Using Concentration to See Things as They Are

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Tonight I'd like to talk about how concentration fits into the overall path of Buddhist practice and how we explore turning our concentration towards insight, towards understanding, towards wisdom.

To explore this, I'd like to start by talking a little bit about the Buddha's own journey. When he was a young man, he had this sense of: why am I looking for happiness in places where it doesn't seem very reliable? Here I am, a human being, subject to aging, sickness, and death. And the ways I'm searching for happiness is in searching for connections with things that are also subject to aging, sickness, and death. So how far is that going to get me?

This was a motivating question for him. When he was about twenty-nine years old, he left his home and went in search of an answer to this question. He explored various teachings that were available in the day. There was a very vibrant spiritual scene in India at the time that the Buddha lived—many teachers teaching a lot of different tools for what they were hoping to be a form of liberation. Various teachers were proclaiming that they had found ways towards liberation, ways towards freedom. And the Buddha went in search of these people and studied with them.

The first two teachers that he met taught very deep states of concentration as a way towards freedom—freedom from the suffering that was present in the here and now. The Buddha explored these and learned very deeply these teachings of how to concentrate the mind and become very blissful, very refined states of bliss, of peace, of ease.

Given that his motivation was how to be completely free of suffering, he saw that seeking happiness in things that were subject to aging, sickness, and death—or impermanence—that wasn't the way. In his exploration of these concentration states, he found that after he emerged from them, these states themselves were subject to impermanence. And so they weren't the answer to his question. Having learned what he could learn from these teachers, he decided this is not the way.

Then he went off to practice some very severe ascetic practices, another set of practices that were available in his day. He practiced a form of concentration of breathing practice where he basically stopped the breathing. He said he stopped the breathing in his nose, his mouth, and his ears. By doing that, he experienced what he called racking pains—pains in his head, pains in his belly. He described it as if somebody with a knife was carving up his belly, or a strap being bound around his head. This was an extremely painful experience.

So he went from the bliss of the concentration to this racking pain trying to do this practice of stopping up

his breathing. This is an indication for you: don't try to make your breathing stop. It doesn't lead to bliss.

The Buddha decided this doesn't seem to work very well, so maybe he'd try some other practices. He decided to stop eating, that maybe if he stopped eating, he would liberate himself from suffering. He reduced the food that he took in. He got down to one grain of rice a day. He lost a tremendous amount of weight. His description of himself is that his hair began to fall off his body—when he rubbed his limbs, his hair would come off. His backbone was like beads sticking out. When he touched his belly, he could touch his spine. Very emaciated. Here he is on the door of death, basically about ready to die, and he's like, this doesn't seem to be the way either.

At that point, just about on death's door, he seems to have a kind of reflection: what might be the way? This question comes into his mind. And what appears to him is a memory—a memory of a time when he was younger, when he was a boy, watching his father do a ritual plowing festival. His father was the local king in the area, and he was watching his father do this ritual festival. As he was observing this, sitting under the shade of a tree, he spontaneously fell into a blissful state of concentration, basically in the terrain of the first jhāna, an embodied blissful state. As he remembered that, he thought to himself: is this the way?

Then he had this recognition: yes, this is the way. Why should I be afraid of pleasure that is wholesome?

This is interesting, I think, because the very first practices he did were heading in this direction of bliss—the concentration practices he engaged in. And so this has been an interesting question for me: What did he see in that moment as the difference? Because he had been practicing with these teachers, practicing very deep states of concentration, and had decided that's not the way. And then in reflecting back, he thought, maybe this is the way. This is the way. It came to him with some certainty. This is the way.

Reading further in what happened, he nourished himself so he became healthy again. And then he began exploring the four jhana states, concentrating his mind to these states—to the depth of peace, tranquility, equanimity. And then the key here, I think, that helps us to understand what he learned or what he found or what he intuited, is this: The description in the suttas is, "I purified my mind, concentrated my mind until it was malleable, bright. And then I turned that mind to the destruction of the causes of suffering."

