Concentration

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:11

So tonight I'd like to talk more on this theme of concentration. We've alluded to it and mentioned it here and there. Vance talked a little about the difference between concentration and mindfulness in one of the questions, and I want to go into more detail because it's such an important factor in our overall meditation and in the Buddha's Eightfold Path and teachings.

Concentration has been around in human history for a long time. Go back as far as there is history and there have been priests and priestesses and shamans who have used the power of concentration to develop relationship with spirits or nature or altered states of consciousness to make healing possible. That's been going on as long as history has been around, as far as I can tell, in just about every culture on the face of the earth.

In the Buddha's lifetime, about 2,500 years ago, as he was leaving home and starting to practice—this is the phase we call the Bodhisattva—he set off from his home on his spiritual quest. Normally, when we talk about a bodhisattva in our tradition, we're referring to Siddhartha Gautama before he became the Buddha, when he was journeying toward awakening. In the Mahayana tradition, there are many bodhisattvas, and perhaps you all are bodhisattvas. In the lifetime of our Buddha, he was the bodhisattva in recorded history and our canon.

I should fill in some of this history because there are misconceptions going around. He was not the son of a king. He was not a prince. There were two kings in neighboring kingdoms, Magadha and Kosala, but his father was not among those kings. His father was like a chieftain, the head of a clan, the head of a village. The Bodhisattva grew up with wealth but was not destined to become a king because the kings already had sons. Nevertheless, he left his luxurious lifestyle and renounced worldly life to go off on his spiritual quest to find the end of suffering.

The first two teachers we have record of him studying with taught him deep states of concentration. These were formless attainments of nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception. While he was practicing in those states, he was beyond the reach of suffering. They were temporary states of freedom, but he always had to emerge from them. Once he returned to ordinary consciousness, he again faced the inevitability of dukkha—aging, illness, death, and eventual rebirth.

Even though he had developed strong states of concentration and was so accomplished that his teachers asked him to teach alongside them, this wasn't what he was seeking. Thank goodness the Bodhisattva moved on and discovered for himself a true path to liberation—what we could call perpetual liberation, unshakable deliverance of mind.

The Bodhisattva set aside those strong concentration practices as inadequate, continued on his journey, and found his way to the path of liberation that we have practiced and you have practiced today. This factor of concentration remains very central in the Buddha's teachings, so I want to talk about that centrality tonight—what concentration is, what it means, how it's developed, what obstructs it, and some of the deepening levels that are possible for us as practitioners.

In reference to this centrality of concentration in many spiritual traditions, you see cartoons referencing it frequently these days. I think this indicates something archetypal in the experience of concentration—all these cartoons about the guru on the mountaintop appearing everywhere. There's something archetypal they're tuning into.

One cartoon I particularly liked shows a seeker climbing up a cliff. On a plateau at the edge of the cliff, probably in the Himalayas, sits someone dressed in yogic garb—basically just a loincloth—a male sitting in lotus position. The seeker comes over the top of the hill and sits in front of the master, presumably. The caption reads: "If I knew the meaning of life, would I be sitting in this cave in my underpants?" This I take to be on the wisdom end of the cartoons.

But there's also something archetypal in the image of meditators. For me, the archetype of concentration is someone, male or female, sitting still, eyes closed, wrapped up in a shawl. This personifies something essential about concentration.

What I love about sitting on a long retreat, as you all are doing, is that if I come into the hall early in the morning or late at night when it's fairly empty, there will almost always be somebody sitting like that—sitting still, wrapped up in a shawl, embodying that archetype.

Several things emerge from this archetype and from observing you when you're sitting like that. One is the quality of stillness. The body is unmoving and there's a sense that attention is drawn inward. There's this drawing of attention into stillness and a wrapped-upness that the shawl symbolizes. But the wrapped-upness is also an inner quality. With that inner stillness comes a sense of being withdrawn from the world and being in touch with some dimension of mind that's more satisfying than normal worldly activities.

