The Skill of Meditation

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:24

I'd like to start tonight by telling a story from the time of the Buddha. The story is about a very young monk, a very young boy. He was seven years old, and at that age he asked his mother if he could ordain.

His mother, having had the sense from the time he was gestated in her womb that he was a very special child, agreed. As she said, as soon as he was in her womb, all of the dull and stupid and careless servants became wise. And so she thought, this child is so wise. She made the resolve that she would never stand in the way of whatever her son wanted. So when he was seven and he asked to ordain, she agreed.

She took him off to the monastery, and her family had been a supporter of Sariputta, the very senior right-hand disciple of the Buddha. They spent seven days there with him. You can kind of imagine parents leaving their seven-year-old child with the monastics—they might want to spend a few days there. So they spent a week offering food and probably saying goodbye to their son.

On the eighth day, Sariputta was going to take him out for alms round. But the boy had never gone out for alms round in the first seven days, and so they lagged behind a bit. Sariputta didn't necessarily want this young monk to be with all the other monks because he didn't quite have the right manner of carrying the bowl or wearing the robes. So Sariputta wanted to give him some extra instruction, and they lagged behind a little.

As they were walking to the village for the alms round, the young boy was curious about what was around him. I guess he'd come from a more remote village or something, and he was seeing things he'd never seen before. So he was asking Sariputta about them.

They saw a ditch of water by the side of the road. He asked Sariputta, "What's that?" Sariputta said, "It's a ditch that the irrigators use to guide water to their crops." The boy said, "Does water have a mind?" Sariputta said, "No, water doesn't have a mind." Then the boy said, "So they can lead such a thing as water wherever they want it to, even though it doesn't have a mind?" Sariputta said, "Yes."

And the boy—I'll read this part to you, apparently this is what he thought to himself—reflected: "If they can lead such a thing as this, which lacks mind, to whatever place they wish, why cannot they also bring their own mind under their own control and cause it to be enlightened?" This is a seven-year-old we're talking about here, so obviously a very bright seven-year-old.

They walked a little further on and saw arrow makers. Again, he asked what they were and what they were doing. Sariputta told him that they were straightening out reeds to make arrows, putting them over a hot flame to straighten out the reeds and make them useful as arrows. Again, the same question: "Do those

reeds have a mind?" And the same reflection: "If they can straighten out those things that do not have mind, why cannot they not straighten out their mind?"

Further on they saw carpenters building wheels and shaping wood. Again the same questions, the same response, the same reflection.

Now, monks walk along one behind each other, the senior monks in front and the junior monk behind. This novice monk was carrying Sariputta's alms bowl with him—that was the form at the time. After seeing and reflecting on all these things, he stopped. This young boy stopped and said, "Venerable sir, would you take your alms bowl back and let me go back to the monastery? I'd like to meditate."

He was inspired by seeing these things to straighten out his own mind, to see whether he could lead that which does have mind to where he wanted it to go.

And Sariputta, to his credit, didn't chastise this upstart young novice for giving him his bowl back—and in fact requesting that he go for alms round for him. "Oh, by the way, would you get my alms food too? I'm going to go meditate." This little seven-year-old boy.

And Shariputra agreed, so the boy went back to the monastery. And the story is, as these good stories go, that this seven-year-old boy became completely, fully enlightened before his noon meal.

I like this story for a couple of reasons. One, it's inspiring to think of the possibility that a child that young actually has the capacity to become enlightened. At one of the last retreats I taught, I was teaching with Gil Fronsdal, and I told this story. We had a little conversation about it afterwards, and he said that he hadn't heard this story before, but that it is said seven is the youngest it is supposed to be possible to become awakened. Seems pretty young to me, but I think it's interesting that it has been recorded as a story from the time of the Buddha—that monks that young actually became fully enlightened.

But the more practical reason I find this story inspiring is because of the verse it points to. After the Buddha came back to the monastery and heard this story, and determined that this young monk had become fully enlightened, he said: "Irrigators guide water, fletchers shape arrows, carpenters fashion wood, and sages tame themselves."

This is a verse from the Dhammapada, and the story I told you comes from the Dhammapada commentary. Most of the verses in the Dhammapada have a kind of back story that goes with them—what happened that inspired the Buddha to utter these verses. So that is the origin of this story.

