Mindfulness of Breathing (Ānāpānasati)

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 52:18

The first thing I'd like to do tonight is express my appreciation for the new hall. How many of you practiced in this place before this year? Anybody miss the red carpet? A little bit—a little sentimental value to an old red carpet that used to cover the platform. But on the whole, isn't this a happier place to be? A place a little on the dark side. So I'm really appreciating the bright colors and light tones of brightness here.

I want to talk tonight about mindfulness of breathing. In some ways this is a rather fundamental talk, really just intended to remind us all of what we're doing at this stage in the retreat. First day of a retreat is always difficult if you just arrived yesterday. It's a little bit like going back to the gym after Christmas and New Year's holidays and finding out that you put on too much weight and you didn't keep the muscle tone up. So rediscovering the muscles is always a little bit achy and tiring.

For those of you who have been here for two weeks or four weeks, you've been going through the transition of all of us coming in from the outside with all our manic, worldly energy, and I appreciate your patience with us all. You may have found it interesting to start over with the instructions this morning. I don't know if you are or not, but it wouldn't be a bad idea because going through the instructions again will give you a sense of how you've changed or what you've learned or how you might be relating to them differently than you did two weeks ago or four weeks ago. So I encourage you to try it if you have an inclination. Start with the whole sequence again, if that feels appropriate, and see how it feels this time around.

We started the instructions today with paying attention to breathing. In some ways, this is kind of an arbitrary choice. I hope you all know that. We could really have started anywhere or nowhere. Technique is a very subjective preference in the whole field of meditation.

Some very well-established meditation traditions put very little emphasis on technique. I remember a Zen session that I went to sit in—I think it was 1978, the first year I was on staff. Actually, Carol and Steve and I all went together to New York to sit with a well-known Zen teacher named Sasaki Roshi. Sasaki Roshi is a very strong spirit in any world. He's Leonard Cohen's teacher. If you happen to see the new film about Leonard Cohen, there's a little scene of Cohen in the film with Sasaki, who I think was used as the model for Yoda in the Star Wars films—that timeless kind of face.

Sasaki Roshi is in the tradition of Rinzai Zen, which is the tradition that tends to hit you if you move in the meditation hall. One of the reasons I didn't stay too long in that tradition. It's also a tradition that puts very little emphasis on meditation technique. So as we started the retreat, we were all given a koan—a baby

koan suitable for Westerners, but a Zen riddle that we were supposed to present our answer to four times a day to the teacher, to the roshi, in individual meetings. If you didn't have a good answer, he'd say things like, "stupid answer, ring the bell," and that meant you were dismissed. So he wasn't one of these warm and fuzzy, cuddly types like we tend to be. It was a little bit intimidating for some of us.

At one point, we'd been given very basic instructions about feeling the breath in the abdomen, and then we'd been given our koan. That was about the extent of the instruction. So in one question period, somebody raised their hand and said, "What should we do while we sit? Should we follow our breath, or should we reflect on our koan?" And Roshi's answer was very Zen. He said, "You can do whatever you want." That was the end of the answer. You can do whatever you want.

That's really true here, too. You can do whatever you want, and I know many of you will, regardless of what we want you to do or ask you to do. We realize that's out of our control. You will do what you want. But we do feel that there is a value in technique, and we want to share with you some aspects that we found helpful in working with techniques in meditation. Hopefully over the time you're here, whether it's nine weeks, seven weeks, or five weeks, you'll have a chance to play with them enough to get a feeling for what works for you.

That's the point of technique—to find what tools, what choices, what directions to aim the attention in best harmonize with your body and mind. Because the body and mind are always changing, different ones will work better at different times. That's why it's good if you have a few; then you'll know which one fits each condition.

When the mind is agitated, it might call for one choice. When the mind is calm, it might be another. When the body is tight, it might require one approach. When the body is easy, it might invite another. So we'd like to offer a range of practices, and we begin with the breath, I think because it's where the Buddha really began. His meditation instructions tend to start with the breath.

Looking over the whole field of Buddhist meditation practice—2,500 years and all the different traditions it has spread to—the breath is probably the most used single technique. But there's nothing sacred about it. I hope you really appreciate that. It is not the sacred object of meditation. It is not the only appropriate place to put your attention. It's a skillful place for many people, and for some people it's a really unskillful place.