This is what the image of concentration represents for me, and it's something you all have been developing. We've been in retreat now for ten days.

For some of you, 10 days might be the longest period of retreat that you've done, or perhaps the longest you've done in a while, since we've essentially been closed for most of three years. So this is already a substantial period of retreat, and I'm definitely feeling in the meetings that I have the factor of concentration developing for people. This is happening for you already.

But I was really struck by something. Many of you have been to Spirit Rock. There are a lot of people here from California, and many of you have visited Spirit Rock. You know there's a beautiful meditation hall

perched up on the hill where the retreats happen, and dormitories where people live when they're on retreat. But that is a relatively recent development—Spirit Rock was purchased about 10 years before that meditation hall went up. So for the first 10 years, the field where the hall is now and the residences was all open land.

If you look at the shape of it, as you're looking toward the meditation hall from the road going up, on the right-hand side is a curve that faces the hillside going up to your left, and it kind of makes a natural amphitheater. And then there's a creek that runs by the meditation hall down the middle.

In one of the early years that Spirit Rock was there, we invited Thich Nhat Hanh to come and teach. We set up a big platform on the right-hand side for him to sit on, and then the amphitheater—the natural amphitheater, the slope of the hillside—was filled with about a thousand meditators. He came to teach a daylong.

Of course, maybe the Buddha could speak to 500 people at once and they'd all get enlightened, but today we needed amplifiers. So we set up big speakers on towers. Thay was on a big platform and everybody could see him due to the shape of the amphitheater. He started speaking and teaching meditation, and as I was sitting in the crowd, what I felt happening was that he was casting a spell of samadhi over the whole crowd. He just emanated stillness, and as you tuned into him—both his words and his body language—he communicated that stillness to a thousand people. It was like this layer of samadhi just settled over the whole crowd. You could feel it; it was tangible.

And then in a break, he took everybody for a walking meditation to the other end of the property. There's still this photo at Spirit Rock of Thay leading this troop of about 500 meditators walking behind him, going up to the other end of the property and then walking back. It was really a beautiful day and a beautiful manifestation of the depth of meditation—something contagious about it.

Concentration comes up in so many of the Buddhist teachings. It is the last factor in the Eightfold Path, and the Eightfold Path is somewhat sequential. So in a way it is building to this factor of concentration. It follows mindfulness, so if you think of it as a sequential deepening, concentration comes after mindfulness in the sequence.

Today in the media, there is all sorts of emphasis on mindfulness. We've got a magazine now called *Mindf ulness*—you've really made it when you've got a magazine. So all the attention and most of the research is on mindfulness. There are so many academic studies now on the psychological benefits of mindfulness, the health benefits, the social benefits, and so forth.

But in the galaxy of the Buddha's teachings, in the Eightfold Path, concentration is the brighter star. It's one step further than mindfulness along the path. So I would say, let's wait for the magazine called *Concen tration*. But the thing is, that largely depends on people practicing mindfulness long enough to reach it, which takes some time. You've probably noticed that. It takes time for concentration to develop.

As I say, just in the last few days, I've been feeling in the practice meetings the evidence of its developing in many of you that I've spoken to. But this is something that takes time. When we look at our practice over many years, concentration will continue to deepen, and that also takes time. It takes time really to grow concentration into great strength.

One of the things that Vance talked about in answering the question on concentration and mindfulness was a translation of the word samadhi, which is the Pali that we translate as concentration. And Vance said it's not a very good translation. I agree with that.

It misses the nuances or brings in connotations that aren't accurate. In English, concentration refers to an exclusive focus of attention. It's like trying to do homework—don't distract me with that music. Although how many students actually say that? They're more likely to say, "Please turn up the music."

Samadhi does not carry that connotation of exclusive focus. It can, but it doesn't have to. Samadhi isn't about a focus of attention, either narrow or wide. Samadhi is about the quality of mind. Vance talked about a possible synonym being this factor of stability. That's a good way to think about concentration. When concentration arrives, the mind feels stable.