The other reason I find this story inspiring is that it points to how taming our minds is like a skill. It compares the guiding of water by irrigators, the shaping of arrow shafts by fletchers, and the fashioning of wood by carpenters to what people who sit down and meditate do with their minds. The actions that carpenters, arrow makers, and irrigators use are skills, and we can cultivate the skills of meditation in the same way.

There's a term in Pali that's often translated as "skillful" or "wholesome." The term is *kusala*. Apparently this term, as it's usually referred to in the Buddhist texts, refers to those actions and intentions that are wholesome and helpful—that guide us away from suffering and towards freedom from suffering. Skillful actions are those based in non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion; those based in generosity, kindness, non-cruelty, and renunciation.

But the term itself, *kusala*, was also apparently used for people like carpenters and irrigators. If they were good at what they did, they were called *kusala*—skillful. So this term in the texts has a double meaning: a skill, something that can be cultivated, and this direction towards the wholesome.

I'd like to talk about the skill of meditation tonight—how we cultivate that skill. The skill of meditation is about learning how to wake up, learning how to guide our minds so that they don't, out of habitual tendencies, move us into our patterns and habits of suffering over and over again. When we're not mindful, as I said the other day, our habits and patterns kind of take over. With mindfulness, with the practice of meditation, we can begin to guide our minds in the way we'd like them to go.

In this way, it's a very apt analogy to the irrigators guiding water. When irrigators guide water, they're directing it to places where it's useful—to water the crops and support them to grow. In a similar way, we guide our minds in the direction that supports them to become happy, to let go of all those actions and intentions that drag us into struggle, dissatisfaction, despair, depression, anger, frustration, boredom, and all those difficult states of mind.

So in a sense, what we are cultivating in the skill of meditation is the skill of learning skillfulness—the skill of learning what is helpful for us and what is not so helpful.

There's a list of five qualities called the five faculties. These five qualities can be understood as the qualities that need to become strengthened in order for this skill to become strong for us. The five qualities are confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

We can actually look at these five qualities as being almost general qualities that would need to be cultivated for any skill. Depending on what we're doing, the way these five qualities manifest would be slightly different. In order to accomplish anything, we need to have some sense of confidence that it's possible to accomplish it. Whether it's playing the piano or playing basketball or whatever we'd like to become skillful at, we need a sense of confidence that it's possible. And from that confidence, we may get some energy to begin to practice, to begin to engage.

The practice, the engagement, involves paying attention to what we're doing—beginning to be aware of what we're doing so that we can grow the actions and movements needed for that particular skill. With playing the piano, you start by seeing the page of notes, matching the notes to the keys, maybe figuring out how the chords go. It's all pretty slow at the beginning. But it's with that awareness of what you're doing that the skill begins to grow. That's the mindfulness part—the awareness of what we're doing, how we're

engaging with this task.

And then there is the practice, the continuity, the repetition of that task—the repetition needing to be done over and over again in order for the skill to become strong. If you sit down to the piano once a week, you're probably not going to get very skillful at it very quickly. You need to sit down and really practice it, do those actions over and over again. This is the aspect of concentration: engaging in the actions, repeating them for a period of time. And from all of this engagement, the skill develops. The capacity to do this with ease develops. We understand how to engage with this task. And that's the understanding part, the wisdom part.

So with respect to meditation, the confidence is in the capacity to engage with the practice, and that helps support an energy to engage. And what do we engage with? We engage with mindfulness and paying attention to our present moment experience. Doing that continuously over periods of time, that continuity of mindfulness, brings concentration. And all of that together helps us to understand our experience, our inner life, helps us to more deeply understand things as they are.

The usual flow of these five faculties starts with confidence or faith as the first one in order to progress through them. That's where it typically starts, that list. But in my thinking about it, it feels to me that it makes sense to actually start with wisdom. We can think of these as a cyclic pattern. We need some kind of wisdom of what we're doing, what we are trying to engage with, in order to begin to engage—some understanding of what it is that we want to do. We don't just start by having faith in nothing; we have faith in something. And that something, in the teachings of the Buddha, is wisdom.

