Thinking about the analogy of the bell, the vitaka is the striking of the bell. And the vichara, the way that the attention can sustain on experience, is going to be influenced by other conditions, much as the sustaining or the resounding of the bell is influenced by other conditions. If I hold onto the bell, it doesn't have that resonant quality. If there are other conditions, there may be changes to that resonance of the bell. So likewise, in our experience, there are conditions that will support that vichara to maintain.

And there are also different ways to strike, right? I can strike it like that, or like this. There are different ways to aim the attention that impact how the resonance happens. And so the aspects, the factors of vitaka and vichara—it's really important how we play with them, how we apply them.

We've been emphasizing relaxation. We've been emphasizing gentleness in the approach to being with the breath. And so I'd like to review this a little bit, because I talked about some of this yesterday in the guided meditation.

In terms of the aiming of the attention, the directing of the attention, we can forcefully aim our minds with a strong will—"I'm going to pay attention to that breath." Or there are some more gentle approaches. I mentioned a couple of these yesterday: the settling back and allowing the breath to come to you, having a sense of—rather than going out and looking for the breath—settling back and receiving the breath. This is a way of aiming the attention. It's just a little more settled back.

Using this approach is especially helpful as the breath gets more subtle. Rather than trying to look directly at it—you know, if you're paying attention to the breath at the nostrils or any place that's kind of a small place. I pay attention to a quarter-sized place at my sternum primarily. And sometimes the breath gets very subtle as we pay attention to it. When the breath starts getting really subtle, the inclination is to kind of force in and look harder. "Where is it? Where is it?" And what I find is actually helpful is to back off the effort at that point, to back off the intensity and almost see if, from a broader or almost peripheral perspective, the subtlety of the breath can pop into view.

I used the analogy yesterday of looking at stars. If you go out and look at stars at night, if you're looking at a dim star and try to look directly at it, it's hard to see. But if you look just off to the side, it pops into view. I've seen a similar kind of thing with the subtlety of the breath. Instead of trying to look directly at it, just let it come into the periphery. And then it can pop into view.

Another way to gently aim the attention is using what I call requests—rather than trying to do the aiming.

For instance, right now, if I say to you, "See if you can attend to the experience of the breath at the nostrils. Just let yourself feel an in-breath at the nostrils"—often that's not too hard because I've pointed you in that direction, I've inclined you in that direction. And the mind, in hearing that, just naturally moves in that direction.

So we can do the same thing for ourselves. I will at times, if I'm finding that the effort is a little too forceful, settle back and just say to myself, "May the attention rest with the breathing"—and then see what happens. Not try to do it, not try to find the breath, but allow the mind to find the breath, having made that request. I've found this to be remarkably helpful. Not always—it doesn't always work, for sure. It doesn't always work, but it works more often than I would imagine. And so this can be a really helpful way to begin understanding how the mind can pay attention, aim the attention in a gentle way, as opposed to a forceful way.

So this gentle aiming is like the skillful tapping of a bell, which begins to allow a more full sustaining of the attention. In the sustaining of the attention, this is an area again where I think we tend to over-effort. We tend to use a lot of force in sustaining the attention, because sustaining the attention is not easy. And what I've learned to explore here is the natural resonance that happens as we make an aiming of the attention.

There's a natural resonance that follows. As you begin to get familiar with this, aiming the attention to the breath, there often is a natural length of time that the mind can stay with the breath in that moment based on the way you've aimed the attention. There's a kind of natural sustaining that follows. It may last half a second, it may last two seconds.

As we become familiar with this quality of sustaining, this resonance that happens as we aim, we begin to learn how to make vitakka and vicāra work together. As we aim the attention, there's a little bit of resonance that sustains. And as we get familiar with that sustaining, we begin to see when it gets a little wobbly, when it starts to fade, and then we need to aim the attention again. We sit with that resonance for a while, and then we aim again.

In this way of playing with vitakka and vicāra, we learn how frequently we need to aim the attention. As we do this practice, a momentum builds and the sustaining naturally lasts a little bit longer. It's like we're getting really skilled at hitting that bell, so the resonance lasts a long time. We begin to learn that we don't need to keep aiming the attention—we can hang out in that space of sustaining. These two factors work together, and we learn how to skillfully navigate them in relationship to each other.

