Concentration in the Service of Liberation

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:50

When the Buddha left home to search for the answer to his question—why do we suffer?—he sought out the main teachers of his day to help him find an answer. He sought out the teachers who had the most skill and studied with them. The teachers who had the most renown at that time were masters of concentration. They taught the very deep states of absorption.

As he studied with them and mastered their teachings—actually two successive teachers—he realized, "This doesn't answer my question. Their teaching doesn't answer my question." He reflected, "This dharma, this teaching, does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to nibbana, but only to the reappearance in the base of nothingness"—which is essentially the kind of concentration he was practicing with this teacher.

And so he understood that his question was different than what was currently being sought after. Somehow his question was a little different, and so he began to explore other possibilities, other paths. As Eugene mentioned the other night, he explored the extreme ascetic practices—kind of almost as a counterpoint to the blissful states of concentration. He went the other direction and really mortified the body. And he is said to have discovered, "This isn't the way either." That beautiful quote Eugene read: "Might there be some other way to enlightenment?"

On reflection, as Eugene mentioned, he recalled sitting under the rose apple tree, watching his father perform a spring ritual in the fields. He spontaneously entered into the first jhana, a state of concentration. It is said that he reflected at that point, "Might this be the way?" And then he got the response, "Yes, this is the way."

That has always been a curiosity to me, because he had explored concentration so deeply in his early exploration with his first teachers. He had explored concentration so deeply and determined that wasn't the way. And yet after all of his ascetic practices, he came back and touched into this recollection of entering into the first jhana and thought, "This is the way."

What I've been curious about—and there's not a particular answer that I can see in the texts about this question—but my sense is that he understood concentration can be used in the service of freedom. Concentration is on the path to freedom, but is not itself freedom. The times he talked to his other teachers, he said, "Is this all you teach? Is this the height of your dharma, these absorption states?" And they said, "Yes, this is it. Come and teach with me. You've mastered it as well as I have." But for him, that wasn't the answer.

My understanding is that he really began to see there is a place for concentration, but that it's on the path—it's not the goal. He said to his monks, to his monks and nuns, to his disciples, "Cultivate concentration. One who cultivates concentration sees things as they actually are." This points to the purpose for concentration. He didn't say, "Cultivate concentration—it feels really good." He said, "Cultivate concentration. One who cultivates concentration sees things as they actually are."

I'd like to talk about this tonight: What does it mean to use concentration in the service of liberation?

To explore this, I'd like to start by reviewing these two forms of concentration. Sally introduced them in the talk on the seven factors when she talked about the concentration enlightenment factor. She talked about these like two ends of the spectrum on concentration.

One-pointed concentration is cultivated using a single point of focus, the body and mind becoming very peaceful, quiet—essentially cultivating a stillness both of mind and of object. This is what we've been doing. This is the orientation of the practice we've been exploring for these six or seven days.

The other kind of concentration is what is called moment-to-moment concentration. This is a concentration cultivated with a stability of awareness even as that awareness knows changing experience. There's not necessarily a stilling of experience, but there is a stilling of awareness. The stilling of awareness means that whatever it meets, it knows fully and is non-reactive. It meets it, knows it, and then knows the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing. It might be a sight, a sound, a body sensation, a mood, an emotion, a feeling, a perception—just moment after moment, rapidly changing experience.

And typically with rapidly changing experience, we get hooked by some piece or other of that rapid flow. Some sight we see—"Oh, that's interesting, what about that?"—and we start thinking about it. Or we notice something we don't like: "How can I get rid of that?" And we start trying to control or fix or change. Our usual mind meeting changing experience is not terribly balanced. It's not very still. It meets something and shoots off. Philip talked about papañca the other day, this mind that is just proliferating around what we experience.

Moment-to-moment concentration is a kind of concentration where awareness meets what's happening and doesn't react to it, doesn't chase it, doesn't try to get rid of it. It knows it fully, meets it, understands it fully, and the next moment it's understanding the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing. Stability of mind, able to stay present for this river of what it is to be a human being.

The factors of concentration that we've talked about—vitaka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, ekaggatā: aiming, sustaining, rapture, happiness, and one-pointedness—are all present. As the mind collects, as awareness gets stable in this moment-to-moment concentration, perhaps we can understand vitaka and vicāra, aiming and sustaining, not as aiming and sustaining at one thing, but as meeting experience, meeting changing experience. Moment after moment, the aiming and sustaining becomes more about cultivating the continuity of awareness itself, of mindfulness itself. We keep checking in: Am I aware? What am I

aware of?