So I'd like to start there, to start by talking a little bit about what it is that we need to understand to begin, to begin to have confidence, to begin to engage.

There's a teaching about wisdom that there are three different sorts of wisdom, or three different ways that wisdom comes about. There's the wisdom that comes about from reading and listening to information—the wisdom that we gain by reading books, listening to dharma talks. Then there's the wisdom that comes about by reflecting on what we've learned, actually engaging our intellectual capacities, thinking about it, reflecting on how it might impact us, how it might relate to our lives. And then the third kind of wisdom comes about through cultivating our minds, through actually taking action to engage with the practices and teachings.

The first two—reading and listening and reflection—are essential underpinnings for the third. Without those first two, without learning a little bit about what the meditation practice is about, what the Buddha's path is about, we don't have anywhere to practice. So we start with some kind of understanding. And the engagement with those practices results in the wisdom of the third kind, which is the wisdom of insight. I'll come back to that after we've gone all the way through all of these faculties again, to show how this comes about to support insight.

So what is it that we need to understand? What is the wisdom that the Buddha offers us? It's phrased in a number of different ways, and it's not necessary, as I said a couple of days ago, to understand all of this. The first way that this wisdom is expressed is as the Four Noble Truths. It's the key core teaching of the Buddha. He said, this is really the central teaching: I teach suffering and the end of suffering. And the Four Noble Truths expresses that.

It expresses that there is suffering in the world, that there's suffering in our lives. And that the cause of that suffering is a mental experience—it's a wanting. It's essentially wanting things to be other than they are. We cannot, we seem to be, it's very difficult for us to just rest with experience as it is. We want it to be some other way. And that's what leads us into this suffering. Those are the first and second noble truths.

The third noble truth is that it's possible to let go of that wanting and that craving for things to be other than they are. That freedom is possible.

It can be realized. The fourth noble truth is that there is a path, a way that we can engage to free ourselves from this craving, this wanting—the Eightfold Path. That's one of the ways this wisdom is expressed.

Another way it's expressed comes back to this term *kusala*. When we understand what is skillful with respect to leading us towards happiness and away from suffering—when we understand in particular the underlying intentions and motivations that lead us towards suffering and lead us away from it—that is wisdom that will help to free our hearts. The wisdom of understanding that actions taken out of greed, aversion, and delusion will ultimately lead us into stress, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, suffering. And actions taken out of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—or to put that more positively, generosity, kindness, and wisdom—actions taken out of those motivations tend to lead us towards happiness, towards letting go, towards freedom.

Another way this understanding is expressed, another aspect of the wisdom that supports our waking up, is the teaching on karma, which is essentially a teaching on cause and effect. When we take certain actions—and it's kind of an expansion of the understanding of what's skillful and unskillful—this is the understanding that skillful actions lead us to happiness, unskillful actions lead us to suffering. That's a two-minute summary of the teaching of karma. I'm not going to go into more detail than that because it can get really, really vast.

Another way this wisdom is expressed is through our understanding of experience itself. We understand the nature of experience to be impermanent. We understand the nature of experience to be basically unsatisfactory, unreliable as a place for us to be happy. If we try to hold on to something that's impermanent as a kind of foundation—thinking "this is what's going to make me happy, this thing will make me happy forever"—that thing is unreliable. It will not make you happy forever because it is impermanent, inherently impermanent. In its dissolution, in its falling away, any happiness that was dependent on that will also fall away.

And then there is the truth of the process nature, or ephemerality—that there's no thingness to anything. Because everything is changing at such a rate that it never really holds still to be a thing. It's always in some process of change. We impute a thingness for a time, but things don't inherently have that thingness.

So there's a potency to this wisdom. As I think I said a couple of days ago, we don't need to understand all of these kinds of wisdom before we start to engage. All we need is a little bit. I kind of like to think of the wisdom of the Buddha being this really rich meal. You can just take a tiny little taste of this meal and get the whole explosion of flavors in your mouth just through that tiny little bite. Any little bit of wisdom that you can connect to and begin to engage with will open the door to the whole of the Dharma over time.

