Factors that Hinder and Support Concentration

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 57:25

I always like the second full day of retreat on the teaching side because I've had an opportunity to talk to you, to hear what's happening, and it really feels like the retreat begins to collect at this time. It was lovely hearing your experiences today and beginning to get a sense of what's happening. Sometimes as a teacher we're sitting up here speaking and not so sure what's actually going on. We can see you sitting out there and it can look so peaceful, but we know from the inside, from our own experience, it's not always that way on the inside. So it's really delightful to get to talk to you.

Tonight I'd like to talk about factors of mind that both get in the way of concentration and that support concentration. This is a lot of what people were talking about today, so it does feel like a fairly timely topic to be exploring with you tonight.

The practice of concentration is very much an expression of right effort—the classic understanding of right effort in the Eightfold Path, where we cultivate and maintain wholesome states of mind and we abandon and avoid unwholesome states of mind. This is what we're exploring as we sit down and explore being with the breath. We notice what gets in the way of that, what unwholesome qualities of the mind get in the way of that, and learn how to navigate that by cultivating and supporting the wholesome qualities. Exploring both sides of this supports our navigation of this terrain.

The Buddha was a great map maker, a list maker, and he did provide us with a list of things that tend to get in the way of concentration: the hindrances. I know you've all heard talks about the hindrances. Since we had attending Vipassana retreat as a prerequisite before this retreat, we partly wanted you to have some skill with working with the hindrances before coming here. So this is not going to be a standard hindrances talk—I'm not going to really touch on the specifics of hindrances. But they are understood by the Buddha as the five hindrances: sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, and doubt. Classically, these are defined as the states of mind that hinder concentration. This is their function, in a way—to get in the way of concentration. They actively counter our ability to settle.

There's another list that is not so much defined as a list in the texts, at least in the suttas, but these qualities are mentioned: five factors that come together when concentration is present in the mind. These are called the jhānic factors, the factors of jhāna. These five factors of jhāna directly oppose and counter the hindrances. In the process of cultivating the collected mind, these factors of jhāna begin to grow in our minds, and they actively work to counter the hindrances. We'll explore both sides of the equation tonight.

In terms of exploring the hindrances, what I'd like to do first is highlight how when we work with hindrances in our Vipassana practice, it's a little bit different than our first line of approach with the

hindrances in concentration practice. In Vipassana practice we often are instructed to turn directly and meet the hindrance. We explore the hindrance with mindfulness. Often we are taught in the mindfulness practice that any object can be used as a place to cultivate mindfulness—and it's definitely true, it's my experience. Any object can be used as a place to cultivate mindfulness, and we can cultivate mindfulness by meeting the hindrances. The hindrances are not our enemy in any way in the Vipassana practice.

In the concentration practice we have a little bit more of an agenda: to settle and stabilize the mind on the experience of the breath, in this case with our practice here. So while I wouldn't say the hindrances are the enemy, we have a slightly different relationship to the hindrances in concentration practice. I would say the first approach is to stay with the breath, if possible. If possible, set aside the hindrance and stay with the breath.

There are different levels of engagement with the hindrances depending on how strong the hindrance is and how strong our capacity for staying with the breath is. In talking to some of you today about the hindrances, sometimes it was pretty clear that you were able to just stay with the breath and let the hindrance stay in the background. This would be the level of meeting the hindrance that is the least engaged with the hindrance.

As hindrances arise, if it's possible—and we can just check this out—can sleepiness, for instance, just be in the background while you simply know the breath? There's the breath happening and just the sleepiness in the background, or thoughts, or maybe a little bit of aversion happening. It can be there, but you can stay with the breath. This can actually be pretty powerful to recognize this possibility.

On my first long metta retreat, I did a month of metta practice as a concentration practice, and got these instructions about how when aversion arises, you just stay with the metta. It was kind of a revelation, because in my

Vipassana practice, it had been like, oh, there's aversion happening? Ooh, let's look at that. And it had been like zeroing in on the aversion. And while that was useful and I learned a lot, it was quite a revelation to recognize, oh, there's aversion happening? You mean I don't have to put it under a microscope? I can just set it aside and stay with the phrases? It was such a relief. Oh, wow, this is a completely different way to engage with the hindrances.

So this is a skill that we learn—essentially a skill of setting aside. Sometimes I call this the skill of "not now." We recognize and acknowledge that a hindrance is there. Sometimes I even bow to it and say, "Yes, thank you for showing up. And right now, you can stay in the room with me, but I'm going to pay attention to the breath." Or I'm going to pay attention to my metta, which is what I was doing in that case.