With this gentle momentum of vitaka and vicāra in moment-to-moment concentration, the stability of mindfulness arises because of its continuity. As the mind settles and is able to be present, the hindrances fall away, just as in access concentration. There's a form of access concentration in moment-to-moment concentration where the hindrances are at bay. Rapture arises, interest arises, happiness arises. And one-pointedness is understood as the mind fully meeting each new experience in a non-reactive way. Ekaggatā—what we translate as one-pointedness—is not a one-pointedness that meets the same object over and over again. It's a one-pointedness that fully meets whatever experience arises in this moment, and fully meets the next moment of experience. All of the factors of jhāna are present as the moment-to-moment mindfulness gets strong.

As Sally mentioned, all forms of meditation use both mindfulness and concentration. It's really a matter of where we are on a spectrum. Absorption practice, steady concentration practice, lies at one end, and open awareness lies at the other end of the practice spectrum. There are practices all through the range. So this is really just highlighting the two ends, but practices fall all over the place.

One of the most familiar practices that we have taught here at Spirit Rock and in this lineage is from Mahasi Sayadaw, where we direct attention to, for instance, the breath. When I practiced with Sayadaw U Pandita, I was taught to stay with the breath until I could remain with it for a full hour. Then I could open to all experience. But I was staying with the breath not in the way of stilling it—I was paying attention to all the little details, seeing the changing nature of that one object. To me, this kind of practice lies in the middle of the spectrum. It really cultivates concentration through focusing the mind on one object while getting genuinely interested in its changing nature.

This moment-to-moment concentration is extremely valuable, as you have all seen. I don't think I've talked to anyone who has said, "This is useless." Pretty much everybody sees just how useful it is.

The far end of the spectrum of one-pointed concentration—the absorption end, where we really enter into a stilled object and absorb into it—the understanding with that deep absorption is that while you're absorbed, there's not much room for insight to arise. There's room for insight as you go into that state and as you come out of it. But in the state itself, you're just absorbed. It's a steady state, no change. For insight to be possible, concentration needs to be attuning to change.

This is one of the key differences between concentration practices and mindfulness practices—whether the emphasis is on stilling or on noticing change. With the kind of concentration we've been practicing, to turn it toward being in the service of liberation, we need to begin turning toward changing experience. We allow the attention to begin picking up on change, as opposed to settling on the more stilling side. We've been emphasizing not looking at the detail of the breath, but more the rhythm or just a kind of flow, without a lot of detail.

So I'll talk in a little while about how to turn towards change, how we can take this practice and slightly shift direction. But first I'd like to explore what it is that we're opening to as we turn towards change. What is insight anyway? Insight into what?

The insight that is of interest here, in what the Buddha taught, comes back to the question he asked at the very beginning of his search: Why do we suffer? The insight the Buddha oriented towards, the exploration he undertook, was: How can I understand suffering? Is it possible to be free from suffering?

His exploration looked at that. And what he discovered—one way to frame what he said—was that one of the core reasons we suffer is basically because we want things to be different than they are. And we want things to be different than they are because we're not seeing things as they actually are. Remember, the Buddha said, cultivate concentration. One who cultivates concentration sees things as they actually are.

We want things to be different than they are. We don't like unpleasant experience. We want to get rid of it. We want pleasant experience to stay. We don't like it that pleasant experience changes.

The freedom that the Buddha found is most clearly described when he said: The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this is Nibbāna.

I like this definition. It's really simple. It's not describing some mind-blowing altered state. It's something I can envision living with in life. I can maybe have a kind of idea of what it might be like to live in this world without greed, without aversion, without delusion.

He goes on: Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed with mind ensnared, one aims at one's own ruin, at the ruin of others, at the ruin of both, and experiences mental pain and grief. But if lust, anger, and delusion are given up, one aims at neither one's own ruin, nor at the ruin of others, nor at the ruin of both, and one experiences no mental pain and grief. This is Nibbāna. Freedom. Immediate. Visible in this life. Inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.

Again, an emphasis on visible in this life. The possibility of waking up, of freedom here and now. Here, now—this possibility, here, now. Not some afterlife of freedom. Not some transcendent possibility, but it almost feels like a sense of transcending through or with, rather than above.

Freedom is the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion. The understanding is that what causes suffering is greed, aversion, and delusion. So the absence of those is what freedom is. Our exploration is looking into what creates, what holds the patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion in place.

