Comfortable Breath, Comfortable Mind

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:25

I'd like to begin tonight by repeating something Philip said last night around listening to dharma talks and how helpful it is, particularly on a concentration retreat, to listen with the body, being in the body as you listen, and not necessarily trying to get every last little point. Having a sense of trust that you will hear that which is helpful for you in the moment. You may actually hear some things that you don't know that you hear, and you'll remember them a year later. So, not having to hold on to the talk. As Philip said, it's fine to take notes if you wish about a particular point. But a good portion of this particular talk will be almost like a guided meditation, and so I'll actually point that part out to you so that you can move into that and just follow along with the suggestions I'm asking you to explore.

The Buddha had his own journey, much as we have our journey, and his journey has something to teach us. I'd like to remind you of his story, the story of his quest, and point to some of the pieces that are particularly relevant for this retreat.

As most of you know, the Buddha was a prince and lived a life of luxury. His father was a king, and he lived in very nice conditions, had the best food, the best clothes, had a lot of sense pleasures around him. He had palaces in the hills for the hot season and basically had the best conditions for someone living in India at that time. And yet he had this question. He had an innate sense of search about his life. One of the questions was framed something like: Why am I, who am subject to aging, illness, and death, seeking happiness in what is subject to aging, illness, and death? Surely that can't be the right way to find happiness. And so he left the palace to go in search of a solution to the problem that he saw was at the core of human existence—the problem of suffering. Why do we suffer? His quest was motivated by that question: Why do we suffer, and is it possible to find an end to that suffering?

The first teachers he encountered were teaching a very deep kind of concentration practice, a kind of concentration practice in which the body disappears and you're in very refined states of quiet and still mind. He got very skilled at those practices, and both of the first two teachers he met actually invited him to be a teacher in their communities. But his quest was motivated by this question of freedom from suffering. What he saw as he explored these practices was that he could be in very blissful states of non-suffering while doing the practices, but then when he stopped, the suffering was still right there. So it wasn't answering his question. The practices they were teaching weren't answering his question, and so he left those teachers and went on to search for other teachers, other practices.

He began doing some very severe ascetic practices, mortifying the body. There was a belief among some of the people practicing at the time that if you mortified the body enough, then the soul would become free

of the body, that it would essentially leave the body and be free. And so he practiced very deep ascetic practices, practices where he stopped his breathing. He said that when he stopped his breathing, he experienced deep, piercing, racking sensations throughout his body. He thought, well, let me try another way, and he kept experiencing these piercing, racking, painful sensations throughout his body. Then he decided to try not eating, thought that might be a better approach. He said he got down to one grain of rice a week. At that point, through that practice, his body got so weak—it's said that his skin became black, people were saying Gautama is dead, and he said when he touched his belly he could feel his backbone. That gives a very visceral sense of how much mortification he was undertaking with his body.

Again he found—I'll read this part to you because it's really quite a striking passage. He said: "Whatever recluses and brahmins in the past, in the present, in the future have or will experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to striving, this that I've experienced is the utmost. There's none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities, I've not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Might there be another way?"

So he had the experience through the life in the palace, the life of sense pleasure, and realized that's not the way. Then he had the exploration of the deep practices of letting go of the body and hanging out in bliss for hours or even—I understand that with those practices, Philip was saying you could hang out in these deep states of concentration for three days; my understanding is that you can hang out in those states for a week. He was doing that, hanging out in those states, and yet coming out of it, he realized this isn't the way either. The austerities weren't the way.

And so he had essentially exhausted the teachings and practices of his day.

Being so undernourished and weak from his ascetic practices, he decided he needed to nourish himself again. In this process, he had a memory of being a child, a boy, watching his father in the fields performing a plowing ceremony in the spring. The story goes that he was sitting under a rose apple tree. In that time, watching his father plow the fields, the breeze was cool, he was in the shade, very relaxed and at ease—and he spontaneously entered into a deep state of concentration. Not a state of concentration beyond the body, but a state of concentration *in* the body, one that included pleasure in the body.

Having that memory, the thought came to him: Is that the way? Is that the path? Is that the direction to go? And it occurred to him: yes, this is the direction to go.

I'll read this part of the reflection to you also. He thought, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?" And he thought, "I'm not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasure and unwholesome states."