It's really helpful to use a light touch with the sustaining. Just enough energy at the beginning to stay with half a breath—don't try to sustain the attention for much longer than that. Just half a breath, and then reconnect with the aiming to the in-breath. Sustain for the in-breath, reconnect to the out-breath, sustain for the out-breath. In this way, half a breath at a time, the momentum begins to build. Then we become familiar with the sustaining and realize, "I don't need to keep aiming. I can be with two breaths." And then

touch in again.

For me, this has been a really helpful exploration around working these two together. I find it's very helpful to take the time to allow this container of skillful use of these two qualities to settle in, to set up—to take the time to establish the relaxed attention. That's how I'm describing this here: vitakka and vicāra are the qualities of attention, and learning how to use them skillfully supports a relaxed attention.

Part of the way I've navigated this is starting from a place of relaxation, which is why I emphasize relaxation at the beginning of a guided meditation or sitting. I usually start with relaxation, and then from that place of relaxation, I incline the mind to connect with the breath. "May the breath be present. May the mind connect with the breath"—as a gentle way to establish that connection.

If I find in connecting with the breath that there's any tightness or tension, I go back to relaxation. It may be I only get half a breath that's not tight or tense. As soon as I start to see the mind clamp down, I'll just go back to that place of relaxation and try again. I'll go back and forth like this for quite a while at the beginning of a sitting until the mind begins to rest skillfully in a relaxed way with the breath.

It's well worth that time to find the way to be relaxed and attentive. It's not so helpful to just say, "Okay, I can hang on to the breath for long enough that I'll break into concentration." We can do that. We can push through that way. But it generally results in a brittle form of concentration, one that's not very stable.

That's the way I used to do it. I used to think, "Okay, I'm just going to hold on to this breath. I'm going to do it." And I could get pretty concentrated, but it was not very stable. I learned the hard way that it's really helpful to just take your time and find the way into relaxed attention. It will be different for each of you how that unfolds.

So explore. This is really a playground. We're playing with our minds here, learning how to be relaxed and attentive.

So the factor of vitakka, that aiming of the attention, is understood to counter sloth and torpor—that dullness of mind. As we consciously connect to the breath, aiming the attention, it brings an energy and a freshness into the mind and counters that quality of dullness and sleepiness.

Just to acknowledge, this is only the second full day of retreat. Many of you are probably experiencing dullness and sleepiness. This is typical for the first two or three days. There's a lot of swamp out there, I know. And it's okay. Just know that's okay. You can take naps, take short naps, rest. And also, just try to stay with the breath, work with it.

The resistance to sloth and torpor, as Philip so beautifully mentioned last night—that resistance actually takes so much energy. The resistance to the sloth and torpor is binding up energy that could be used to attend to the breath with the sloth and torpor in the background. So there's no need to resist it. Just let it be and see if you can stay with the breath. Aiming the attention, perhaps being a little more precise,

knowing that that aiming of the attention counters that dullness of mind. Noticing the beginning of the in-breath. In the guided meditation that Sally offered, it was very much that aiming of the attention—really helpful. Noticing the beginning of the out-breath, that regular aiming of the attention, connecting, will counter that sloth and torpor.

Then the factor of vicāra, the sustaining of the attention, is understood to be the antidote to doubt. Doubt we experience in terms of doubt in ourselves, our ability to practice, doubt in the teachings, doubt in the teachers. Often when doubt is present, we're lost in thought and not connecting at all—completely lost in thought. So it's really helpful to begin to recognize doubt. For me, the main key is: if I'm thinking about the practice, doubt may be present.

If you find yourself waking up into thinking about the practice—what kind of practice should I do? How should I engage? This practice isn't right. Maybe I should do this—doubt is probably present. When doubt is present, the antidote is connecting with experience and sustaining that attention on experience. Doubt can't get its roots in the ground when the attention is sustained on an experience. So we just need to be willing, when we notice doubt is present, to find an experience—find the breath. Find the breath and see if you can stay with it. See if you can practice that sustaining of the attention.

Be willing to try this and see whether it supports you. It does take a willingness, a little bit of faith, that this will support me to let go of the doubt. And the seed of faith actually also helps to counter the doubt. So that trust, that willingness—try it and see. Run the experiment. Does this work?