So we can begin with a little bit of understanding. Just a little bit, perhaps. The First Noble Truth is an interesting place to begin. There is suffering. And the Buddha, in the statement of that first noble truth, didn't stop and just say, "Yes, this is something you need to believe." No. He said this is something to be engaged with. Suffering is meant to be understood. That's what we're supposed to do with suffering—we're supposed to understand it. There's an action associated with that truth. With all four of the noble truths, actually, there's an action associated with each truth.

So if we just start with that one truth—understand suffering—and we understand what the Buddha means by "understand" is not an intellectual understanding but an experiential understanding, it's pointing us to turn to our experience, to turn to look at suffering, to understand how it comes to be, the causes and conditions that put it into play, what helps it to fall apart.

With a little bit of understanding, a little bit of intellectual understanding in these aspects of wisdom, we may begin to want to engage, to actually be at least interested in the thought, "Maybe this could help me out." This is the beginning of confidence. Confidence that we can engage, and confidence that it would actually be helpful for us.

Initially it might be a little bit of a leap of faith. Sometimes some of this wisdom that the Buddha offers sounds counterintuitive. I know that when I first heard this about understanding suffering, I thought, "Well, why would I want to understand it? Don't I just want to get rid of it? What's this about understanding it?" But I began to see in my own practice that my willingness to engage, to at least kind of give it a try, came when there was a lot of suffering. I was in a place of despair, in a way.

And I felt like I'd tried just about everything. I had kind of hit bottom. I thought, well, I've tried everything that I know of to be happy and I am just so miserable. That very hitting bottom actually made me more open to something that sounded counterintuitive. Okay, it says pay attention to your emotions and don't act on them. Well, I'll give that a try. Doesn't make a lot of sense to me, but I'll see what happens.

So that's the beginning of confidence. I didn't believe it initially. The term "confidence" is often translated as "faith," and to me, confidence is a more resonant term at times, because faith means believing something that I may not understand. For me, it wasn't about believing. It was more of a willingness to try.

It was a willingness to say, okay, I don't understand how this is going to work, but I'm at least willing to engage. I'm at least willing to try.

This actually has been a way that I've worked with confidence over and over again in my practice. The Buddha didn't actually say you need to believe this. He said, "Come and see. Try it out." There's a term used for the Dhamma, a quality of the Dhamma: *ehipassiko*. This term means "come and see." Come and see for yourself how this works. You don't need to believe it, but try it.

I'm kind of scientifically inclined, and so I just looked at it as, well, okay, the Buddha said if you do it this way, this will be the result, so I'll at least run the experiment. I'm willing to see what happens if I pay attention to these emotions, just turn towards the feeling of the emotion instead of doing something about it, acting on it.

By running the experiment—and as I said, this dharma is so rich that any little piece of it can really bear fruit—as we begin to engage with it, often we begin to see the benefits, we begin to see the results. And that seeing the benefits begins to verify that little bit of wisdom. It's kind of like, I'm beginning to see that this is helpful. I see that this is changing my relationship to this experience.

There's a second quality that the Dhamma is described as having. The Pali is *opanayiko*, which means "leading onwards." To me this is what it is: we get a little taste of the Dharma, we apply it, we engage with it, and it benefits us. Because of that benefit, we go, oh, this is helpful, let me try it more, let me engage more. So it's got this onward leading quality.

As confidence builds, we tend to engage. We have energy to put into the practice. This is the second of the five faculties: the quality of energy. In the context of playing a piano, the energy is around practicing the piano. Here it's around engaging with whichever bit of wisdom you found supportive for you, like understanding suffering. The energy is directed to the practice. It's not simply energy directed to mindfulness, although that's a big part of it. But it's got this foundation of wisdom underneath it, pointing us in the direction we want to be going.

We're not simply guiding water randomly through any which way; we're guiding water to the crops, guiding water to the seeds that need to be moistened. Likewise, we need to have some wisdom about what direction to guide our energy. And that is the wisdom we spoke about earlier.

Energy can be cultivated by making effort. Often the terms energy and effort are used interchangeably. But there's a slight difference between them, and I'd like to clarify that a little bit. One passage in the Samyutta Nikaya says that the faculty of energy we're talking about here is that quality of mind that results from making wise effort. So effort leads to energy. Now that sounds perhaps a little counterintuitive.

that we need energy in order to make effort. And we do need some amount of energy in order to make effort. We're sitting here, we're alive, we've got enough energy in our bodies to be sitting upright here in

the room. That's about all the energy we need to make this effort. So it doesn't take a lot of energy, actually, to make the effort. And that effort then, in turn, generates energy directed to the practice.