If you find it difficult to relate with the breath, please talk with your teacher in the interview and see if you can work together to find an alternate focus that better harmonizes with where you're at. So there's no obligation for anybody to be with the breath. And please don't think that this is in some way the best technique. It's just one technique, and it's the one that we tend to start with.

But really more important than the object of the breath is the quality of mindfulness. Mindfulness can be applied to any part of your experience. So it can be applied to any of the sensations at the five physical

sense doors, any experience of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Those are bases for mindfulness. It can be applied to any phenomenon that you recognize at the mind door—to thoughts, to emotions, to intentions, to perceptions, to feeling tones, volition. Any of those are excellent grounds for mindfulness.

We tend to start with the breath, but mindfulness is the primary thing. So as Steve mentioned today, if in being with the breath you find the attention drawn somewhere else and you notice that, mindfulness is still happening, and that's really the key.

I find it interesting that after about thirty years of coming into this country, the practice of mindfulness is starting to become recognized outside the kind of fringe group that you and I represent. We're kind of an oddball assortment of people who would come into a place like this and be in silence for five weeks or nine weeks. Mainstream America isn't going to do this anytime soon.

Nonetheless, mindfulness is starting to be really recognized and appreciated in the mainstream. Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction has made a big impact. And that has brought it to the attention of the scientific community who are now starting to do research and experiments involving mindfulness that are showing some pretty amazing results. But I don't really want to go into those because I think you know from your own experience the benefits of mindfulness.

One group that I know of in Los Angeles is part of a $25 million funding effort. And there's a group within that dedicated to the study of mindfulness in a research-oriented way. So I think this is great. I think this will validate the beneficial effects of what we do and take it further into the mainstream as yoga has gone into the mainstream after years of being considered sort of a fringe and cult pursuit.

So as mindfulness becomes more mainstream, I wonder—I want to ask you a question. Have you ever tried to define it for yourself? If a friend came and asked you, "Okay, you do this practice called mindfulness, I'm reading about this. What do you mean by mindfulness?" Would you have a clear response for them?

Sometimes it's described as bare attention, just the sense that we connect with our experience. And around mindfulness, there's something to do with the present moment, right? It's important that mindfulness have to do with an experience in this moment. And bare attention represents that connecting of our attention to something that's happening, and we don't add anything to it. That's what the bare part means.

So we don't analyze it. We don't judge it. We don't compare it. We don't evaluate it. We don't wish it were something else. I mean, we may, but that's not mindfulness. Mindfulness doesn't add to the experience, and that's why it's called bare.

But I don't think that completely sums up what mindfulness is, for me anyway, because as far as I can tell, dogs have bare attention. Most of the time, when I look at a dog, they're just with what is. When they sleep, they dream, and then you see their paws going. But when they're alert, they're very happily, usually,

with what is. Are they being mindful?

Is a dog mindful? A dog is in the present moment. They're connecting to some sense experience. Are they being mindful? Is a baby mindful? A baby is also very connected to the present moment. Is a baby mindful?

For you to consider this question, I want to read some sections from the Satipatthana Sutta. This is in a way the Bible in our tradition for how to practice mindfulness. It is the discourse on the foundations, or the establishment, you might say, of mindfulness. It's found in the Majjhima Nikaya, one of the primary texts that came down to us in the language of Pali, a language from ancient India, and has been translated into many languages around the world. There's now a very good translation in English, and that's the one that I'll quote some sections from.

The Satipatthana Sutta is directed to a practitioner. In the way that the Buddha delivered it, he used the term bhikkhu because mostly he was speaking to male monastics in his day. But the term bhikkhu, according to the commentaries in this context, means anybody who's committed to the practice. So you don't have to be a monastic, you don't have to be a male. It means all of us who are seriously engaged in mindfulness practice. So this is how we are instructed by the Buddha to practice. These are just a few examples. There's a lot more in the whole sutta, but these are a few representative examples.

"Breathing in, the practitioner understands I am breathing in. Breathing out, she understands I am breathing out. Or, feeling a painful feeling, he understands I am feeling a painful feeling. Or, feeling a pleasant feeling, she understands I am feeling a pleasant feeling. She understands the mind affected by lust as the mind affected by lust, and the mind unaffected by lust as the mind unaffected by lust. Or, there being aversion in him, he understands there is aversion in me. Or, there being no aversion, he understands there is no aversion in me."