And so he began nourishing his body again, getting back to a state of health, and then began exploring the practice in a new way, seeing if he could find his own way. The basis, as he saw it, was a state of concentration in the body, through the body, with pleasure in the body. Not pleasure of the senses—not

coming from having things, not coming from nice food and nice clothes and having palaces on the hillside—but rather a pleasure that connects body and mind. A pleasure of the mind that resonates through the body is the way I experience it. The pleasure of mind that ripples through the body and is very pleasurable in the body.

With this teaching, I first want to explore a little about this memory he had. What are some of the key components? He's sitting under this tree, relaxing, watching his father. It's a kind of state of grace. He didn't try to enter into that state of concentration—it happened almost spontaneously. It was a state of ease, of comfort, of relaxation that allowed the arising of that state. A different approach than the striving approach he'd been using with the austerities, and a different approach than transcending the body that he had done with the other deep states of concentration.

The other piece about the use of concentration as part of the path: he asks, "Is this the way?"—this state of concentration, is this the way? He doesn't ask, "Is this the goal?" His goal, his exploration, his quest was the ending of suffering. My understanding of this reflection—"Is this the way?"—is: Is this a tool that can be used in the service of liberation? And his answer was yes. This is a tool that can be used in the service of liberation. So it's okay to cultivate happiness, pleasure, comfort, joy, and delight through this exploration of concentration. It will support us in the service of liberation.

There's a beautiful teaching that describes the natural unfolding of the path. I think this resonates quite well with his entering spontaneously into that state of concentration, so I'll read some of this to you as well.

The Buddha speaking: "For a virtuous person, one whose behavior is virtuous, no volition need be exerted: 'Let non-regret arise in me.' It is natural that non-regret arises in a virtuous person, one whose behavior is virtuous."

This non-remorse, and the happiness that comes from non-remorse, is sometimes called the bliss of blamelessness.

"For one who is without regret, no volition need be exerted: 'Let joy arise in me.' It is natural that joy arises in one without regret."

Again, this bliss of blamelessness.

"For one who is joyful, no volition need be exerted: 'Let rapture arise in me.' It is natural that rapture arises in one who is joyful. For one with a rapturous mind, no volition need be exerted: 'Let my body be tranquil.' It is natural that the body of one with a rapturous mind is tranquil. For one tranquil in body, no volition need be exerted: 'Let me feel pleasure.' It is natural that one tranquil in body feels pleasure."

Again, this pleasure of mind that impacts the body, that resonates through the body.

"For one feeling pleasure, no volition need be exerted."

Let my mind be concentrated. It is natural that the mind of one feeling pleasure is concentrated.

Now, this term for pleasure here—the Pali term is *sukha*, often translated as happiness. What the Buddha is saying here is essentially that happiness is the natural or proximate cause for concentration. Happiness is the proximate cause for concentration. *Sukha*.

When I first experienced this *sukha* in a really deep way, it was amazing—like the best, sweetest experience. I like the word sweet. It reminds me of *sukha*. *Sukha* sounds kind of like sugar, you know. It was just so sweet, so tranquil and sweet, both.

As I came out of that state—because while I was in the state, I was simply in the state—but in coming out of it, the mind really went, "Wow, that was amazing." And it was like, "Oh yes, I want more of that." I gave it the name in my mind: the "oh yes" state. Because that was the sense of it.

So this happiness, this sweetness and tranquility, are the proximate cause for concentration. And as the Buddha points to—I'll just read one more of these:

For one who is concentrated, no volition need be exerted. Let me know and see things as they really are. It is natural that one who is concentrated knows and sees things as they really are.

This is moving towards insight, and this is the direction the Buddha was looking: how to know and see suffering as it really is, how to know and see the cause of suffering as it really is, and the freedom that comes from that. The concentration developed in this way leads naturally to this doorway of insight.

Now, it's my understanding that when the text says "it is natural that this state follows that one," the expression is one of becoming much easier to cultivate. There's a kind of natural inclining of the mind towards concentration in one who's happy. It doesn't mean you don't have to do any work. It doesn't mean you just sit there and it happens automatically. But it is like the supporting condition. The way I see it is that with the state of happiness, concentration begins to arise, and we can then begin to support that concentration with our mindfulness and wise effort—in an easeful way, not in a way of grasping or clinging or craving.

So the supporting conditions for concentration are tranquility and happiness. How can we, in exploring our breath, find our way to calm, comfortable, happy breath? That's really the exploration I'd like to make with you tonight.