One of the definitions found in the discourses is the Pali term cittassa ekagata—unification of mind. Cittassa means "of the mind," and ekagata means "unification" or "oneness." This is a beautiful way to understand what concentration, what samadhi, really means: the mind becomes unified.

How is our mind usually in daily life? Often distracted—running off to past, running off to future, getting involved in analyzing, getting involved in remembrance. Not unified. But when the mind becomes unified, something really powerful happens.

Wordsworth wrote: "The world is too much with us. Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." That distractedness wastes our powers. When the mind's whole energy is brought back together in that unification, the mind's natural power is returned to it. We find that when the mind comes back together, it becomes strong, stable, steady, and penetrating. This is really what's involved in the term samadhi.

Much more than just a narrow exclusive focus, it's the mind coming back into itself. Now it is concentrated in a sense—the same way frozen orange juice is concentrated. Frozen orange juice means that all the non-essential stuff has been squeezed out, and what remains is quite powerful. It's concentrated. That's the way the mind becomes. When it gets concentrated, it's strong. And that's what we're developing.

One of the first things that happens with that stability of mind is we start to feel peace. This is a wonderful development. When I came upon this in my early months of retreat meditation, I thought, "How come nobody ever told me about this peace being possible?" I hadn't known it in my daily life. My mind was so busy. I was trained to think—I went through university, and probably many of you had a similar

experience. Going through university, we're trained to think, and I thought that was a solution to all my problems. So I kept thinking. Only through meditation could I find that settledness that brought a degree of peace.

I'm sure some of you have noticed and reported that when the mind acquires this kind of stability, thoughts are not so problematic. Thoughts arise, but due to the stability, they just pass away. There's enough presence that we don't grab after them, and they don't actually disturb this inner peace that has been growing. We're not so buffeted by the changing weather within.

It's really important that we start to recognize the presence of concentration in our direct experience, because as we recognize it, we find our way back to it more easily. We think, "Okay, this is a possibility." We start to learn how it arose.

This is part of the fourth foundation that someone will talk about, not too long. This is the path to bringing into existence that factor of concentration, which is one of the seven factors of enlightenment.

So we start to see that one of the characteristics is its stability. And what's stable? Our present moment attention. Our attention is stable in the present moment when the mind becomes concentrated. And that means that we can be with a number of moments of experience in a row with mindfulness. That's one of the great benefits.

So we start to notice when it's present. The Buddha recommended this in the Third Foundation: "The practitioner understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind." So we start to recognize it and how it arose. And also we'll see how it passes. It's not permanent.

When I first came upon it, I had an idea that meditation was like a linear development. And now that I'd reached this state of concentration, it was going to last. And I thought, "Wow, my life will be fantastic when I go back with this state of concentration. Nothing's going to upset me. I'm going to get great jobs and find a great relationship, because I'm going to be such a stable guy."

It didn't last past the next sitting.

So concentration is impermanent. It will arise. It will pass away. Don't worry. Once you've learned the pathway to it, you can develop it again.

So let's talk about why we would like to develop samadhi. I've already talked about part of it. First, it makes us calm. And that's a wonderful thing in and of itself. There is, with peace, the feeling of wellbeing and ease. And I think this is what so many of us have looked for in meditation, whether in the secular version through mindfulness-based stress reduction, or in this intensive version here on retreat—we're looking for a degree of peace of mind.

And as it develops, it's very satisfying. I don't know how one can live a happy life truly without some

access to this kind of peace of mind. For me, it's just become a foundation, kind of a baseline that things may come along and disturb, but the mind knows how to find its way back there. And so there's a real sense of protection and refuge in that discovery and a source of happiness.

The Dalai Lama says, "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." Samadhi, collectedness, is a big part of this.

So first it makes us calm, and that brings a significant measure of happiness. And second, it sets us free if we continue to develop it in the direction of insight.