So these are the Buddha's own descriptions of how to practice mindfulness. What common word stands out to you from that selection? "Understands" is actually the way that Bhikkhu Bodhi translated the term from Pali. Understands.

So I would say that a good working definition of mindfulness is understanding what our present experience is. It doesn't have to be our total present experience. It just means understanding that experience where our attention is directed—understanding what's happening in the present moment where our attention is landing. That's mindfulness.

I like this word "understands" because there's some quality in there that I think is important to notice, and that is an intelligence. Understanding is the part, I would say, that's missing from the dog's experience. It's the part that's missing from the baby's experience. They don't quite have that—you could almost call it a reflective ability in consciousness to take note of what the present experience is. There's almost this sense of stepping back a little bit from the immediate engagement, and also understanding what's happening to

us.

This quality of intelligence is a really important piece of mindfulness because it is the opening of wisdom. It's through our mindful relationship to our experience that the wisdom door opens up to us. Wisdom is the word we usually use to translate the Pali term paññā, an important component of the Eightfold Path. And they are so related, these two qualities of mindfulness and wisdom, that one of my teachers from Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, seldom spoke about them separately. He would use the combined term sati-paññā, mindfulness-wisdom, and he would talk about this as the natural functioning of our beings. When we are present and we pay attention, our mind naturally engages with our experience from this quality of mindfulness and understanding. It comes forth naturally if we let it.

This is really what we're training in, this quality of mindfulness with understanding or wisdom. So then let's back up one more step. This is what mindfulness is. Why do we do it? Why on earth would you put yourself in this situation for nine weeks? I'm sure you've asked yourself this more than once.

This is an arduous practice. I really appreciate working with people in long retreat because I know each one of you has a tremendous amount of commitment, tremendous faith in order to undertake this kind of activity. It's a challenge every day, sometimes many times every hour. This is a challenge. Why do we do it? What is it about mindfulness?

There's something about a wisdom of staying in the present moment that I think is an important part of it. There was a cartoon in the New Yorker a few months ago that really illustrated our human condition and said something about the nature of desires. The cartoon was in three panels. The first panel was of a man at work, sitting in front of his computer, working away on the keyboard. But over his head there was this little thought balloon which had an image of him out on the golf course playing golf.

Next panel: same guy out on the golf course striking a ball off the driving range, but over his head was an image of himself at home making love to his partner. Third panel—can you guess? Same guy at home making love to his partner, thinking about his PC at work.

This is the nature of samsaric mind. Wherever we are, we can't be entirely present because the mind is running on to somewhere else. Desire is taking our thoughts somewhere else. That kind of life doesn't really have the possibility of deep satisfaction—the life where we're always somewhere else. As the Dalai Lama expressed it, the present moment is the only place that we can feel love. So the present moment is an important piece of the puzzle.

But there's another aspect to it also, which is that this property of mindfulness as the channel for wisdom begins to interact with our experience in a way that wakes us up. As we start to connect with the facets of our human experience—all the experiences of the body and of the mind, the outside world and the inside world—mindfulness looking on those things with the eye of understanding starts to make some sense of life. This is really the unfolding of wisdom. I want to talk more about it later, exactly how that comes about

and how it develops. But just to say that the wisdom piece of mindfulness is the one that ultimately gives the greatest satisfaction through the development of freedom.

So I want to talk a little bit technically for a few minutes about meditation practice. I'll talk about this in relation to the breath, but I hope you'll see the connection with any other focus that you may experience. I want to talk about two words that are really helpful in understanding how meditation practice functions. These two words are connecting and sustaining. They're the English translation of two Pali words: vitaka and vichara. They're, you might say, the beginnings of concentration. We'll talk more about concentration later, but concentration is the settled quality of mind that lets us start to feel some stability, some calm, some steadiness with our attention.

As we practice meditation with the breath, notice that what you do when you're being properly mindful is that you connect your attention to the breath and then you sustain the attention there for a short period of time. That's the meaning of these Pali words. First, we choose to connect the attention to the sensations of the breath, and then we let the attention rest there for a little bit of time.