So he basically—I think the key piece that he recognized is that the early teachers he went to were teaching the concentration states as an end in themselves. That the states that were attained, the very deep states of concentration in which the body completely falls away, where there's no experience of body, very refined states of mental stillness and tranquility—those states themselves were not the freedom that he was looking for. But he found, or thought of, a different way of using that. Rather than using it as an end in itself, he chose to use the concentration as a tool to explore this question of: What is suffering? How is it caused? Is it possible for it to come to an end?

And so he turned his concentrated mind towards this question. This is, I think, the real key—the shift that he found, the shift that he contributed: that this concentrated mind can be used as a tool. It's not the end, but it is a very powerful tool. He said to his followers, "Cultivate concentration. One who cultivates concentration sees things as they actually are."

So concentration in our practice, in our path, in the Buddhist path, is developed and cultivated in the service of liberation, in the service of freedom. This is the direction I'd like to explore: How do we turn this concentration towards freedom? How do we use this concentration in the service of liberation?

And this for me can be very inspiring at times when I'm practicing concentration. I can get into some very beautiful states and it's kind of like, well, why am I doing this? What's this about? Why do this? What is the point? I remind myself: the point is that this supports liberation. It is in the service of liberation, and that can give me the inspiration to continue with the concentration.

So to talk about how concentration is used in the service of liberation, I'd like to review something that we've already explored a little bit. This will just be a quick review of the different kinds of concentration.

The concentration that we've been mostly encouraging and cultivating these past days has been one-pointed concentration—the concentration where we're stabilizing our mind on one object. The object becomes more and more still as we do this, and that stillness stills the mind. So the emphasis in this kind of concentration practice is in stilling the mind.

Then there is the kind of concentration that we talk about with respect to insight practice—the kind of concentration in which the mind is stable, the awareness is stable and non-reactive, but there's changing experience. The mind is non-reactive to the flow of changing experience. So there's a stability of the mind, but the objects are no longer still.

This kind of concentration, this moment-to-moment concentration, can also get very, very strong. All the jhanic factors that we've talked about are cultivated in the process of attending to experience moment after moment after moment. The continuity of awareness is what cultivates the stability of mind, rather than continuity on one object. So the mind recognizes moment after moment: seeing, body sensation, a sound, an emotion, a thought, a sight, another body sensation. It's just an endless flow, but the mind is picking up moment after moment on the changing nature of experience.

This also creates the stability of mind where the jhanic factors are all strong and the hindrances fall away. So there is that bliss of seclusion in this kind of concentration as well.

The factor of *ekagata*—the one-pointedness, the unification of mind—in moment-to-moment concentration is not one-pointed on a single object. Rather, the one-pointedness or stability resides in the awareness itself. The awareness is stable in that it doesn't pick up on any object and then go following it out, following with thoughts and ideas and views and opinions about it. Something arises, it arises and it's known. It passes. Another thing arises, it arises and it's known. That stability, the *ekagata*, is the stability

of awareness itself.

This second form of concentration—the concentration that can be attentive to changing experience—is the kind of concentration that allows us to penetrate into things as they are. The Buddha made this statement: cultivate concentration, for one who cultivates concentration sees things as they are. This second kind of concentration begins to penetrate into how experience is ever-changing, ever-flowing. How that ever-flowing experience is completely unreliable as a place where we can find happiness. There's nothing we can hang onto in that flow of experience that will be the thing that will do it for us—the unreliability of experience. We see that everything happening is simply a process of change, of causes and conditions. There's no abiding, lasting anything. Nothing that we can call self, me, or mine. This kind of concentration, this moment-to-moment concentration, is the kind that can see these truths.

Absorption concentration—the concentration of stillness where the mind settles into one-pointedness—produces very blissful states, produces great stillness, and very much sharpens the mind, refining its ability to meet subtler and subtler experience. And yet the stillness that we come to in that state... the change is not so obvious there. Change is not what's happening. And so that kind of absorption concentration, while it leads to very blissful states, doesn't lead to the kind of insight that will free us.

The key thing that begins to liberate us is turning the mind towards change. As we employ concentration as a tool, we turn the concentrated mind towards changing experience. This is actually the key distinction between what we would call concentration practice and vipassana practice. In concentration practice, we are inclining the mind towards stillness. We're not inclining it towards change; we're not inclining it to see all the subtlety of the changing nature of the breath. We're inclining towards stillness, more and more stillness. In vipassana practice, we turn our attention towards change.