There's a skill to this. This setting aside cannot be done with aversion. It's not a pushing aside. It's not trying to get rid of or repress. It's more of just a gentle acknowledgment: "Yeah, I see you." It's kind of like how you might give a toddler a timeout. Let the aversion have a timeout. It can sit over there, but you're

just doing your thing, paying attention to the breath.

How this works as a skillful means is that essentially the hindrances feed on unawareness, and they feed on a kind of spiral or cycle of reactivity. You're all familiar with this—with aversion arising, thoughts of anger arise, and it kind of fuels the cycle. This practice of setting aside and staying with the breath doesn't allow that cycle to continue because we're not engaged with the hindrance. But we are also actively engaged in cultivating mindfulness and concentration on the breath. And so the hindrance doesn't actually have much nourishment to feed it. Setting it aside is one way that the hindrance can begin to dissipate. This was quite a revelation for me to recognize: oh, you mean I don't have to actually zero into it and figure it out? Set it aside and let it dissipate as you stay connected with the breath.

This level of engagement—this "not now," setting aside, letting the hindrance be in the background—works either if the hindrance is not terribly strong or if your capacity to be with the breath is pretty strong. If the hindrance is a little stronger or your ability to be with the breath is a little weaker, there may need to be a little more engagement.

The next level of engagement is something along the lines of breathing with the hindrance. You know there's the hindrance arising and it's like, "Yes, I see you, anger, and we're going to breathe together here." Or "Restlessness, let's breathe together." The hindrance has come a little bit more to the foreground, but hopefully it can be at a place where there's a balance between being able to stay connected with the breath and just knowing that the hindrance is there. Allow the breath to include the hindrance. Envelop the hindrance with the breath.

This can also work with exploring pain. We talked a little bit about this this morning. If there's pain, often there is an aversive reaction to it. But we can also, if there's an unpleasant experience that's challenging, breathe with that unpleasant experience, breathe through it—even having the sense of allowing the breath to infuse that state of mind or the place in the body that's feeling pain.

Another tool that I use sometimes, one that's broadly useful in a lot of different ways but particularly helpful with the hindrances, is just to remind myself: "Okay, yep, there's that frustration—and the breath. There's confusion—and the breath." Just continually reminding myself: and the breath, and the breath. So that there's this touchstone, a way to stay with the experience of breathing even as we know other experience.

Something you might also explore—and I say this with a little more caution, as this needs a little more exploration or context setting—is to use a kind of inquiry. Perhaps you're finding it's hard, you know the hindrance, but it's hard to find a way to be with the breath skillfully while that hindrance is there. You're trying. You see the hindrance and you know the breath, but it just doesn't quite feel like it's settled in together.

Sometimes you can explore just asking for wisdom—essentially asking for the body and mind to support

you in this exploration. This is something that comes from my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, this kind of inquiry that I have found incredibly useful. You just drop a question in: "What might it mean to attend skillfully to the breath with this mind state?" Not trying to figure it out, but just putting that question into the whole mix and then continuing to be present with the breath.

I tried this just the other day. There was some mind state and I was struggling to find a way to be with the breath with that mind state. And this question arose spontaneously.

And as I just continued to be with the breath, it was like I watched the mind and the breath adjust themselves to have a more relaxed, receptive relationship with that mind state present.

So this use of inquiry or this use of questions—if you find it sends you into thinking or trying to figure out or searching for an answer, just forget about it. Don't even go there. But sometimes we can drop a question into a meditation and a kind of wisdom begins to show up. Because the more we actually settle into concentration, the more wisdom is actually available for us. Sometimes we can use this kind of question or inquiry to encourage that wisdom to arise.

If the hindrances are even stronger, then we might need to actually let go of the breath and work more directly with the hindrances using our familiar tools. For instance, when the mind is sleepy, opening the eyes or standing up. Or perhaps with the hindrances of sense desire or ill will, turning directly to meet the hindrance with mindfulness. But this is kind of our last line of approach with the concentration practice. Our approach first is to try to stay with the breath, to try to meet the hindrance with the breath, to breathe with the hindrance. And then if it's not possible, or it feels like the hindrance is growing and getting stronger, then it might be time to begin to use our familiar tools, a familiar approach.