This little bit of time is important because if you have the sense that you should last the whole hour, you'll get really tight. So don't try to sustain for very long. The recommended time is half a breath. Don't try to sustain that connection for more than half a breath. So we connect with the breath as we feel the in-breath coming. We let the attention stay there for half a breath, and then we kind of let go. When the out-breath begins, we connect again, and we sustain for just that length of time.

I think this is realistic for us. If you have in mind "I should sustain for ten breaths even," you can get really tight and frustrated and discouraged. If you have in mind "I only have to sustain for half a breath," I think you can do it. I think I can do it. I think this is a helpful way to gauge our effort.

Even so, we might get tight because we miss a breath, or two, or three, or five minutes, or ten minutes. I mean, if you're here starting a retreat, I would suspect that most of you have been gone for ten minutes at a time, maybe twenty minutes at a time today, without connecting to the present. That happens on early days of retreat. Don't be discouraged.

Because we feel a little judgment about that, sometimes we get tight. "Oh, I can't miss this breath." But does the tightness actually help us stay connected? Not so well.

Other times we might be so relaxed, we'll say, "Whatever happens, happens." This is the hippie approach to meditation. "I'll just sit back, man, and whatever happens, I'm cool with that."

And that's not so satisfying either because the whole period can go by and we haven't really connected with anything.

So we want to find that quality of effort that's somewhere in between. This is really what's meant by the balance of effort—a mind that's firm enough to make a good connection with our focus, let's say the

breath, but not so tight that it squeezes the life out of it.

An analogy that one of our teachers used was trying to pick up a baked potato with a fork. Let's say you have half of a baked potato, a small potato, and you'd like to pick it up and put it in your mouth. Notice the quality of effort with which the fork hits the potato. If you hit the potato too hard, what happens? It breaks up, and you can't pick anything up. But if you hit it too soft, the fork doesn't go in and you also can't pick it up. So you have to press the fork in with just the right amount of force. Then it picks up the potato and you can eat it.

Similarly, when connecting to any meditation subject like the breath, find where that appropriate balance is for you of effort. It can change moment by moment, but keep trying until you find it.

This is really a key to something I think Steve or Carol mentioned last night about right attitude. You want an attitude of mind in your practice that's not too aggressive, not too gaining or striving, because that leads to being too tight. But you also want an attitude that's not too laid back or too passive, because that will lead to you being out of touch. So you want to find the place that's firm but not too hard and connect with the breath in that way.

Remember that the point of the meditation is to be present, to be mindful in as many moments as you can. But in a lot of ways, that's not up to our control. So be really patient with yourself in those periods when mindfulness just doesn't happen. It's not always up to us. A lot of times, it's not our choice that we're away in thought for a long time. It's just what happens—not under our control, so not right for us to blame ourselves or judge ourselves for that.

Remember that you can always just start over. When you've come to the end of one of those long periods, attempting to blame ourselves doesn't help so much. Remember, you can just begin again. Every moment is a new opportunity. You don't have to go back and figure out what you thought about. You don't have to resolve the train of thinking. You can just let it go. You don't have to excuse yourself or even forgive yourself. You say, "Oh, here again," and we start anew. You can be grateful for that.

Now the development of mindfulness leads in two directions, which I'm sure you've heard often. The Pali terms are samatha and vipassana. You could say these are the two big streams of the benefits of our practice. In English, these are translated as calm and insight.

So samatha basically means calm. Vipassana we usually translate as insight. The literal meaning is more like seeing clearly, seeing things the way they are.

Over the 2,500 years that these teachings have been around, there has been a lot of comment on these two streams of the practice. Different people have said, "Oh, if you want to develop samatha or calm, these are the practices you should do. And if you want to develop vipassana or insight, these are the practices you should do." So over time, there's been this division of certain practices that are considered right for developing calm or samatha and others that are right for developing insight or vipassana.

Some teachers will tell you, "Oh no, you're doing a samatha practice now, don't go looking for insight." Or "You're doing an insight practice now, don't worry about samatha."