The third jhānic factor of rapture is delight and joy accompanied with interest in our experience. This comes about—again, this is not something that we do—as a result of maintaining our attention, the practice of vitakka-vicāra, the aiming and sustaining of the attention. As that becomes more continuous, this quality of rapture begins to naturally arise. This quality of interest in the breath begins to arise.

Now, we can't actively do this. We cultivate rapture by cultivating the conditions for rapture. And the main conditions for rapture are the aiming and the sustaining of the attention. Then there's another aspect we can support, another condition for rapture, which is the comfortableness of the breath that we can play with. Allowing the breath to be comfortable. Finding the pleasure in the breath. Sometimes this is actually quite easily present if we're just open to it, if we just check in: Is there any pleasurable experience to be found as I'm exploring the breath? Sometimes it's quite obvious. This connection with the pleasurable quality of the breath can also support the development of this third factor of rapture. The comfortable breath is something we can actively play with.

We can approach this from two angles. We can come at it from the side of the body, actually exploring whether there are different ways we might breathe that would support the breathing becoming a little more comfortable. For some people, this is very helpful. I found this to work at times, but what was more helpful for me was to come at it from the side of the mind—basically to look at the breath and recognize that if the breath doesn't feel comfortable, something is going on. Often it meant there was a little bit of

aversion or a little bit of wanting in the mind that was obstructing the pleasurable qualities of the breath. So for me, exploring it from the side of the mind proved more fruitful. Is there a way I can be comfortable with the breath? Is there a way that this breath can be comfortable?

Another way to explore this is again through the use of requests. "May the breath become comfortable." This can be surprising. This is a way I found in for myself, using these requests—the mind can be quite amenable to this. Again, it's not that we're doing it. We're simply dropping this request into the mind and body and seeing what results. It's like dropping a pebble into a pond and watching the ripples. Drop this request in: "May the breathing become comfortable," and see if the breathing shifts a little, or if the comfortable experience around the breathing shifts.

Rapture can be a very beautiful experience. It can have many physical manifestations accompanied by pleasant body sensation—tingling, goosebumps, flashes of energy, showering sensations, waves of pleasure, lightness in the body. It can also involve energetic experiences. It sounds wonderful, and people say, "Oh yes, I want that." But be careful what you wish for. The energy can become really strong at times, and it can get a little edgy or agitating as well.

Rapture often has a physical component to it. It often feels quite nice and has this aspect of interest. There's a quality of feeling nourished—the mind and body feel like they're getting what they've been asking for in a certain way. The way it's felt for me is that all my cells seem to be just drinking it up.

Because rapture can be such a strong experience, there can be a tendency for us to get pulled toward it. Someone asked a question this morning about working with pleasant experiences in meditation and how to navigate them. The sensations of rapture can be really interesting. You're experiencing waves of pleasurable, almost orgasmic feelings through the body, and it's like, "Wow, that feels really good." The breath just recedes because it feels so good to be sitting in these waves.

A couple of things are important to understand here. First, the rapture comes about because of sustaining and maintaining attention on the breath. That attention was the nourishment, the cause for rapture arising. If we take that nourishment away, we're removing the conditions that support the rapture. So one of the most helpful things to do is—much like working with the hindrances—to let the rapture be in the background and let the breath be in the foreground. Or perhaps breathe with the experience of rapture when it's very strong. Sometimes there's a sense of breathing with or breathing through the feelings of rapture, allowing them without pushing them away.

There's an interesting distinction between what happens when we allow rapture to be in the background versus allowing a hindrance to be in the background. When we bring our attention to the breath in the foreground and allow a hindrance to be in the background, generally the hindrance dissipates. When we bring the breath to the foreground and allow rapture to be in the background, generally it creates conditions for the rapture to strengthen. Maintaining attention with the breathing actually supports the rapture.

Rapture counters the hindrance of ill will. When the mind is in a state of rapt interest, it is simply not in the terrain of finding fault with things, of discovering what's wrong. The state of being happy and interested naturally opposes ill will. Now again, this is not something we can do directly, but as concentration is cultivated, as we work with vitakka and vicāra and attention is sustained, as rapture arises, ill will will start to fade. This is how we abandon the hindrance of ill will through the cultivation of concentration.