This is not a failure, by the way. This doesn't mean that you failed. It's just that these are the conditions right now. Conditions change. Sometimes it's easier to be with the breath. Maybe you've had a good night of sleep. Maybe sometimes the morning is your easy time, and then the day goes on and the mind gets a little more tired. So conditions change, and our responses to the hindrances need to be flexible.

As we cultivate the practice of concentration—staying with the breath, connecting in this relaxed way with receptive attention—the factors of jhana, these five factors, begin to grow and begin to counter the hindrances directly, encountering those forces that keep us from being present with the breath.

The five jhanic factors are—I'm going to use the Pali here, and I will translate this for you, but we tend to use the Pali for these terms for some reason. So I want you to start to get familiar with the Pali terms for these jhanic factors.

They are: *vitakka*, *vicāra*, *pīti*, *sukha*, and *ekaggatā*. *Vitakka* is directing the attention, aiming the attention, connecting to experience. *Vicāra* is a sustaining of the attention. Then there's *pīti*, which is rapture—interest, delight, delighted interest, rapt interest, that kind of quality of mind. *Sukha* is the Pali for happiness, a kind of contented, sweet flavor to experience. And *ekaggatā*: unification of mind, balance

of mind, collectedness of mind.

Each of these five factors directly counters specifically one of the hindrances. And so as we cultivate the concentration, very naturally the hindrances start to reduce. They're actually suppressed in a way. These jhanic factors counter the hindrances but don't uproot them. It's not the kind of uprooting that happens, not the kind of elimination of hindrances that occurs when something is seen very clearly and released through wisdom. So it's a form of suppression—a skillful suppression of the hindrances.

As these hindrances are released through the cultivation of these factors, the mind moves into that access concentration where the hindrances are fully at bay. As the concentration develops, these five factors grow strong and the hindrances grow weak. And this, as Philip said last night, feels really good. The term for this is the bliss of seclusion. We are secluded from the hindrances for a time. It's a really powerful learning to begin to recognize what it is for the mind to not have these hindrances at work. When we get a taste of this, it begins to encourage us to keep going.

So I want to talk a bit about each of these factors, primarily about the first two: *vitakka* and *vicāra*, the connecting or aiming of the attention and the sustaining of the attention. Because of these five jhanic factors, these first two are the only ones that we have any possibility of engaging in personal effort with. The other three—*pīti*, rapture; *sukha*, happiness; and *ekaggatā*, unification of mind—are a result of the practice. Essentially, the last three jhanic factors are a result of how we apply *vitakka* and *vicāra*. And so it's useful to take some time to explore: How do those two factors work? What is a skillful way

to engage with those two factors of jhana.

Essentially, this to me is the art of concentration practice—the art of any meditation practice, actually—how we engage with aiming and sustaining the attention. Can we cultivate a receptive, relaxed attention through the use of these two factors?

As a pair, these two work together. Sometimes they're described this way: the vittaka is like the hitting of the bell, and the vichara is the sustaining sound. As we connect with the attention, there's a kind of natural resonance or sustaining that happens as we aim and connect to experience. It depends on how we do it. If the connecting isn't done well, the resonance isn't quite as full.

And so that connecting—the way we connect—is actually one of the biggest areas of our exploration of effort. How do we connect? How do we aim the attention? The word "aiming" itself, the vittaka, the connecting to the object... often, at least when I first heard about this, I thought, "Oh, this means I go out to find the object. I grab onto it. I narrow my focus." That's the kind of idea I had in my mind about this factor, vittaka.

But there's a whole different way to aim. I've found through my own practice some perhaps gentler ways to aim the attention. So I'll share some of those with you, and some have already been mentioned. Sally mentioned the very first evening the notion of allowing the breath to come to you—settling back and

receiving the breath. This is a form of aiming, but you're not going out to look for it. It's more a settling back, an intention: "I'd like to connect with the breath. May the breath come into the awareness."

Try that right now. Can you settle back? You can even use it as a request: "May the attention rest with the breathing." And then not so much try to do it. "May the attention rest with the breathing." Allowing the breath to come to you.

Sometimes when I'm exploring this receptive attention, I have a sense of wanting to counter that notion of narrowing. If I'm paying attention to something small—like the tip of the nostrils or in the abdomen—and we have this idea of the object being maybe the size of a quarter, then it's like we think we have to squish all of our awareness down into that little quarter-sized thing.