As I read the Buddha's teachings, he never talked in this kind of separated way. Rather, as I read the teachings, he said when you practice mindfulness, you will develop in both samatha and vipassana. They both really support one another. It is true that you can take an approach that emphasizes one or the other, but here in this course, most of us will be developing both. So we'll make our instructions on the assumption that you're interested in both calm and insight.

But it is very interesting to meet people who've developed a lot of calm because it's hard to tell them from fully enlightened beings. It's an interesting point about the development of calm.

One of the teachers I got to spend time with was Dipa Ma, and I'm sure many of you have heard of her. There's a wonderful book about her written by Amy Schmidt, who was a resident teacher here for many years. I'd say of all the dharma books in the last ten years, this is one of the most immediately happy-making dharma books, and especially for women. Women who read the Dipa Ma book tend to really connect with her as a kind of living teaching figure, even though she died a number of years ago. So I highly recommend, especially for the women, that you check out the book called *Dipa Ma*.

Dipa Ma was a very accomplished yogi who had experienced deep insight and profound stillness—deep samatha. Just to give you an idea of what her concentration was like: she went to her first meditation retreat and had been practicing for about a day when she was supposed to go for an interview with her teacher. As she was walking toward her teacher, she found she couldn't lift her left foot off the ground. Something just stopped her, and she wasn't sure what had happened. So she just stood there for a few minutes—"Oh, can't move. Guess I'm supposed to be here." She didn't fight it. After a few minutes of still not being able to move, she looked down and discovered that a dog had bitten her ankle, closed his teeth around her ankle—that's why she couldn't move. She didn't even really feel it, except as a kind of weight. That's how steady her mind was at that point.

So spending time with Dipa Ma was always amazing because her mind never seemed to move. And I couldn't tell if that was because she was so highly enlightened or because she had developed calm to such a high degree.

Another person who reminds me of this is a teacher from Thailand named Ajahn Jomnian. Ajahn Jomnian has a monastery in the south of Thailand near the town of Krabi. He's in his late sixties now and has been a monk since he was very young. He has done a lot of metta practice, so he has a very joyful disposition and strong concentration. He also has psychic powers that arose out of the concentration. One of the things he said a few years ago is that he hasn't had any anger in twenty-five years. And it's not because he's isolated, living in a cave—he runs a large monastery with many people coming and going, and I'm sure many headaches. He said he hasn't had any anger. Now, is that because he's so realized, or is that because of the steadiness of his mind from concentration? I don't know.

Another teacher who really impresses me was here at the Forest Refuge this summer. His name is Pauk Sayadaw. He's a Burmese teacher who teaches a very complete and complex system of meditation, the first part of which is seriously oriented toward developing samatha. He wants you to develop what are called the four jhanas or absorption states—very high levels of concentration. He himself is clearly a master of those concentrated states. Then he instructs you how to use that concentrated mind to turn to insight, to see the nature of reality very clearly.

In himself, he is a very impressive being. I find him remarkable. I've met a fairly wide range of teachers in Buddhist circles, and of all the ones I've met, Pauk Sayadaw reminds me of the stories of the Buddha more than anybody else I've encountered. His mind seems always unflappable. I've never seen him in anything but a state of equanimity. He always has a very warm and loving presence, very nonjudgmental, very accepting. And he's totally focused on dharma. Nothing else interests him. I try to make conversation with him, and it just falls flat after about a sentence, because he'll go there to be polite for about one sentence, and then it's clear he's not interested anymore.

He was at the Forest Refuge, and the Burmese donors would come up from New York or Boston to visit with him. He'd have lunch with them and exchange a couple of pleasantries, and then he'd retire to his room. Because if the conversation wasn't about dharma, it didn't interest him. So he manifests this complete dedication. He's been in robes since he was ten years old and has complete dedication to his own liberation and the liberation of anyone else who wishes to follow his teaching.

So these are some of the powers of a concentrated mind, a still mind, a steady mind in conjunction with insight. This is the direction that mindfulness of breathing leads—both the deepening of stillness and the deepening of insight.

In terms of meditation technique, there is no other that the Buddha described in as much detail. There's this wonderful sutta in the Majjhima called the Anapanasati Sutta—a discourse on mindfulness of in-and-out breathing—where the Buddha describes in detail how this practice unfolds for us as we follow it all the way through. He said that this practice is sufficient to follow all the way through to realization, and in doing so, it covers the other foundations of mindfulness as well.