So this is the key distinction between concentration practice and mindfulness practice. With the concentrated mind, we can use that concentration to turn towards change. The more concentrated the mind becomes, the more refined the concentration becomes, the more clearly it can see change—if we choose to turn that concentrated mind towards change.

This is the turning that we are exploring at this point in the retreat. We've been cultivating concentration for these number of days, and in the instructions tomorrow we will offer the suggestion to begin turning this concentration we've been cultivating towards changing experience.

There are a couple of ways to explore this, which I'll mention briefly here; we'll go into them more over the coming days. One way is this: you've been cultivating your attention on the breath, staying with the breath, inclining the mind more and more towards stillness. One way to explore this turning towards change is to open up—essentially to let go of the focus on the breath and open to the six sense doors. Open to the fact that seeing is happening, hearing is happening, body sensations are happening, smelling, tasting, and all the events happening in the mind. We can open to the changing flow of experience.

This can sometimes feel a little jarring after you've been really still—to just say, well, let me let go of the breath and open to changing experience. So we can take an intermediate step if you wish. And actually, it's sufficient: the practice of mindfulness of breathing is the practice of turning the attention, the concentrated mind, from the stillness around the breathing to the changing experience of the breathing. The Buddha said this practice of mindfulness of breathing can take you all the way to liberation. But it's not going to take you all the way if you just settle into more and more and more stillness, into absorbed states of concentration. You need to turn to the changing nature of the breath, the changing nature of the mind as it meets the breath—the instructions that Temple was talking about the other day in the Anapanasati Sutta.

So we can turn and open to the flow of broad experience, or we can also open to the change of the breath and the change in the mind, how the mind changes as the breath moves, noticing how various factors arise in the mind and are cultivated. We turn towards change, allowing ourselves to begin exploring experience—whether the flow of experience across all our senses or the changing nature of the breath. And in that turning towards the changing nature of experience, the concentrated mind has the capacity to simply be with this change, to not be reactive to the change, to just witness this flow.

So it allows us to open to insight. Insight into what? What is the insight that we are exploring?

Vipassana, the term usually translated as insight, means something along the lines of—the *vi* part, the first syllable, Sayadaw U Pandita says means something along the lines of "various things." And the *passana* part means "to see clearly into." So the term vipassana means to see clearly into various things. And the various things, Sayadaw U Pandita said, that that first syllable refers to are impermanence, suffering, unreliability, and not-self. This is the terrain of insight.

To come back to the perspective from which the Buddha was asking his question—I think that's always helpful, to return to what was the Buddha's motivation, what was his aspiration, what was the direction he was coming from. His quest was: Is there an end to suffering? Is there an end to distress, dissatisfaction, unease?

He found through his exploration that the core cause of this suffering is basically wanting things to be some other way than they are. He found that this wanting things to be some other way than they are is based in three basic factors of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion.

In his exploration, studying what's happening and what's the cause of that, he reasoned: Well, if there's suffering and the cause of that is greed, aversion, and delusion, how might I bring greed, aversion, and delusion to an end? If I can bring the cause of suffering to an end, then suffering should come to an end. It was very logical.

So he began that exploration, and he found that possibility. He found the possibility for freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion. And that is enlightenment.

Maybe it doesn't sound so glorious. We think of enlightenment as floating blissful on clouds somewhere. I don't know what we think of it as—blinding flashes of light and showers of bliss, something along those lines. But no greed, no aversion, no delusion sounds pretty mundane in a way.

But here are some of the descriptions from the suttas: "The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called nibbana." Nibbana being the term for liberation, extinction of suffering.

"Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims neither at one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and experiences no mental pain or grief."

Imagine that. Just imagine that. No mental pain or grief. That sounds pretty good.

"This is nibbana immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise."

To me, that's very inspiring. Enlightenment maybe seems like some far-off thing, distant. But the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion—the possibility that this is visible in this life—that is inspiring.

So the insight into suffering, the insight into the cause of suffering, the insight into ignorance—these are the insights that we explore. Deep at the root of greed, aversion, and delusion is this ignorance.