But a different approach might be: can you let that experience of the breath get as big as the awareness? Again, it's letting the breath come to you, but the awareness doesn't have a size or shape, really. Sometimes we can play with a sense of big awareness. Let the object get big. Let the breath get big to fill the awareness. This usually requires relaxation—relaxing the body, relaxing the mind—and then exploring this possibility: can the breath fill the awareness? Can I have the sense of the breath getting big in the awareness?

The breath can sometimes also be a delicate creature, kind of a shy thing. I've found sometimes that if I tried to turn and look right at it, I could hardly find it. But if I kind of snuck up on it from the side, then I could connect with it. It's almost like... I don't know if any of you have noticed with stars—I don't know what the stars are going to be like tonight—but if there are stars, you can check this out. If you look up at the stars, sometimes if there's a dim star, and you're looking right at it, it's hard to see. But if you look just off to the side, then you can see it.

Sometimes the breath is like that. If we're trying to zero in right on it, sometimes it's too much energy, and it just obscures the experience of the breath. If you just almost think of it as looking in the periphery of your attention for the breath—one way you might explore this right now: you're paying attention to what I'm saying. Notice you're hearing, but while you're hearing, let there be a little bit of a split attention. Be with the breath at the same time, but keep your attention on the hearing, and just notice—like from the side—you might be able to just kind of know the breath simultaneously.

Sometimes, and some of you actually reported this today, it's actually easier to connect with the breath when the mind also has another object in mind. If you find that, you can use it. You can connect to the experience of hearing, for example.

And then allow the attention to know that the breath is there. Again, a very gentle way of aiming—not this zeroing in kind of approach.

With vicāra, the sustaining of attention, I think with both vitakka and vicāra, we often have habitual relationships with those factors of mind that are bound up with our doing. "I'm going to get this done. I'm

going to figure this out. I'm going to accomplish this." We have habitual relationships to these two qualities that often tend to be a little less effective in meditation than they are if we're doing something in our work, for instance.

Philip was talking about ordinary kinds of concentration, like holding a bottle under a tap. There we can focus in. But that kind of focus may not be the most skillful approach for concentration practice. It's possible—I certainly have gotten concentrated by grabbing on and holding on to the breath. But then I found that a kind of container was created that was tight and not so flexible.

So it's really well worth the time to be a little more patient with the vitakka and vicāra. Be a little more patient with this receiving of the breath and a gentle sustaining of attention. Let the way into the concentration be the kind of container in which concentration can naturally grow and deepen, as opposed to trying to hold on.

With sustaining also, we often have the idea of using force to sustain. We might sit down at the beginning of a sitting and think, "Okay, forty-five minutes, breath—let me be here for forty-five minutes." It's almost like we pick up the entire forty-five-minute sitting in that first second, trying to create and muster the energy to be present for that whole time right in the first moment.

Instead, a more helpful way to sustain the attention is just a very light touch. It's almost like noticing how that connecting or aiming of the attention—the way Philip was talking about connecting with the hand—we connect like this, and that connecting will have some lingering resonance, like hitting a bell. There will be some lingering sustaining of attention. We need to begin to get familiar with these two qualities together.

With just that gentle connecting, sometimes we need to simply connect, and there's a little sustaining, and then it's not that we're going someplace else, but the attention kind of floats a little bit, and you can just gently connect again. It sustains, then it floats, then you gently connect again. We use that gentle connection to create the sustaining.

It's just enough—just enough effort to stay with half a breath. When you sit down for that forty-five-minute sitting, that's all the effort you need to make in the first moment. Right now, half a breath. How much energy does it take to be with half a breath, an in-breath? And then do it again, an out-breath. And then enough energy for an in-breath. That's it. That level of energy is what constitutes a skillful sustaining of attention.

As we explore in that way, a momentum begins to build. We get familiar. We connect and we see, oh, there's a natural sustaining. We learn how to connect and have that sustaining naturally flow for a while. Then we don't have to keep connecting—we stay with the sustaining. We learn that sense of what sustaining is. And when it starts to weaken, we gently connect again.

I sometimes use an analogy for this pair, vitakka and vicāra. Kids sometimes ride these scooters, these

Razor scooters—not motor scooters but kick scooters. You're standing on the bed of the scooter, holding on to the bar, and you have to put your foot down and tap the ground to get going. That tap is like vitakka. You're tapping, tapping, tapping. A gentle tap is very effective. You could put your foot down and push really hard, but mostly just a gentle tap, tap, tap.