Fortunately, we have some teachings of the Buddha to help us understand this. He pointed to a quality of ignorance, of not understanding, that is the root. I said a moment ago that we want things to be different than they are because we are not seeing things the way they are. This is ignorance—not seeing things the way they are.

Our usual definition of ignorance is something along the lines of not knowing something, a lack of knowledge. But the ignorance that underlies greed, aversion, and delusion is much more insidious than simply not knowing something. It's actually an active misperception.

The Buddha pointed to three primary misperceptions of reality that we could call human ignorance. We tend to take what is impermanent to be permanent. We tend to take what is unreliable to be a place where we might find reliable happiness. And we tend to take what is not self to be self.

These misunderstandings infuse the way we meet the world, inclining us—through the misperception of permanence—to think, "Oh, there's something that will make me happy. There's something out there I can hold on to that will make me happy." Really, the unsatisfactoriness of experience is a direct result of the fact that everything, everything, everything that we experience without exception is impermanent.

There is nothing in our experience that is stable even for a split second. And yet we misperceive this over and over again. We think we're finding something stable. We hang our hats on things. This misperception of permanence.

There are a couple of things that incline us as human beings to make this mistake. You're not alone in making it. One of the things that inclines us toward this error is that the change happening is occurring so rapidly. Our perceptual system is actually designed to piece things together so that there seems to be a coherence to what's happening.

We can perhaps do a thought experiment. Many of you may have seen, when you were younger, those Fourth of July sparklers. When I was a kid, we used to spin around in a circle with that sparkler and enjoy seeing the circle that appeared. We could create the illusion of a circle by waving the fire stick really quickly. This is the way our perception works—when something is moving and changing quickly, our perceptual system will tend to create something as if it's there. Now, with the fire stick we know there's not really a circle in the air, but our perceptual system is fooling us into thinking it might be there.

This kind of thing happens in so many ways. We don't generally touch into the rapidly changing nature of experience. But through meditation, through concentration, the concentrated mind has the kind of precision to start seeing the rapidly changing nature of experience. This is one of the ways that concentration serves us—to help us see this rapidly changing nature. And why is that useful? Because without that understanding that things are actually changing, we are inclined to want to cling to them. As soon as we deeply understand that whatever is happening is impermanent—deeply understand that—the mind is not inclined to pick it up and say, "Oh yes, that's going to do it for me." Because it understands at a very deep level that it's impermanent. It's changing even as we think we want to pick it up. And so concentration can begin to reveal just how rapidly things are changing.

It also begins to reveal another familiar, human way that change tends to be masked: we tend to relate to experience through ideas rather than through direct experience. When we look at our body or explore our

body, think about our body—and you may have noticed this some in the settling into concentration, feeling your body in a different way, feeling the vibratory nature of the body, the earth element, the fire element, the wind element. The wind and fire elements in particular are very dynamic. And yet as we think about our body, we think about it in terms of hand or foot or knee. We think about pain in the knee. It becomes a block of solidity. When we relate to our experience through concept, it tends to create something more solid. Those concepts, when we for instance think about a pain in the knee—if we just think about it as, "Boy, my knee really hurts"—it can feel like this solid mass. And yet when we actually start with concentration to explore the actual experience of the body underneath both the idea of knee and pain, we see a very dynamic experience that is not at all solid.

This was one of my early real understandings of just how helpful it was to see change—that as I saw the dynamic, changing nature of uncomfortable experience, the mind stopped relating to it as a thing and began just understanding it as something changing. I could see that as soon as the mind congealed around it as a thing, the pain shot up through the roof. But when the mind was just noticing the rapidly changing nature of it, there was nothing for the mind to react to, because as soon as the mind felt one sensation, it was gone. And then another one appeared and it was gone, and another one and it was gone. So there wasn't anything to be averse to. It was changing so quickly.

The concentrated mind begins to see this rapidity of change. Because things are changing so quickly, the mind also begins to understand that there's nothing that can possibly be a lasting source of happiness. This sense of taking something as satisfactory, this "this will do it for me, this is what's going to make me happy"—it's completely undermined. Through looking at our experience, looking at what we're holding on to, asking where we think we're going to find happiness—it comes in small ways, and it's kind of amazing just how powerful that delusion of greed is. Greed saying, "Yeah, if you get that thing, you're going to be happy." We know that a piece of chocolate is not going to do it for us forever. But that's not the way our mind works in that moment. It has jumped on that greed bandwagon and says, "Yes, I believe that chocolate is going to make me happy."