In my own practice, I talked about setting up the container of the meditation. There's the container of the center, the container of our conduct together, and then the container within our hearts and minds that allows the concentration to unfold. For me, this really includes relaxed attention. I think probably for all of us it includes this relaxed attention.

There are three steps that I explore in creating this container for concentration to deepen naturally. There is the relaxation of body and mind. There's connecting to the breath, knowing the experience of breathing.

And there's an inclining or encouraging that experience of breathing to become comfortable.

What I'd like to explore with you now are some ways that I've approached these three steps. I invite you into your own experience as I continue the talk.

Setting up the container of this relaxed, connected, comfortable breath, there are a couple of different approaches. One has to do with using directed attention and conscious action, conscious choice.

Beginning with step one: consciously relaxing the body, consciously relaxing the mind. Using a body scan, for example, noticing areas where there may be tension, releasing, relaxing that tension. The relaxation of body begins to support a relaxation of mind, so as you explore that relaxation of body, you may also check in and see how it impacts your mental experience to relax the body. Particularly relaxing in areas that you may not necessarily consciously think of—sometimes areas we don't check into, like hips and buttocks. There can be tension held there.

Also inside the body—relaxing in the area of the throat, inside the throat, relaxing the heart, the organs inside the body, relaxing the stomach and the intestines. For me, as I relax inside the body, I feel a kind of softening in the mind as well.

And then, inclining perhaps to relaxing the mind, letting go of mental tension, thoughts of the past or future. As much as possible, just allowing the mind to relax.

From that place, that container of relaxed body and relaxed mind, notice that within that container of body there's breathing happening. It's already been happening. Breathing is one of those great experiences that we don't have to create—it happens. And we can begin to tune in to the breath.

Allow a connecting with the inner experience of the breath where it's clear to you, wherever it's most clear for you. There's no right place. Sometimes it can be helpful, especially early on, to have a sense of more of the body breathing, not necessarily narrowing it down. So wherever the breath, the sensations of breathing, are clear, allow the attention to connect and rest with those sensations. An inner experience of the breath. The felt sense of the breath. The breath from the inside.

Now, this is bringing a focusing quality into the mind. We are choosing an object out of the field of attention, out of the field of objects. We're choosing an object on which to connect with experience. And sometimes that choosing an object, that focusing, we can lose the relaxation a little bit. I've found a couple of ways for myself that have been particularly helpful in allowing relaxation with focusing. So play with this a little bit in your experience.

Wherever you're noticing the breath, wherever you're feeling the sensations of the breath, rather than having the sense of narrowing down the field of awareness to find the breath, see if you might be able to allow the experience of breathing to expand, to fill the awareness. So rather than having that notion of narrowing the attention, let the object, let the experience of breathing—even if it's a little centimeter of

place on your physical body—let that get really big. Let the experience of breathing get big.

Because I find often with focusing, we narrow and tighten the mind. But the focusing can be allowing the experience to get big. The relief, the sense of the object, becomes quite heightened. There's a kind of sense of really seeing the texture or the relief of that experience as it gets big. It's like using the zoom lens on your camera, being able to see something closer. So that's one approach—allowing the experience to get big.

Another approach I've found helpful in terms of focusing or connecting with the experience of breathing in a smaller area is this: sometimes, especially when the breathing gets really quiet and delicate, that narrowed attention almost obliterates the actual experience or sensations in the body. It's kind of hard to touch in. So sometimes I have a sense of, okay, there's this little area I'm paying attention to. Often for me it's right at the sternum, about the size of a quarter, where the sensations are felt. But rather than narrowing the attention down to that little space, it's like I look at a bigger space. I take in the whole of my torso, only the attention is kind of still settled in the middle. So it's like having the peripheral attention allow the subtlety of that delicate experience to come into perspective.

It's kind of like looking at a faint star in the night sky. Some of you may be familiar with this experience—or if not, you can check it out. At night, if you're looking up at the stars and there's a particularly dim star in the sky, sometimes if you look right at it you can't see it. If you look just off to the side, it pops right into view. So it's that kind of exploration—not looking directly at the area that you're exploring, but just off to the side. And sometimes, oh, there's the breath. There's the experience. Explore that in your experience.

Finding yourself relaxed, the attention connecting with the sensations of breathing, the next step is exploring comfort, ease, pleasant experience in the breath—inclining towards pleasant experience in the breath.