And with that gentle tap, tap, tap, momentum builds. You can ride for a while. You get the feeling of what it's like to just ride—you simply hang out there and ride. And you become familiar with what it's like for that scooter to start feeling wobbly, sensing when you need to put the foot down again and tap.

It's a very similar experience with vitaka and vichara. We get familiar with that gentle connecting, receiving, that receptive, gentle connecting to the breath. We notice how long the vichara sustains, and then we learn essentially how frequently to keep that vitaka going. The more we practice, the more the sustaining begins to carry us. We don't need to put in so much personal effort. We don't need to aim so much.

Getting familiar with both of these qualities will support you in understanding the feeling of concentration as it begins to collect and gather.

The factor of vitaka, the aiming, counters the hindrance of sloth and torpor. If the mind is dull or sleepy, this is the factor that helps wake up the mind. You can actively use vitaka if you are sleepy. You can consciously use vitaka—consciously remembering. Connect. Connect. Maybe a little more frequently. Connect. Gentle connect. Maybe even a little more active. Sometimes it's helpful to use a little more precision to just track the breath. Just like, "Yep, there's the breath. Beginning, middle, end of the breath." Vitaka, vitaka, vitaka through the breath.

Vichara, the sustaining of attention, is the antidote to doubt. It counters the hindrance of doubt. Vichara is what connects us to the experience. We sustain the experience with the breath. Doubt feeds on being disconnected from experience, so as we sustain attention, there's no nourishment for doubt. The sustaining of attention supports the falling away of doubt.

With doubt, it's often helpful to just be willing to engage. Noticing, "Okay, yes, there's doubt here." If we're engaged with the questions of doubt—doubts in the teachings, doubts in the teachers, doubts in ourselves—then the mind is not connecting to experience. If we can simply say, "Yes, I see there's doubt, but I'm just going to see. I'm willing to run the experiment and see. How about if I just try staying connected with anything? Let me just stay connected with a foot on the ground or my butt on the chair. Let's just see what happens."

Being willing to see, willing to run the experiment—this willingness is a form of confidence, a form of trust, a form of faith. And that also is a counter to doubt.

So that's vitaka and vichara, the first two factors of jhana. I'll speak much more briefly about the last three.

Rapture, or piti, is a delight, a joy accompanied by interest in the experience. It's often felt as physical, pleasant bodily experience. It might be felt as tingling or goosebumps or waves—pleasant wave-like sensations crashing through the body, almost orgasmic. There could be flashes of energy, flashes of light. You might feel like you're filled with water, saturated, or very heavy. Lots of different experiences arise.

The physical experiences are often one of the signs of rapture, but rapture is a mind state. It's the mind of delight and interest in the experience. It comes about as vitaka and vichara keep us connected with experience. As the momentum of vichara begins to sustain, the mind becomes much more interested in the breath. It actually starts to feel good.

The mind wants to stay with the breath, interested and happy to be there. As the rapture starts to grow, the practice begins to feel less effortful. Less personal effort is needed to keep it going, as the vichara is sustaining the practice on its own.

Sometimes the feeling of rapture has a quality of nourishment through the body, a mental refreshment as well. It's a very delightful state. And yet sometimes it can also get quite intense—the physical sensations can become rather strong at times. I'll speak about that in just a moment.

We have a tendency, because the sensations of rapture are often so pleasant—the physical experiences being essentially a side effect of the mental state—to get pulled into them, or into some idea of "Wow, this is so great." We tend to get pulled toward the rapture itself. See if you can stay with the breath. Let the rapture, let the physical sensations, be in the background if possible. It's almost like working with the hindrances—let the rapture recede. You're not trying to push it away, but neither are you directing attention toward it.

The rapture has come about as a consequence of staying with the breath. The conditions for rapture arising are staying with the breath. If you take your attention out of the breath and start paying attention to the rapture, wonky things can happen, and you've removed the very conditions that were nourishing it. So it may just disappear entirely, or it can become unstable. See if you can let the rapture be in the background and stay with the breath.

The presence of rapture counters the hindrance of ill will. As the mind is contented, interested, happy to be with experience, ill will simply isn't in the picture. You can't even muster it up. Ill will? What's that? It's a very powerful counter. The mind just does not go there.

If the rapture becomes quite strong, the physical sensations can sometimes get intense. At one point, on a long concentration retreat, the rapture for me felt like being immersed in a bath of electrocution. That intense. Every single cell felt like it was vibrating.