So I want to talk a little bit about this effort, because effort is so often misunderstood. Greg talked about this some last night too, and I think it bears repeating, because it is so often—I think it's cultural—that we really believe in this culture that the way to get things done is to really dive in there and engage and do it. "I'm just going to do it." We bring a lot of energy, a lot of effort to our activities. And that kind of effort—the kind of effort that Greg talked about—you know, sitting down, the first thing in the sitting, "Okay, I'm going to be mindful. I'm going to be mindful for the entire thirty minutes." How do I do that in this first minute? How do I generate enough effort to be mindful for the whole thirty minutes? It doesn't work, as you know. It doesn't work. But that's kind of how we think. It's like going to a gym. "I've got to lift these heavy weights." Then we tear a muscle.

So the kind of effort that we need to make is really light. It is just enough effort to be present for a moment. Right now, pay attention to the sensations of your hands. Notice the sensations of your buttocks on the cushion or chair or bench. Notice the sensation of your feet. How hard is it when I say these things? Often, almost instantly, you can kind of touch into that experience. That's the level of effort we need to make. We just have to do it over and over and over again. Light effort. Many, many times.

So this is a different way of making effort. A simple persistence. It's a very light touch to staying with our experience.

There's an analogy I like. It's kind of like we need to learn how to balance how much effort to apply—or rather, how frequently to apply the effort. It's not so much how strongly to effort; the strength of the effort has to do with the frequency of reminding yourself to be aware. And as the energy gets rolling, we don't need to remind ourselves as frequently. We can kind of ride the wave of the energy that's there.

There's an analogy I think helps to illustrate this. You know those scooters that little kids ride on? When you start out on a scooter, you hold onto the little handlebar at the front and stand with one foot on the rail of the scooter, and then you tap the other foot on the ground to get going. When you start, you have to tap your foot on the ground pretty frequently because you're starting from a standstill. But as you get going, you need to tap less frequently.

It's kind of like that with our meditation practice. At the beginning of a sitting, at the beginning of a retreat, early on, we need to tap frequently. We need to remind ourselves to be mindful more frequently. But then as the energy gets rolling, we need to have a kind of ability to read that energy. Because it's easy for us to over-effort. We think we need to be reminding ourselves, "Be aware, be aware, be aware." But if we're already aware, Joseph Goldstein once said, it's kind of like trying to turn on a light switch that's already on. The energy is already there.

So we're learning to ride that energy, to recognize when we need to tap again. You know, like on a

scooter—you ride for a while, and when you start to wobble a little bit, you need to tap again. That gets you going for a bit longer. Then you notice you start to wobble again, and you tap again.

We can get attuned to the energy in our minds this way. We can start to see: "Yep, I'm pretty present here. I can pretty much hang out with that." But we also notice that maybe we need just a little gentle reminder. And that reminder can take the form of a note. The noting practice is a really helpful way to use this—every few seconds, just a little note kind of nudges the mind. It's like that little tap on the screwdriver.

This learning to read our energy is trial and error. We'll continually be falling off on one side or the other, applying too much energy or not enough. Applying too much energy will get us wound up, make us too tight. And that kind of effort tends to drain energy—that kind where you sit down and think, "Okay, I'm going to be mindful for the whole sitting." That tends to drain our energy. But this light touch doesn't take much energy to make. And the accumulation of that builds.

Then we can fall off on the other side, where we get a little bit lax. It's so pleasant to just sit here riding that wave of energy that we forget to remind ourselves, and we drift off into wherever we go. So we need to learn through trial and error how to read our energy, how to remind ourselves, how to find the balance around energy.

A lot of what we are directing that energy toward is being aware, being mindful. The term for mindfulness is *sati* in Pali, and the root of that term comes from the word for memory. So we can think of mindfulness as having a component of remembering to it—remembering to be aware, remembering awareness in the present moment. That's one way to look at mindfulness. Another working definition is knowing what's happening while it's happening.