It's stunning. It's really amazing to see just how much our mind buys into this delusion. It's fascinating to look at it in small ways—small cravings, small places where we find greed. Maybe a second... we haven't had many desserts here, but a second chocolate biscotti, perhaps. Avoiding that, not doing it, just watching the wanting and seeing what happens.

Another side of this exploration is to really investigate—and this is actually one the Buddha recommended—what we think is going to make us happy, what we think is going to really satisfy us. He said to look at just how far that satisfaction actually extends. Pay attention to that.

So yes, you think that chocolate's going to make you happy? That second cookie is going to make you happy? Well, have your second cookie, but pay attention. How long does it actually make you happy? Are you even there for the happiness of the cookie?

I was talking to someone recently and I had encouraged her. I said, "Don't try to not go for the chocolate, but be there for the chocolate." It took her a while to get there. And then she began to see—oh, actually, that chocolate, it's very nice while it's there. It's actually delightful to be present for the sense pleasure of that. And when we're really available, sense pleasures can be very heightened when we are truly here. But it's heightened partly because we are not clinging to it anymore. And so we can really be there for that sense pleasure.

I did this myself. I was at the Forest Refuge and I would have a piece of Dove dark chocolate with a cup of coffee after lunch. And I paid attention to just how long the pleasure lasted. It lasted for way longer than I would have thought, actually. I'm told there's something about chocolate that generally makes you feel good—endorphins or something. It did last for a couple minutes after I finished the chocolate. But it was a couple of minutes of happiness. The mind had bought into the belief that it would last longer than that.

When we start to look at this satisfaction, look at where we think we're going to find what we want, it's interesting not only to examine how long the pleasure extends, but also to ask: what is it that we're actually wanting? What is it that we actually want?

Sometimes we want a particular sense pleasure, like really wanting that chocolate. But when I really look at it, more often what I discover is that what I want is some idea. This was really clear to me at one point. I was sitting the three-month course and I heard descriptions of certain kinds of meditation experience—seeing things rapidly arise and pass away, sometimes called the arising and passing. I heard these descriptions, and I suffered a lot wanting that experience.

I could feel the wanting, I knew the wanting, I knew I was wanting it. And at one point I really just felt into the wanting. I was watching and observing that wanting. And at some point when I was observing it, what I noticed was that what was happening in my mind while the wanting was occurring was that I was envisioning telling my teacher that I'd had the experience. That's what I wanted. I wanted my teacher to recognize me for having had some experience. I had no idea what arising and passing actually was. I didn't know what I wanted. I just knew that I wanted to tell somebody that I'd had it.

This is the kind of thing—what we want is actually a construct of our own minds. That's rather amazing. When we start looking at this process of where we think we're going to find satisfaction, not only is the suffering of the wanting produced by the mind that's doing that, but what we want is created by our own minds. It's not any more substantial than a thought. Look at it in your own minds to see this.

And not-self. We take what is not-self to be self. We can do whole talks on this topic—it's huge. So I'll just say a few things briefly about this. Essentially, this is again a misunderstanding. We are interpreting

We're interpreting some experience, or some aspect of our experience, as being me or mine or I. There are many varieties of ways that we claim I or me or mine. Sometimes it's an aspect of feeling like I'm in control—I'm the one that decides things, I'm the one that chooses things. Or sometimes it's more a feeling

of ownership: this is mine, this belongs to me. Or sometimes it might just be a sense of I'm the one who experiences things, I'm the one who feels things. Or it might be an identification with emotions—I'm the one who's miserable all the time. We identify with a whole range of things that are just processes unfolding.

This pointing to not-self is really a pointing to the fact that everything happening to us is a kind of tumbling of causes and conditions. There's something happening here. A process is unfolding—a very cohesive process is unfolding. It's like a tree grows. There's a very cohesive process about that tree growing. An acorn falls to the ground. It gets enough nourishment, water, light. The conditions are such that it's one of those oak trees down there with a cage around it, so a deer doesn't come along and eat it. It has conditions that allow it to grow. There's no entity directing the process of growing a tree. It's nature. It's just causes and conditions.

And very similarly, the unfolding of our human life is nature. It's a process of causes and conditions. I think that part of the reason why we attribute self is because of this very interesting process that's a part of human nature—that is self-aware, that is self-reflectively able to know what is happening in this process. This process is aware of itself. This is just a part of being a human being, that this process is aware of the process itself. But that very reflective kind of process aware of itself—that's where the belief in self enters in. And so there's no entity in here, in the control tower, guiding, deciding. It is a tumbling forward of process.