Mindfulness of breathing is about the body primarily, but as we explore it with some depth and some consistency, it also opens up the other foundations of mindfulness—feeling tone (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), mind states or citta, and the fourth foundation called dhammas or dharmic principles.

The Buddha described the unfolding of this practice in sixteen separate stages in the sutta, normally organized into four groups of four. In each stage, the meditator is experiencing these developments both through breathing in and through breathing out.

The first group of four: One notices whether the breath is long. One notices if the breath is short. One breathes in experiencing the whole body. And one tranquilizes the bodily formation.

So fairly early on, the meditator is using the breath to bring calm into the body. This is one of the first beautiful benefits of breath as a meditation—it starts to calm the body. The breath is particularly good for this because of its rhythmic nature. I'm sure you've felt this, for short periods or for long periods, how that very steady in-and-out activity has a soothing quality to it. The rhythm can eventually convey that soothing quality to the body, and the body starts to calm down.

Whenever I enter a retreat from the outside world, from a busy period in life, one of the first things I notice is how busy my body is—that it's stored up tensions and energies and hasn't fully relaxed. Then as the retreat goes on, I feel the body relaxing and letting go. So the breath begins to bring a calming energy to the body.

The next four descriptions: breathing in and out, experiencing rapture, experiencing pleasure. The commentaries liken this to the second foundation on feeling tone, the pleasant aspect of experience. You might try this in a sitting—see if in breathing in you can have a sense of that energy picking up throughout the body and of a pleasant quality to that energy.

Third in this step: experiencing the mental formations. So early on, only seven steps in, the meditation on the breath is leading to looking at the mind. When we talk about the breath, don't think that you have to hold it separate from knowing what's happening in the mind. They're really meant to be integrated. We can look at the quality of mind that is with the breath. The relationship we create with the breath—is it an aggressive one where we're taking hold too hard? Is it too distant or laid back where we're not connecting enough? Are we finding the right relationship with the breath?

Next step: tranquilizing the mental formation. As the breath calms the body, so also in time it starts to calm the mind. These two steps of calming the body and calming the mind are important developments through the mindfulness of breath.

The third tetrad has four more components: breathing in, experiencing the mind—so knowing clearly what's in the mind—gladdening the mind, concentrating the mind, and liberating the mind. That's delightful. Liberating the mind, and we're only at step twelve.

This has a special meaning in the text: the mind that's free from hindrances. You might notice this in your practice—there are moments when the hindrances of desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt aren't active. In those moments, feel that quality of freedom. It may be there a number of times in one sitting. In that moment, the mind is free. It is liberated. Breath leads in that direction.

Because of the beautiful qualities that grow out of mindfulness of breath, there can easily come a striving around these states. Just think what we've covered so far: tranquility, rapture, pleasure, gladdening, concentrating, liberating. Who wouldn't want that? So notice if there starts to come a striving element in relationship to mindfulness of breathing: "I'm being mindful so that I can get concentrated. I'm being mindful so that I can get glad. I'm being mindful so that I can feel free."

Of course, if we do it from that kind of ulterior motive, it doesn't work. We have to really be with the breath in an innocent kind of way, and we have to see these benefits all as byproducts. That innocent attention leads to all this beautiful result, but we can't force it.

So we learn that right effort is just about forming that relationship in the moment with the breath—not pushing it, not trying to get over it to get into a different next moment. All the beautiful qualities of meditation come out of a moment where we accept it the way it is. Never out of aversion or grasping. This is always the first step: accepting the moment the way it is. Then the beautiful qualities come from that.

When I sat with Palak Sayadaw the first time, I went over to Burma and spent six weeks with him.

And a friend of mine was already there and knew I was coming, so he told Sayadaw about my arrival. I'm afraid he gave me quite a buildup, saying, "Oh, this teacher from California is coming. It would be good if we could give him a nice kuti."

So they did. I received a beautiful kuti when I arrived, and Sayadaw went out of his way to welcome me. I was able to see him every day for interviews, which was wonderfully positive. At the same time, I felt like I had a reputation to live up to. After practicing for about thirty years, I thought I should be somewhere significant along this path.