What is this ignorance? Our usual definition of ignorance is something like not really being aware of something, not knowing something, not having some kind of information—just a kind of passive not knowing. We sometimes think about ignorance as being a passive not having some kind of information.

The ignorance that's at the root of greed, aversion, and delusion is far more insidious than a passive form of not knowing. It actually is an active way that our minds engage with the world, misunderstanding things, misinterpreting things. We walk through life confused. Because of that confusion, we think that having things will make us happy. We think that getting rid of things that we don't like will make us happy.

So this ignorance, this fundamental ignorance, distorts the way we maneuver through our lives. There are three primary distortions.

These three distortions will be familiar, as I've been mentioning them throughout. The Buddha speaks of three primary distortions, three fundamental misunderstandings that shape the way we move through life: we take what is impermanent to be permanent, we take what is unreliable as a source of happiness to be reliable, and we take what is not self to be self.

This is simply human. It's not individual or personal—it's the way we are set up as human beings. These

misunderstandings are wired into our nervous system in a certain way. But fortunately, they are not hardwired. It is possible to see through them.

Taking what is impermanent to be permanent—there are several ways this happens for us. One of the most innocuous ways is that things are changing so rapidly that the very speed of change masks its presence. In our experience, in all of reality, the level of change is happening so fast that it becomes invisible.

There's an analogy given somewhere, either in the suttas or in the commentary, about impermanence. Someone holds a fire stick—a stick with fire on the end—and whirls it around in a circle. I used to do this as a child with sparklers, just whirling around in a circle. The illusion created is that a circle exists in the air, because you're moving the fire so fast that the mind creates the appearance of a continuous ring. The rapidity of movement actually generates this illusion that something solid is there, something permanent. This is one way impermanence is masked—things are changing so rapidly we don't perceive the change.

Another way impermanence is masked operates more in our psyches: we overlay concept onto experience and relate to things through those concepts. For example, place your attention in your hand for a moment. Feel your hand, feel the sensations there. Close your eyes and don't look at your hand—just feel the vibration, the pulsing, the tingling. There's a variety of changing experience. Now open your eyes and look at your hand. Think about it as a hand, what hands do. What happens to the immediacy of that sensation?

For me, the concept removes me from it. The idea of "hand" overlaid on experience distances me from its dynamic, changing nature. This is another way impermanence is masked—we place concepts onto experience and relate to the world through them.

This is very useful. We couldn't live without concepts. If we lived only in raw experience—particles of sight—and had to construct people and chairs and floors and walls every time we walked into a room, marveling at all this change, we wouldn't get very far. Concept is remarkably useful, but we need to see it for what it is. It's not solid. It is a fleeting idea. The concept itself is impermanent, unsubstantial, unreliable.

And then there's taking what is unsatisfactory to be satisfactory. Until we truly meet a spiritual practice, we go about our lives mostly trying to construct a world that suits our desires. We arrange circumstances so that we have more of what we like, less of what we don't like. Our culture has trained us to believe that having what we want, getting rid of what we don't want, is happiness.

While we see at some level that this isn't very reliable, our sense of happiness still depends on maneuvering our environment. We think, "This will keep me happy for a while. I can live with that, but then it's going to start falling apart. So what's the next thing? What can I construct next to maintain the happiness?" We believe that arranging our lives—stringing together moments of getting what we want, moments of avoiding what we don't want—is the best it gets.

That's as good as it gets.

So we are seeking happiness in inherently unreliable things. And at some level we know that. At some level we know that the happiness we're creating is unreliable. This is why we're on this hamster wheel of "what's the next thing? What's the next thing? What's the next thing?"

The Buddha discovered that this form of happiness actually keeps us tied to endless dissatisfaction. As we are constructing this world of "what's the next thing?" we're in a state of dissatisfaction. At the moment that we want something, dissatisfaction springs up. The moment there is a sense of wanting, there's an inherent sense of lack. And so we're living in a continual state of lack.

The Buddha found a different way.

Taking what is not self to be self—I'll just give an example from my own experience. Before I started practicing, I was a pretty miserable person. And I knew I was a miserable person. There would be moments when happiness would come through, but the mind would go something like, "Well, yeah, I'm happy now, but I know what I really am is miserable." I was completely identified with this miserable person. Complete belief in its reality. It was a full-blown self. That's who I was. Miserable.