Some ways to work with this: First, I reminded myself that this is a mind state, it's impermanent, it will pass. Then my teacher recommended allowing the energy of the rapture to flow down, putting attention in the hands and feet and letting the energy flow out through them. This was very helpful. I really suggest

this practice. You might also use a request or exploration, as I mentioned before: What kind of breath would support calming this energy? What kind of breath would support tranquility? What would tranquilize the breath?

Sukha, happiness, the next factor, is a more purely mental pleasure. It does come with some bodily experience as well, but it's not so energetic. Sukha is very naturally a tranquilizing quality of mind. We really touch into the tranquility aspect of concentration through sukha. But it's also very, very sweet. I call it the "oh yes" state. It's like—why would the mind not want to be here? It feels like all my cells are aligned and pointed in the same direction. Just very sweet.

Again, both rapture and sukha, both piti and sukha, are not something we do.

We can support their arising through the aiming and sustaining of attention—these create the conditions for rapture and happiness to emerge. We can also incline in their direction by cultivating interest in the breath. Since interest is a component of rapture, we can simply incline toward being interested in the breath. If it's not possible, let it go. You don't want to be doing too much there. But sometimes we might ask ourselves: Is there a way to be interested in the breath? Then just let go of the question and see what happens.

We can also incline toward these qualities or create supportive conditions by encouraging a pleasure in the breath—breathing in a way that feels comfortable. This was one of the instructions my teacher gave me. Thanissaro Bhikkhu was my main jhana teacher, and he said, "Breathe in a way that feels comfortable. You're welcome to adjust the breath so that it feels comfortable." Sometimes I would ask myself, "What kind of breath would be most comfortable right now?" And then just let the breath breathe at that point. Can there be some comfort in the breath?

As the breath becomes comfortable, the mind naturally begins to want to stay with it. That's really what supports the rapture and happiness arising—the sustaining of attention. But encouraging a comfortable breath supports the resting with the breath, and the pleasure of that also becomes a support for the arising of rapture and sukha.

Sukha counters restlessness. The mind is just really contented in that state. It is not interested in searching around for other things. So the hindrance of restlessness falls away as sukha gets strong.

We do have a tendency to cling to sukha—it is so pleasant. This is an area where we have to recognize that hindrances can come in; desire can arise around sukha. Fortunately, the next factor is the one that counters desire: unification of mind, balance of mind, *ekagata*.

It's in the vicinity of equanimity, but the mind also feels contented, balanced. There's a stillness. This is where the stillness of the practice really becomes strong, as ekagata becomes strong. The mind feels like there is no problem. Nothing it wants to change, just very balanced.

This counters sense desire because there's nothing the mind wants in that place of ekagata. No problem. The mind understands there's nothing that would make this experience better—which is exactly what sense desire is trying to do, to go out and get something to make something better.

The experience of unification of mind, all five of these factors working together, creates the state of access concentration. It shows us a happiness, a contentedness, a pleasure that is far beyond any pleasure that sense desire has to offer. As we touch into this possibility, it becomes much easier to let go of sense desire.

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

We basically see that the pleasure related to sense desire is an inferior kind of pleasure. And the mind naturally begins to let it go.

So the hindrances start to fall away with concentration. Again, they're not uprooted with concentration—as the concentration state falls away, they can return. You may notice this sometimes as we go through cycles of concentration. Sometimes we find that as a concentration state falls apart, we are just overwhelmed with hindrances.

I remember on a metta retreat doing dishes one evening when the metta was a little bit weaker. I was doing the dishwashing and I was railing at the machine: "Who designed this stupid machine?" It's like, wow, look at this. Sometimes the hindrances can come back with a vengeance after a period of being concentrated.

So it's not like you've done something wrong. It's just part of this process. But we learn so much as the mind goes into these states, as we learn the conditions for the cultivation of concentration. We learn about our minds. We learn how our minds tend to want to gravitate towards the hindrances. We learn how to release them, how to set them aside, how to keep our attention in a place that leads to a greater form of happiness, in the service of liberation.

We really begin to appreciate a mind that is free from hindrances. And we have this wisdom—the mind wants to head in that direction. And so it starts to do that, and we start to want to cultivate the conditions that support concentration.

Again, we can't create the concentration. We can engage with our effort, our light touch, our gentle, receptive effort that creates a container for concentration to arise. We cannot create concentration, but we can nourish the conditions that support it. And those main conditions are relaxed, receptive attention and gentle connection.

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