But Sayadaw's level of concentration is extraordinarily high. I charged in and practiced as intensely as I could. I made some progress and was advancing on his system, but then I completely plateaued. I never got close to where he would have liked me to reach.

Did I get caught up in striving? Absolutely. I had to deal with it as it arose—this desire to be somewhere other than fully present, motivated by something beyond just being here now. It was an ego thing. I had to examine that and let go as completely as possible.

When I sat with him again at Forest Refuge, I encountered a friend who sometimes joined the daily sits. He saw me recently and asked, "How did you work with the striving in relation to Sayadaw?" I replied, "I'd already fallen on my face in Burma—I didn't have to worry about doing it again here." So it was actually much easier the second time.

We do learn to recognize and work with this striving quality of mind, this gaining mind that craves some special experience from our practice. But the practice truly unfolds only when we can accept the moment exactly as it is and find ease with that. That's freedom—the freedom to discover peace of mind with things precisely as they are.

What leads in this direction is the fourth group of stages in relating to the breath. As we breathe in and out, we contemplate impermanence. You'll notice that these final four stages are entirely about insight or vipassana. Some of the first twelve were clearly about concentration—tranquilizing the mind, gladdening the mind, concentrating the mind—clearly on the side of samatha. These last four are unmistakably on the

side of vipassana.

Contemplating fading away—the Pali word is viraga, literally meaning "not passion" or dispassion. It's a synonym for the unconditioned, for nibbana. Contemplating nibbana as I breathe in, contemplating nibbana as I breathe out. Not the concept, but the direct experience.

Contemplating cessation or nirodha—this means the cessation of suffering. This is truly the third noble truth. The end of suffering is the end of craving. So we contemplate in our direct experience of breathing in and out what it feels like when craving ends, even if only temporarily. With the end of craving comes the end of suffering.

Finally, contemplating relinquishment or letting go. What the commentaries say this refers to is releasing any of the defilements of mind, the torments of mind that Carol mentioned last night—letting go of greed, aversion, and delusion, hopefully at some point for good, so that these qualities of mind never again visit. This is the final freedom, the direction toward which the entire path leads.

This great stability of mind where the mind is no longer troubled by self-centered thoughts or confusion in any direction whatsoever. This is truly the kind of peace from which love and compassion flow naturally. Love and compassion are already present when the mind isn't preoccupied with self-centered striving.

As the mind settles and becomes free from these torments, love and compassion emerge naturally, expressing themselves in countless forms of connection, helping, sharing, and generosity. This is what the Buddha was teaching the Satipatthana for. This is why the Buddha taught the practice of mindfulness.

Through understanding the way things truly are, as mindfulness comes into contact with objects like the breath, body, sounds, thoughts, and moods, we begin to see their specific characteristics—an in-breath, an out-breath, a sound, the quality of fear, generosity, anxiety, or compassion. We see how all these phenomena have their individual nature, but they're also subject to the universal characteristics of impermanence, unreliability, and selflessness.

As mindfulness and wisdom together begin to uncover all these characteristics, we find ourselves releasing more and more of any kind of clinging. It's the letting go of clinging that allows the mind to be liberated, released finally into a direct realization of the unconditioned. It's that direct realization that accomplishes the work of relinquishing the defilements.

So as the Buddha said toward the end of the Satipatthana Sutta: "Friends, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, and for the attainment of the true way and the realization of nibbana—namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

In the mindfulness of the breath, we find a complete path in itself that opens up to all the other foundations, beginning with the development of calm and opening into the development of liberating wisdom.

Let's just sit for a minute in silence, please.

[Silent sitting]

"This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana—namely, the four foundations of mindfulness."

Thank you for your attention. It was a pleasure to be with you at the start of this retreat and also in the new hall. It's the first time I've taught in the new hall, so it's been a great pleasure.

Just one brief announcement about interviews: Interviews for the whole group will begin tomorrow. Due to the somewhat idiosyncratic nature of this computer system, there was no way to separate out the people who had interviews today from the whole group. The result is that some people who had interviews today—the continuing retreatants—may also be on the list for tomorrow. In addition, about half of the new group will be scheduled for tomorrow and about half the day after.

So please, everybody check the board because your number could be up tomorrow. Please do check, and we look forward to seeing you then.

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