Through the practice, I began to understand that this miserable person was a construct, and that miserableness was a state with causes and conditions. It comes, it goes. There's nothing inherent about that miserableness. So taking what is not self to be self—for me, that's what I was doing. I was taking this miserableness, creating a whole construct out of it, and then saying, "That's me."

We do this a lot. We do this kind of thing a lot. We take what is not self to be self.

These misunderstandings actively impact how we relate to experience. We go around believing that we can find happiness by holding onto things.

As we begin to explore our experience with a concentrated mind, as we turn towards our experience, we're basically noticing change. Turning that concentrated mind towards change, we begin to deeply, deeply understand the impermanence of experience. Nothing lasts very long. Nothing lasts for even more than a split second. Experience is ever flowing and ever changing when we drop below the level of concept.

We see this in our experience. It's a truth that we witness. We see that it's our own minds constructing this belief in permanence, this sense of permanence. We see it as a fiction—a useful fiction perhaps at times, but it is a fiction.

The concentration begins to reveal this to us. It reveals the unsatisfactory nature of experience. Because we see the changing nature of experience, we see that there's nothing we can really hold onto. There's nothing out there that would be reliable. It's all just slipping away, slipping out of our grasp. The attempt to hold onto things that are impermanent creates this dukkha, this suffering.

And we also discover—actually, one of the things we discover in terms of what we hold onto as we turn our concentration towards experience—we discover that we are holding on not to things themselves, because there's no way to hold onto things that are just changing. There's no way to hold onto them. But what we are holding onto are concepts. We are suffering over clinging to something that our own minds have created.

This is quite a revelation when we see it.

Not only is our suffering created by clinging—our own minds construct what we cling to.

Seeing into the not-self nature of experience is essentially revealed through beginning to see that things are a process. Again, it's all related back to the impermanent nature of experience. Because of impermanence, things are unreliable. In that impermanent, flowing, changing experience, there are causes and conditions. Things arise, they create causes, there are effects. The effects then create more causes, and it's just this flow. It's kind of like dominoes—you set up dominoes in a series, then tap the end one, and they just collapse. It's like that. There's a process happening in our experience, a process of cause and effect, a very lawful process of cause and effect.

The very lawfulness of that process is part of what obscures this truth of not-self. Because the lawfulness of the unfolding of experience makes us believe that there's something here, someone here that's deciding and choosing and doing.

If we explore this through the analogy of a seed growing into a tree: you plant a seed and water it. There are conditions—the water that nourishes the seed, the soil from which it can draw nutrients, the warmth of the sun. All of these conditions come together for the seed to sprout. Then more conditions have to come into play. That little sprout needs to not be walked on or trampled over or eaten by animals. More conditions need to come together for this seed to turn into a tree. If the tree is in favorable conditions, it will grow, it will age, it will unfold into a full tree. But there's no being there directing that process. It is simply a lawful unfolding based on causes and conditions. That tree comes into being or it doesn't come into being.

It's very similar with this process that we call "me." We are an unfolding of process. There's a stream of unfolding cause and condition. There's no abiding entity. And as we turn our concentrated mind to our experience, we begin to see this. We begin to see the cause-and-effect nature of our experience. We start to see how, as I turn my mind to attending to the breathing, it supports a cultivation of various conditions. So there is some kind of agency—but there's not a being there that has that agency. That agency is itself a product of causes and conditions.

We see how intention leads to results. We see something creating the arising of an intention. An example that might illustrate this: as you observe your experience, you may find you're sitting in the hall for a long period of time and there begins to be a feeling of pressure in your bladder. That feeling of pressure

produces some discomfort. That discomfort produces the intention to move. The intention to move produces a movement to stand. And we're off to the bathroom. There's this unfolding. We would typically think, "Oh, I need to get up and go to the bathroom. I've decided to do this." And we impute a self to that. We impute a "me" to that—"I need to get up and go to the bathroom." But when we start to observe our experience in this way, just noticing what happens, what is arising now, what does it condition—we see it's like dominoes falling. The pressure in the bladder conditions the intention to relieve that pressure, which further conditions the intention to move, which further conditions the intention to stand. It's just cause and effect. We start to see this.