So again, we're right now exploring the kind of conscious action, conscious intent, conscious directed attention and conscious action way into this comfortable breathing. One of the ways to explore this is to actually adjust the breathing. Experiment with the breath, connected with the breathing. Does it feel more comfortable to have the breath be long and slow right now? Perhaps extending the breath, playing with that—a long in-breath and a long out-breath. Or play with shortening the in-breath or the out-breath. Perhaps a long in-breath—

and just allowing the out-breath to release.

So you can play with it, exploring what makes the breath feel more comfortable. It's okay in concentration practice to play with the breath, to alter the breath for comfort.

Typically in our mindfulness practice, we don't go this direction. With mindfulness practice, we're looking at meeting experience as it is—not altering experience for any reason or any purpose or any goal in mind.

With concentration, we are trying to cultivate the pleasure. Remember, the pleasure, the sukha, supports concentration.

One of my concentration teachers, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, gives an analogy. It's kind of a funny analogy, but I think his teacher gave it to him, his Thai teacher. The analogy was: if you want to catch an eel, eels are pretty slippery—eels that run around in the rivers in Thailand. If you want to catch an eel, it's kind of hard to just reach your hand in the river and grab an eel out. It's going to slip right out of your hand. But, he said, you give the eel something it likes, and it'll go right to it. You take a jar and put some raw meat in the jar, and then the eels will go right into the jar because they like raw meat. And then you'll have your eel. So you can catch a very slippery eel by giving it something it likes.

And he said, likewise, you can catch the slippery mind by giving the slippery mind something it likes. And the slippery mind likes pleasure. So if you can find a way towards comfort in the body with the breathing, the mind will more naturally incline there. It'll be happy to go there.

In exploring this in my own concentration practice, there was a time during one particular retreat—it didn't happen on every retreat—but on one particular retreat, exploring this comfortable breath, getting to the place where the mind naturally gravitated to this comfortable breath, it ended up feeling like I had this secret relationship with the breath. It was a secret lover. It really had that feeling of being that intimate and connected. A very lovely meeting of the mind and the breath.

What we do with a lover, I think with true love, is that we love that person for their own sake, not for what they give us necessarily. This is the true mettā. And this is another exploration with the breath: can we be with the breath for the sake of the breath, rather than for a goal or anything we think we're going to get from being with the breath? That notion of breath as lover supports that.

Another way into this container: we've been exploring the tools of conscious action, directed attention. Another way in is through using intention, which we have talked about quite a bit here—using intention, inclining the mind. And this inclining of the mind can happen at each step, each of these three stages.

So again, I invite you into your experience while we go through each of these steps from another perspective.

Allow yourself to find a posture that feels alert. And in terms of connecting with the relaxation of the body, rather than consciously doing it, consciously checking in and trying to relax the body, drop in the request: *May the body relax.* And see what happens. Not trying to do it.

With requests, as we've talked about—I'm just restating something we've said here, but the Buddha restated himself a lot. I think we can hear these things over and over again. We're not trying to do it. We're kind of just dropping a request into the mind and body and seeing: are the mind and body willing to do this right now?

So check that out for yourself right now. *May the body relax.* What happens in the body with that request? *May the body relax. May the mind relax.*

Sometimes that actually, for me, is easier. It's like I have no idea consciously what it means to relax the mind, but when I make that request, the mind knows how to relax itself. I couldn't tell you how to do it. Sometimes the mind and body know how to accomplish things

from places that we don't have conscious access to.

These requests are a way in to see: does the body and mind have some wisdom it can offer us? It won't always manifest, and you don't need to beat yourself up if it doesn't. It's just like making a request. Let's see. Let's see what happens. It's out of your control, in effect, whether it works or not. So just seeing what happens.

May the body relax. May the mind relax.

And then, rather than consciously choosing the breath, again a request: May the attention rest with the breathing. What happens if you make that request? Again, sometimes it allows a more easeful connection to the experience of breathing. If it doesn't work, you can go back to directing the attention consciously. But again, sometimes there's some wisdom in the body and mind of how to do this easefully that our conscious mind doesn't have access to.

May the attention rest with the breath. May the breathing become comfortable. Again, seeing if there's a way that the body and mind intuitively know the comfortable breath in this moment. May the breathing become comfortable, or may the breathing become easeful. May the breathing be pleasurable. Using language that resonates with you. It's important with these requests that you find language your mind is comfortable with—so exploring that piece as well.