The fourth factor is sukha—happiness, contentment, sweetness. It's a mental pleasure. This quality of sukha is present with rapture, but often it's a little obscured because the energy of rapture is so much stronger. Sukha is a much more tranquil kind of experience, and so it can be overshadowed by rapture's presence. As the mind settles more, becoming a little more tranquil, the quality of sukha becomes more apparent to us.

It's a refined kind of happiness. There's an analogy in the texts that describes the distinction between rapture and happiness. It says that rapture is like the state of someone who has been walking in a desert and comes upon an oasis. Just imagine, if you've been walking in a desert for a long time, the kind of joy that would arise for you, the happiness that would come up with the idea that relief from thirst is near. That's the comparison to rapture.

The comparison for sukha is somebody who has taken a drink of the water from that oasis and is already resting in the shade of the trees. There's more of a sense that the thirst has been slaked. The mind is more at ease—there's a contentment, a relaxation and ease, a tranquility with the happiness of sukha.

Sukha is understood to counter restlessness and anxiety. As the mind becomes more tranquil and settled, more content, there's no room for that agitated energy of restlessness. Restlessness, both physical and mental, is an excess of energy, and this quality of sukha settles our energy.

We also will have a tendency to grasp at sukha because it too is very pleasant. My own expression for sukha is "oh yes." It's the "oh yes" state—like, oh, this feels really good. So we can grasp at it. Again, see if you can let it be in the background. Stay with the breath. Stay with the supports that allow these qualities to be nourished.

Then there is the fifth aspect: ekaggatā, one-pointedness or unification of mind. These two translations offer two ways of exploring and understanding this factor. One-pointedness points us to the kind of concentration that is cultivated on a single object, where the mind grows more still based on attending to one thing. Unification of mind can be understood as a broader kind of concentration where the mind is settled and stable, not whipped around by the hindrances, able to meet whatever is arising. This understanding allows us to appreciate the broader concentration, the moment-to-moment concentration.

This quality of one-pointedness or unification of mind is present whether the concentration is on a single object or whether it is stable on changing objects. I wanted to make that clear. The translation of

one-pointedness sometimes makes us think this only happens when we're paying attention to one object, but this quality of mind arises in both kinds of concentration.

Ekaggatā is sometimes used as a synonym for samādhi. It's this unification of mind, this balance of mind. It contains a mind that is more stable, not reactive. Again, it's a result of sustaining the attention. Vitakka and vicāra are the ground out of which all of these other factors grow. The continuity of our mindfulness, either on one object or on changing objects, supports this quality of one-pointedness, of unification of mind, to become strong.

The mind feels balanced. It feels contented. There's no problem, nothing that we need to change. And this points to the hindrance that this factor of mind opposes, which is sense desire. When we're in this state of unification of mind, the mind is completely contented with whatever is happening. There's no need to want anything. The desire to want things falls away with that state.

As this factor begins to grow strong, as all the factors come together, we begin to get a sense of how concentration helps us to overcome all of the hindrances. It points toward a happiness that is deeper and more satisfying than our normal way of operating in the world—the normal way that we go after sense desire, trying to construct the world as we'd like it to be, finding the next hit of pleasure, getting rid of the next thing we don't want in our environment.

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

This is what we begin to see with concentration when these factors come into balance together. As they come into balance, the hindrances fall away. We experience a kind of happiness that is much more satisfying than the happiness of getting what we want.

And we begin to realize that renouncing the happiness of sense desire helps us to move towards this deeper kind of happiness.

So this practice of exploring our minds, getting to know the hindrances, allowing them to fall away, practicing concentration, cultivating these factors—we are exploring our minds here. We're learning about our minds.

However you are engaged in this moment, whatever's happening now, that's where we start. We've said that a few times: we start where we are. If that's with a restless mind, we bring the breath through the restlessness. If we need to, we turn to the restlessness itself. If we're starting with a mind that's a little more settled, stable, and satisfied with just being with the breath—that's where we start.

There's no right or wrong. However you are engaging is supporting the practice. It's actually supporting both directions at once. Whenever we're cultivating letting go of the hindrances, we're already cultivating qualities that support the factors of jhāna. Whenever we're cultivating the factors of jhāna, we're already

cultivating things that help us let go of the hindrances.

Wherever you are, however you're engaging—that is the practice.

Let's just sit for a moment and allow the words to drift away.

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