This isn't just the general awareness that we roll through our lives with. We can be wandering around doing things, kind of knowing where we are but not really present. If somebody asks us, "What have you been doing?" we'll remember, we'll know. But that's not true mindfulness. Mindfulness is when we really know in the present moment what's happening in the present moment.

The mindfulness task of this practice is exploring our inner world. It's about exploring what's happening in our minds and bodies—not so much about exploring what's happening out there, but rather the interface between the world and our bodies. How seeing happens, how hearing happens, how our minds work, how our minds process information. Mindfulness reveals to us how our minds work through this inner exploration.

And it gives us a couple of different pieces, different things we learn about how our minds work. One of the things we learn is about what suffering actually is, especially from the perspective of the Four Noble Truths—this perspective of understanding suffering. We start to see what suffering is in our experience.

For instance, the feeling of frustration. There's that feeling in our bodies. And typically, before we run into

this practice—at least I know before I ran into this practice—I took that feeling to be a signal that I needed to do something to the world. Something needed to be fixed or changed, or somebody else needed to change the way they were doing something. So that's the usual movement: we try to get rid of that feeling of frustration by changing something in the world, changing the way other people behave. We think that's the way we'll be happy.

And in fact, we do become happy that way, by doing things to change our world. We find there's a little bit of happiness that results. It lasts a little while, and then we have to rearrange our world again. And we have to do that over and over and over again, because nothing lasts very long.

And so the Buddha suggested—the Buddha's wisdom suggested—that a more reliable way to become happy is to let go of the frustration itself.

The frustration itself is the suffering, not the situation we don't like. It's the frustration itself, or the anger, or the depression, or the fear—whatever your pattern is, whatever your struggle is. So the wisdom of the Buddha suggests we should turn toward that field. Observe it, get to know it. Get to see how it comes to be.

This is another piece of what mindfulness begins to show us. Mindfulness begins to show us cause and effect. When I behave this way, when I engage this way, this is the result. So we start to get some insight, again, into this distinction between skillful and unskillful. When I engage out of wanting something, I see that the wanting itself is challenging and unpleasant. When I get the thing I want, I get a brief moment of feeling okay, but then there's fear immediately—am I going to lose that thing? Or there's sadness or depression or loss when it actually goes away. So we start to see, we start to gain insight, that behaving and acting out of wanting is ultimately not terribly satisfying.

We see a thought in our mind, and we see a tendency to follow that thought and create some mood or emotion. I saw this on one retreat, and I was quite shocked when I saw it. I had a pretty strong pattern of loneliness. I would just move into loneliness a lot. At one point I was sitting at lunch, eating, and I was fine. I saw this memory arise in my mind about being with an old friend and doing something we really enjoyed doing together. And I saw my mind reaching out to that memory with the intention to become lonely. I was shocked. Why would I want to become lonely? But there it was. It was so clear that there was this response: "Oh yes, loneliness—let me wallow in that. I know that feeling. Yes, I know loneliness. That's me." It's kind of cozy because I'm so familiar with it.

So we actually sometimes want to put ourselves into these states. And with mindfulness, we can see this. This is the way mindfulness works a lot. We get an education into the suffering of these states by being with them. Spending time with loneliness: "This doesn't feel very good. This is how loneliness feels. There's heaviness, there's contraction, there's a feeling of weight. It's not a good feeling." And then when the mind sees that it's wanting loneliness, it remembers, "Oh yes, loneliness doesn't feel very good. Maybe I shouldn't go there." And it can let it go.

I've seen this happen in my practice so many times. It's quite amazing that through this education we get about suffering, when the mind starts to move in that direction, it understands. It's had that education. It recognizes, "I don't need to go there." And it's not something we necessarily have to do. We don't necessarily have to try to stop it. We just have to give the mind this education through mindfulness. So we see these causes and conditions that lead us into suffering.

As we stay more present, as we cultivate this mindfulness and stay more present with our experience moment to moment, this begins to cultivate concentration. The continuity of mindfulness itself is what results in concentration.