Images can also be used in this connecting, allowing a connection more intuitively. An image I've used at times is the image of very gentle waves on the surface of water. The rising and falling of the breath being like the rising and falling of the waves. And the attention being like a float sitting on the surface of the water—neither not connected with the water floating above it, nor pushing down into it. It's just resting and very naturally riding the rhythm of the waves. You may find your own images that support you in connecting with the experience of breathing.

As we find our way to a relaxed, connected, comfortable breath, the practice of concentration begins to unfold very naturally. Essentially, concentration practice isn't about doing the concentration. It's about creating the conditions in which concentration can appear. We're watering the seeds, nourishing the soil, and allowing concentration to grow naturally. With a tree, we can't make the tree grow, but we can support the conditions by pulling the weeds, by nourishing the soil, by offering it moisture—and the tree will grow. Likewise with concentration, we nourish the conditions. And the main conditions are relaxed attention, how we connect with the breath in a relaxed way, and encouraging this sense of comfort with

the breath.

As we find our way to a comfortable breath, we also find that the mind begins to get really happy, delighted, easeful. The mind gets comfortable too. The mind and body are really intimately connected, and as the body and the attention connect with a comfortable breath, the mind naturally becomes very comfortable. Likewise, if the mind becomes comfortable, easeful, at ease with experience, the breathing also naturally gravitates to comfort as well.

This was a startling recognition I had on one retreat. In one set of practices that I do, it's very much an open awareness practice where I'm cultivating a comfortable mind, able to be with whatever's happening in the moment. The main practice there, in my insight practice, is cultivating a mind that is balanced and at ease with whatever's happening—a comfortable mind. And in my concentration practice, I was cultivating a comfortable breath. At one point on a concentration retreat, I began to see how these two interweave. With a comfortable breath, it's like the mind is automatically comfortable. And I could also approach it from the side of a comfortable mind, and the breath would become comfortable. Comfortable mind, comfortable breath; comfortable breath, comfortable mind.

So we can approach this practice of concentration, this practice of creating this container, not only from the side of creating comfort in the body, but also in exploring: how can the mind be comfortable? Minds can be very different in this respect, how they find their way towards that sense of ease with what's happening in the present moment. For myself, the easiest way to approach this is through that practice of open awareness.

And at some point in my concentration retreats, I began realizing that the most skillful way for me to move into concentration was to start from that comfortable mind. I had done enough open awareness practice to find it fairly easy to move into that place where experience is simply slipping through and there's an ease in the mind with that.

From that place of a comfortable mind, at some point there would be a breath in that experience. There's a breath, and that breath was comfortable. Then I began the process of inclining the mind towards the breath. The intention in the practice was towards gathering the mind on one experience, but for me it was helpful to start with a really broad container—let the mind be comfortable and then slowly try to find my way towards a comfortable breath.

It's as though my mind was able to be relaxed when I wasn't choosing a focus, but when I chose the focus, that was when tension began to creep in. So this exploration of comfortable mind led me to investigate: How can I choose an object and still have that comfortable mind? For me, this was a back-and-forth exploration, and a huge part of it was patience.

Very often I would start with a comfortable mind, pick up on a breath, a second breath, a third breath, and by the third breath the attention was all tight again. Rather than having the agenda of "I have to stay with

the breath," I was working with the comfortable mind. I would let go, go back to the place where the mind was comfortable, and try again. This going back and forth would take some time to find the way. The mind educated itself on how to be comfortable and be focused.

This exploration of how to be focused and relaxed is one we all have to make for ourselves. It may be really natural for some. I had one friend—she died a few years ago—for whom deep concentration was the most natural thing. She could put her attention on something and just rest very deeply, very relaxed. For her, the practice was being able to open up into meeting a changing flow of experience. Minds are really different along these lines, but we all need to find our way towards this ability to focus and be relaxed. For some it may be easy; for some it may take more patience.

For me, having the aspiration towards a comfortable mind—a mind with an attitude of curiosity, of interest, of kindness, of happiness, of comfort—that was how I was navigating through my experience. If I found the mind beginning to contract, I went back to where the mind could be comfortable.

You can explore this from either direction. You can explore it from comfortable mind or from comfortable breath. Both ways have worked for me. I find them useful at different times. Sometimes the mind is more willing to choose an object and hang out with that object than other times. Having a wide variety of tools at our disposal and having the discernment to know which ones are helpful at a particular time is really valuable.