So the concentrated mind starts to reveal the truth of our experience, and this inclines us to not cling to our experience. This undermines greed, aversion, and delusion.

It undermines ignorance, because we see in direct experience the futility of trying to hold on to things—the futility of trying to arrange things to be the way we'd like them all the time.

There's a beautiful quote from a Tibetan poem: "Grasping the ungraspable, we exhaust ourselves in vain." That is what we see. We see the fact that these things are ungraspable, and we see the exhaustion that results from trying to grasp. The mind learns this very deeply and starts to let go of the greed, of the aversion. The ignorance begins to be swept clear.

These insights, in my own experience, are revealed to us gradually. I remember in some of my early retreats, I was sitting there waiting for the mind-blowing insight after which I would be liberated. And I've had a few pretty amazing insights—I could probably count them on a few fingers. But mostly my experience has been that the unfolding of this practice is gradual. Gradually beginning to see into the changing nature of experience. Gradually beginning to understand how I'm holding on to things. Wisdom develops gradually. This understanding, this sweeping away of ignorance, usually doesn't happen in one mind-blowing insight.

There's an analogy that the Buddha offers about the path of practice that I love. I love this analogy because it really speaks to how my practice feels like it's unfolded. He talks about the process of the unraveling of the way we grasp things, the way we cling to things, as being kind of like a shipwreck. There's a ship that's crashed, and all the parts of the ship are strewn on the beach—the rope, the rigging, the wood, all the various parts lying on the sand. He says the sun, the sand, the wind are like our mindfulness, our effort, our concentration, gradually wearing away at those parts of the ship.

Thinking about this analogy, I consider the rope lying on the beach. Each day, if you went out to that beach and looked at that rope, you wouldn't see much change. But come back a year later, pick up that rope, and it falls apart in your hand—because gradually, over the course of the year, it has been worn away by the water, the sun, the sand, the wind.

Our practice unfolds in a similar gradual way. We may not see how it's changing. But at some point we

begin to understand, and often we can see it by looking back. Sometimes we're in a situation with a co-worker or a partner, and we've been practicing meditation for five years, and we recognize: they just said something that I know five years ago I would have flown into a rage about. And it's okay. There's not a problem here. I see that my partner is motivated by their own struggles. I don't need to take this personally. We start to see small ways in which our minds have shifted.

For me, a lot of these insights are revealed when I see that certain patterns aren't happening anymore—when the clinging and grasping simply isn't arising. I didn't actually see things fall away. It wasn't a blinding flash after which suddenly that anger was never going to happen because I had this profound insight into it. It's just a gradual letting go. And one day it's like, "Where's that anger? I can't find it."

As we cultivate concentration, I want to talk a little about how the practice of concentration supports us with insight. As we practice concentration, the mind learns a great deal. The whole process of moving into concentration—how we learn that our minds can be relaxed and attentive—involves a lot of letting go. We see how we grasp onto the breath. We learn that grasping doesn't work very well. We learn how to let go of that. There's a lot of learning around craving and clinging that happens as we work our way towards the state of concentration. We learn about what we cling to and how to release it.

A lot of you have been talking about clinging to a great sitting, wanting it back. Yes, we do that. That's part of our work here. It's not a mistake that this happens—it's very natural. And we can't simply say, "Oh, I'm not supposed to do that. Just be with the breath without clinging to that state."

We can't do that. We need to learn how to be with that grasping. Learn how to let it be. Learn how to let it go. Those tools that Sally mentioned—allowing, avoiding, accepting, attending.

We also learn from the purification process that Temple so beautifully described. As we open—and we've been talking about this in the practice discussions—as our hearts open, we move into a place where the heart is not grasping for a few moments. A place where the hindrances fall away, and it feels like everything is okay. That opening allows things that have been held, things that have been tight underneath—it gives them room to start to move. And they come up to the surface.

So this is also not a mistake. This is part of the process. One of my teachers, Michelle McDonald, talked about this rhythm of purity and purification. Purity and purification. We have moments of purity, maybe even minutes of purity. And then often the rhythm is hours of purification. Learning how to be at ease with that process is another big letting go—letting go of wanting it to be this way, letting go of our agendas, our plans, what we wanted our retreat to be. This is my retreat. This purification.