We can start to explore this too, just looking at what it is we take to be me. What is it that we take to be me? The teaching on not-self is sometimes used as a spiritual bypass. We might say to somebody, or somebody might say to us, "Oh, get over it, you're just identifying with it." That's not what this teaching is about. There's a very famous saying by Zen Master Dogen: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

This path begins by studying what we think of as self—not by bypassing it and pretending we don't believe that we have this sense of self. We have to understand how that misconception happens, so that it's not an overlay of "Oh yes, I believe there's no self." That's not even what the Buddha said. Beginning to explore our experience, the changing nature of our experience, as we turn and direct concentration towards the changing nature, we begin to see into these core misperceptions, these human misperceptions.

I've talked in this exploration of these core misperceptions about how we turn towards—basically, we turn towards change. We turn towards looking at what we think should make us happy. We look at where we think we're finding satisfaction. We turn towards looking at where these misperceptions are operating. What is solid in your experience? Turn towards that and see: does solidity really hold up? Is it really solid? Turn towards what we think is going to be satisfying. How long does the satisfaction actually last? Turn towards what we think of as I or me or mine. What do we see when we do that? So we can begin, with a concentrated mind, to investigate these.

misperceptions and begin to understand for ourselves that they are misperceptions.

But more directly, I'd like to talk about what you've been doing here and how this concentration that we've been cultivating is used—has been used during this time—and can be, going forward, used in the service of liberation.

In my own exploration of concentration practice, I found that just in the creation of the state of concentration, there was a lot that I learned. So much. We learn about what we cling to, where we get stuck, what's hard to let go of, where we start clinging to pleasure. We learn about our habits of mind in the very first days of the practice of just coming to the breath over and over again. Learning about our tendencies, our own personal habitual tendencies of where our mind tends to go. This is an understanding, a learning that we're gaining about our own minds, the habits of our own minds.

Also, something that some of you have talked about is that as the concentration deepens, there's this cyclical nature to it. It's not like this ever-descending deepening or steadying of mind. We go through a lot of cycles. And sometimes what happens is what one teacher, Michelle McDonald, calls the purity-purification cycle.

The purity cycle is the settling into the stillness, the hindrances being at bay. The mind gets a taste of purity there. It's very beautiful. You've all touched into at least some measure of this purity. For moments, as Philip was talking about, for moments we get tastes of this purity. And sometimes what happens is we get long tastes of this purity and we think, "Oh, I figured it out." I had one time when I was sitting in the dining hall and had a kind of opening to concentration just while I was sitting there, and all my pain went away. I was in this great state of bliss and I thought, "Wow, I figured it out. I'm never going to feel pain again." I believed that. So we go through cycles—the concentration collects, gathers, unifies; there's that sense of purity—and then the concentration falls apart.

Sometimes what happens, and some of you have talked about this, is that the purity has created the conditions for something that's been deep and held, not able to be touched into or met. That purity gives space for that to come up and arise, to come to the surface. This too is a part of the learning. It's not a mistake. It's part of the process—the process of learning how our minds cling, learning where the holdings are, the old patterns of holding. Purity, purification. We go through these cycles.

On this retreat, you may have gone through one or two of these. On a long retreat, a six-week retreat, you go through it over and over again. It's not that you somehow lose everything. The first few times I went through it, I felt like I had to start all over again. And because I thought I had to start all over again, I did have to start all over again. It's the idea that we have to start all over again that makes us have to start all over again.

But if you're staying with the process, with the purification as it happens, actually as that begins to soften or loosen or let go, the presence with that can support you to just move right back into a purity cycle.

We've talked about malleability of mind. The mind is way more malleable than we think. And with concentration, we can move in and out of states of concentration way more quickly than we might expect. So if you have the idea, "Oh, it's going to take me forever to get concentrated again," just know that's just a belief. Check and see if it's that thought itself.

I remember one time during a three-month course—somebody had fallen down in the meditation hall on Halloween. They had pumpkins lighting the hall so it was really dark in there, and somebody had fallen over and hurt themselves. I was the only other person in the hall, so I went into the staff office to let them know that somebody in the meditation hall needed help. And they were having a Halloween party in the staff office. I walked into the Halloween party and it kind of blew me away, after six weeks of silence.