There are other terms for concentration that I like. Concentration often tends to have a kind of narrowing, focusing sense. The word itself gives us that narrowed sense. But there are other words I prefer: stability, composure, collectedness, settledness. All of these describe the state of mind that is concentrated. Essentially, it's the state of mind where awareness stays present over time. And there are two different ways to cultivate this continuity of awareness.

There are essentially two main approaches, two different camps of practice for cultivating this quality. One is the approach we're all pretty familiar with: one-pointed concentration, staying with a single object. This is a really effective way to cultivate concentration. It's an accessible method because the mind can stabilize readily, and it's easy to recognize when we're on the breath or off the breath. So it's relatively straightforward to learn to collect the mind this way. We stabilize our awareness with the breath and watch the mind start to settle down. It's not running off into thoughts all over the place, and we notice that we're not getting pulled out of the present moment or reacting to things. That state feels pretty good. This is the classic way to cultivate concentration.

Another way to cultivate concentration—and in fact the reason why one-pointed concentration works—is that it stabilizes awareness. It's not the object that's so important; it's the stabilization of awareness itself. You could pick anything: an idea of a color, a word, the breath. You can stabilize your mind on just about anything, and it doesn't particularly matter. It's the awareness, the continuity of awareness, that brings the concentration.

We can also cultivate this continuity of awareness on changing objects, on changing experience. This is a different approach to concentration, where we enter into the flow of our experience, recognizing the changing current or the river of experience, the river of sensation of our being. This kind of concentration is a little harder to begin with because it's so easy to fool ourselves that we're actually aware and present when we're really thinking about something. It takes some ability to know what it means to be aware and present before we can begin cultivating this kind of mindfulness. So often teachings start with settledness on one object and then open into this broader field of changing experience. It's in this opening into change where mindfulness and concentration can lead us into the deepening of wisdom.

So we're back to wisdom again. The mindfulness, the concentration, being with experience moment to

moment begins to point out, to show us, the truths of all experience. We really deeply see—experientially, not intellectually—we start to truly recognize impermanence.

I talked the other day about watching wanting, seeing if you can just hang out and observe it. Watching it get strong, feeling it pull on you, and then potentially seeing it disappear. If you can actually watch that wanting, pick something really minor, like wanting a piece of chocolate. Feel the pull, feel that desire to go pick one up, and see if you can watch it until it goes away. When that wanting disappears, you will see that nothing has changed in the environment. It is only in your own mind that anything has changed, and you are free from the feeling that something is off, that something is wrong because you don't have this thing you want. It's the wanting itself that's the source of the suffering.

This is insight—when we experientially recognize and understand this by seeing it directly in the moment. Seeing that wanting disappear is something you never forget. If you see it vanish in the moment, it's quite remarkable.

This is the third kind of wisdom: the wisdom of insight, the wisdom that results from mental cultivation. You understand deeply in your being the truth of impermanence, the truth of suffering. It doesn't come by thinking about it.

And so we've come full circle to the cyclic nature of these five faculties. Wisdom supports faith or confidence—that basic understanding of wisdom supporting confidence. Confidence then supports energy, the energy to engage, which supports being here, connecting with experience through mindfulness. Energy and mindfulness together bring mindfulness more continuously through moment after moment, which brings on concentration. Mindfulness and concentration together give us penetrating insight so that we can see the truths of impermanence, the truths of the unreliability of experience, of anything, as a place where we might think, "Yes, this is what's going to make me happy."

We see the relief of letting go of wanting things to be other than they are, deeply in our being. We see that we're much happier when we let go than when we're trying to hold on. And we see this truth: that there isn't actually anything to hold on to, or anyone to hold on to it. It's just a process of change, just a process of causes and conditions.

And with this wisdom, this insight, we get yet more inspiration to continue the practice. At least that's how it's worked for me. Seeing something, a simple understanding of how the mind moves toward wanting to become angry or wanting to become lonely, and watching it let go of that movement—it's like, wow, this stuff is powerful. I'm going to keep doing this. This is really helping me out. I see that I'm not becoming angry when I used to become angry.

We see the benefits. We directly experience the benefits, and so it encourages us to have more confidence in the practice. And so the cycle begins again.

These qualities of the five faculties, when they become strong and balanced, support our deepening into

understanding and insight, and they yet then encourage us to keep going. Keep going until we become completely free.

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