So there's a lot of letting go that happens as we move towards concentration. Then, as the mind becomes more stable, as it stabilizes and we get more of the feeling of minutes or even a whole sitting of concentration, that stability of mind can then be turned towards changing experience. This is the shift

from concentration to insight. We turn our minds towards changing experience, begin to witness the flow of experience directly—inclining the mind to see into impermanence, unreliability, not-self.

I'm covering this so briefly, and we'll probably talk about it more over the coming days. So this is just the first pointing towards how we turn towards insight from concentration.

As some of us might start to move into actually deeper states of concentration, into the deeper states of jhāna, there's another way to explore. In the state of jhāna itself, there's very little change happening. That's the place where the mind really comes to stillness. So there's not a lot of change happening in the state of jhāna itself, but the state of jhāna, being an impermanent phenomenon, will fall apart at some point. And as that state falls apart, the mind is in such a state of concentration that it can turn towards looking at the impermanent phenomena that are disintegrating around the state of concentration. So essentially, we're looking at the dissolution, the disintegration, the impermanent nature of concentration itself. This is one of the ways the Buddha taught about using concentration.

My teacher Tānissaro Bhikkhu says that the concentrated mind is one of the beautiful places from which to practice insight, because the mind itself is concentrated enough and the state itself has enough conditions that have come together that we get to see, in the dissolution of that experience, how it all dissipates, how it all falls apart. We watch the way the mind lets go, deconstructs the state of concentration. So we begin to understand the ephemeral, the unreliable, the impermanent, the not-self nature of that state itself.

Mostly, our insights are impermanent. When concentration and mindfulness become balanced, we move into a place where the mind is seeing clearly. Wisdom begins to be cultivated and nourished. The mind can see into something so clearly. I'm sure many of you have had this experience of being in a state where it's just so clear—like, how can I not see this? How can I not see how impermanent things are? It's so obvious. And then an hour later, you see it's not that obvious, because the mind has changed state. The mind has moved out of that place where concentration and mindfulness are balanced and clear.

The wisdom strong.

So the balanced state itself is a result of causes and conditions. It is also impermanent. But the key thing that happens—even though we can't live in that space of insight—when you see into something so clearly, you see: "Oh my gosh, that thought, 'You're a failure'—it's just a thought. It has no meaning, no bearing on anything. It's just an arising blip of neurons." You see into that. No belief arises around that thought. And there's a sense of wonder: "Wow, I really understand something here. This thought is just a thought. It doesn't have any reality to it."

And yet, a few days later, the thought comes up: "You're a failure." And you believe it. "Oh, I'm a failure." It's not so clear anymore.

But what has happened is that we have, for a moment, seen through those misperceptions. For a moment,

in our own experience, we've seen through these distortions. In a moment we've seen the impermanence, the unreliability, the not-self nature of experience. That seeing through in direct experience is something that doesn't go away. We can't necessarily live from that space and know it continuously in direct experience, but we can remind ourselves. We can use that knowledge we have gained to remind ourselves: "Okay, yes, here's this thought, 'You're a failure.' It's just a thought." That doesn't necessarily put us into the space of seeing it as just a thought, but it can offer some space, allow us to not be quite so jerked around by it.

Through these small insights, we see into how our perceptions are distorted. And that's a fundamental shift—that we have seen this. These are distortions. So even if we're looking through this lens and seeing things as distorted, we at least know: "Yes, I'm seeing things as distorted."

These insights turn our minds in the direction of non-clinging. I'll finish with a few more quotes from the Buddha—these insights toward non-clinging, freeing ourselves from ignorance, letting go of greed, aversion, and delusion. This is the perspective the sutta is pointing to:

"The extinction of greed, the extinction of hatred, the extinction of delusion. And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and nothing remains to do."

"Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither forms nor sounds nor odors nor tastes nor contacts of any kind—neither the desired nor the undesired—can cause such a one to waver. Steadfast is the mind, gained is deliverance."

"This is peace. This is exquisite. The resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna."

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