It did take me a couple days to settle down, but the reason it took me a couple days to settle down was because it went something like this: "Oh, breath. Oh, that party. It's going to take me forever to settle down." Breath. Breath.

Oh, why did I have to go into that office? It's going to take me forever to settle down. Over and over again, that thought arose. That was what was taking me forever to settle down—the insertion of that thought.

I now know that a concentrated mind can have a very dynamic interchange, very engaged, fully normal, and then within minutes be back to concentration. So we learn about this malleability of mind as well. We learn about cause and effect as we explore creating the state of concentration. We begin to understand the conditions. What gets in the way of concentration? What supports concentration?

We've talked about this. We've talked about the jhanic factors that support concentration, we've talked about the seven enlightenment factors, and the fact that we cultivate certain ones of these and the rest arise as results. We engage with vitakka and vicara. Piti, sukha, and ekagata are the results. We learn how to cultivate the conditions. So we begin to understand the cause and effect nature of the processes of the mind.

This is actually a pointer to not-self—understanding that our system, our organism, is this process of cause and effect. And there is agency in this system. This process that knows itself, this process can make decisions. This process can choose to cultivate mindfulness. This process hears about mindfulness and can choose to cultivate it, seeing the results of that. And then we attribute, "I did that." The sense of self is an afterthought, basically.

So in terms of shifting, tomorrow morning in the guided meditation we'll offer a guided meditation about this shift. And then it's your choice whether you continue over the next two days to deepen in the concentration, or perhaps from time to time explore the power of concentration to see into things as they are. There's a really unique opportunity you have here to see just how powerful the mind can be when it's concentrated.

We'll explore this a little in the morning, but just as a description: when we're in one-pointed

concentration, we can shift to change in different ways. One of the most straightforward, perhaps the most comfortable given what you've all been doing—most of you have been really right with the breath—would be to shift how you are paying attention to the breath. Becoming more interested in the changing nature of the breath. Looking at what is the sensation that lets you know the in-breath is beginning. How do those sensations change? What are the changes of sensation as the breath continues? What about the ending of the breath? How do you know it ends? Just noticing the changing nature of the breath itself.

This is a subtle shift in the way you're paying attention. It doesn't have to be dramatic. But it begins to orient the mind towards this exploration of change, beginning to see the breath as a process.

The breath is a great object of meditation because it breathes itself, basically. We don't have to try to breathe. And in this process of witnessing, again, we see the not-self nature of breathing. There's this process going on, this process of breathing taking care of this life. That's really a beautiful thing—this process that breathes, that wants to breathe to keep itself alive. It's like metta in action.

So that's one way we can turn towards the changing nature of the breath. Another way would be to let go of the breath entirely. For moments, you could play with releasing the focus on the breath and just opening—perhaps to the whole body, or opening to the body and hearing, and just seeing what's changing. This flow of being a human being, the dynamic experience of changing sounds, body sensations.

Even just right now, let your attention be broadly connected to your body. What are you experiencing? Pulsing, tingling, hardness, coolness, softness.

Opening to the changing nature of experience, we also become aware that attention itself picks up on different experiences. Attention connects with something, and then that attention connected with that object goes away and another attention comes. We start to see that process as well.

So insight deepens over time. It starts from hearing a description—the Buddha's pointing. If the Buddha didn't point these things out, the likelihood that we would see them is so small. And so hearing this, we may start to be curious and investigate. We start to get little tastes, little tastes of insight, just as we get little tastes of peace and ease. We get little hints, little pointers to seeing clearly.

I used to think there was going to be some big mind-blowing insight after which I would be happy forever. And what I really have seen so much is that the practice and the insights are really gradual. The Buddha actually described the unfolding of practice through an analogy—practice unfolding very gradually. He said it's like a rope from a shipwreck, the rigging that lands on the beach. Day by day, the sun, the sand, the wind wear away at that rope. If you were to go to that beach and look at that rope day to day, you're not going to see much changing. But six months, a year later, you go back, you try to pick up that rope and it will have fallen apart.

And so with the small recognitions—sometimes we don't even see them. Sometimes we don't even see the

changing understanding that's developing. So a lot of this involves trust. Trust on the side of the small pointings that Philip was talking about, the small pointings to peace, to ease, as being the indication that we're on the right path. And likewise with insight—just small pointings, small recognitions. Oh, I see how wanting a piece of chocolate actually isn't satisfying. Small things.

It really is a gradual path. And so, trust in that gradual unfolding.

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