As we find ourselves in this container where there is a sense of relaxed focus, we need to track that we stay in that container. Too much effort and we agitate ourselves out of the container. Too little effort and we kind of slop out of the container. It's easy to slip back into old habits of paying attention, and so that is something to keep track of—in a gentle way, in a light way. For me, it was keeping track of this ease in the body and mind, letting that be the guide for the concentration practice. Whether starting from ease of mind or starting from ease of body, that was the guide. If it got tight in the body, I wouldn't try to force the mind to stay with the breath. It's more important to find our way to that relaxed focus than it is to actually be with the breath.

We can be with the breath through an act of will, and it creates a very brittle kind of concentration. It's not very stable; it's easily broken. The concentration that comes from this relaxed meeting—that hand-on-hand quality Philip was describing—is much more stable. It's like you've got a really broad base. The concentration of will, an act of will, feels like a very narrow post, very easy to topple over.

Another way we sometimes slip out of the container happens as the practice deepens. We may find that we've been able to be present with the breath with a lot of ease and relaxation.

So really kind of easily able to stay with the breath for stretches of time, minutes or even hours. I had one time at a retreat at IMS where pretty much every time I sat down, it was really easy to be with the breath. And then one morning I sat down and the mind was all over the place. I was like, what happened to the

concentration?

At that point I'd had enough experience to be curious about the wandering mind rather than judging about it. So I was like, well, when is the mind wandering? What's happening here? What's going on in the mind that it can't stay with the breath? I would start, I'd be like, yep, there's a breath, and then—poof—the mind would be gone, off into thought. And a few seconds later I'd be like, whoa, wait a minute. What happened? It just felt like the mind was slipping out all over the place.

What I noticed when I looked back at the breath was that within the space of a breath, the breath was getting so subtle that I couldn't experience the sensations anymore. That's when the mind was wandering.

My understanding of this is that as we practice, as we attend to the experience of breathing in this relaxed way, it naturally happens—and some of you have talked about this—that the experience of body falls away, the experience of breathing gets more subtle. Sometimes the breathing gets really short, just like a little wisp. And that's kind of counterintuitive when you first start to do concentration practice. We intuitively think, you know, relaxed, settled breath is a really long, deep, slow breath. But that's not what happens when the mind settles down. The breath can get really short. Almost non-existent. Very long gaps between in-breath and out-breath, between out-breath and in-breath. Very subtle.

The experience of breathing can get very subtle. And what happens at times is that we've been paying attention to our breath—this is the breath, this hand here, and this is the mind paying attention to the breath—and it's been happily meeting the experience of breathing for a while, knowing what to look for, hanging out there. And then at some point, the experience of breathing gets more subtle, more quiet. The breathing settles down. And our mindfulness, our agenda—we have a kind of agenda of mindfulness—is still looking for the sensations of breath up here. It's not seeing that the experience of breath has gotten quieter. And so the mind doesn't have anything to connect to. It can wander off. It can wander into thought. It can wander into spacing out. It can go into a kind of zoned-out place.

Part of the way that the practice of concentration, mindfulness of breathing works—and it's a beautiful practice this way—is that as the mind settles, the sensations of breathing get more subtle, which means that the mindfulness that connects to those sensations also has to get more refined. So the settling of the breath draws in and refines the ability of the mind to meet it.

I say this because that falling out of the container can sometimes happen when we've been able to connect in that container for quite a while and suddenly we see, wow, it seems like nothing's going very well. Suddenly our mind is wandering all over the place. And we may think we need to double down, make more effort, try harder. Actually, what we may need to do is relax the attention more. Because as the breathing gets more subtle, again it's that narrowing and pushing in that obliterates the experience. Relaxing and settling back, the experience of breathing can pop into view.

So sometimes paradoxically, as the sensations get more subtle, backing off and not trying as hard to find

them—there they will be. In being in that container and seeing the mind wandering, don't necessarily assume anything has gone wrong. It actually may be that the breathing is settling, the practice is deepening through the breathing settling and becoming more subtle. And it's just a matter of finding a way to have the mind meet that more subtle experience.

At one point I was reporting to my teacher in Burma, "The breath is too subtle, I can't meet it." He said, "What? Just notice that it's subtle." I was like, oh, that's a thought. And so I just began using a kind of note: subtle breath is happening.

And I could stay right with it.

So patience as we go through this journey. We're not creating the concentration—we're supporting the conditions. We all have our own way through this journey. Patience, allowing, accepting where we are, accepting how that journey is for us. And being with the breath for the sake of the breath.

Thank you for your attention.

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