When the mind is stirred up, it can't see very clearly. We're thrown all kinds of ways by the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. And we can't really see so clearly the way things are. As the mind settles, now we can start to see clearly. From that base of peace, we can see things more the way they are.

This is from a discourse of the Buddha: "The purpose and benefit of concentration is the knowledge and vision of things as they are." I'm going to read that again because it's really important: "The purpose and benefit of concentration is the knowledge and vision of things as they are."

That is, when the mind settles, we can see things truly. We can see things accurately. We can see things the way they are. And what's the purpose of seeing things as they are? That's what leads to liberation.

So the same discourse goes on to explain how this seeing leads to liberation. So concentration is a really key ingredient on the path to liberation—a key ingredient for insight.

It's a little bit like, suppose you're on a merry-go-round, right? You've hopped on one of those painted horses and you're going round and round and round.

It's a lot of fun. But a friend of yours walks up to the side of the merry-go-round and holds up a newspaper. You're spinning by and you think, well, it must be important because my friend is holding it up. What does it say? Can't read it.

Then the merry-go-round starts to slow down. You come to rest in front of your friend and you can read the headlines: "Everything changes. If you hold on, you suffer. Letting go is freeing." Oh, I got it.

So that's what collectedness lets us see. We can read those headlines about the way things are in this life.

How does concentration develop? Again, as a few people have said, one of the key things we're going to say again and again—in Vance's talk it was the second job of the yogi—is to build in continuity of mindfulness. It is from continuity of moments of mindfulness that concentration develops.

When I say continuity, I don't want you to think that it's absolutely continuous, like one string going on and on. Rather, it's like there's a moment here and then we get lost. Then there's a moment here and maybe we get lost. Then there's a moment here and we get lost. That's okay. Later there'll be a moment here and a moment here and a moment here and a moment here. Then we get lost. And then we go back

to it and build it up here and build up here, build up here.

So continuity doesn't mean absolutely continuous. It just means we put it in more and more frequently.

Joseph Goldstein loves to teach and talk about the noting practice. One of his metrics for you to use to gauge how your noting practice is going is what he calls NPMs—how many notes per minute are coming through? A note is a moment of mindfulness. How many moments of mindfulness per minute are coming through?

This may be a little too quantitative for some of you. Being a math minor in college, I love it, but you don't have to. So this is one way to think about continuity. A more accurate term would be frequency—the frequency of moments of mindfulness.

This is why mindfulness precedes concentration in the Eightfold Path. We put in right effort to develop right mindfulness, and right mindfulness is what develops right concentration. By and large, we can't jump from right effort to right concentration. That's not within our power for most of us. Someone like Dipa Ma, yes. Someone like you and me, not yet. So we have to go through mindfulness to get to right concentration.

Say you've been concentrated for a period and it falls away. What often happens? Oh, I want it back. If we try directly for concentration—I want to reproduce that feeling of concentration—it leads to striving. Because we can't regenerate that concentration. We have to go through the process of mindfulness. And not mindfulness with forcing and over-efforting, but a calm, relaxed interest in the present moment. That will lead onward to concentration.

So basically, it's about doing one thing at a time and giving it your full attention. The unification of mind means give it your full attention in this moment.

A lot of you probably have heard of this Korean Zen master who used to teach, who founded a center in Providence, Rhode Island. His name was Seung Sahn. He was very famous in Korea, and when he came here, nobody knew him. He didn't have a community. He didn't have a sangha. He went to work repairing machines in a laundromat to support himself while he established Korean Zen meditation in this country.

But he was a fantastic teacher and drew lots of students and became quite famous. He came to IMS one year at the end of a three-month course. I've never heard so much laughter in the hall as when Sansanim was speaking. He was really an interesting, creative teacher.

One of his ways of encouraging practice was to tell people: when you sit, just sit. And when you eat, just eat. This is like doing one thing at a time. But he was living in community with some of his students, as they do in the Zen world. And one of his students said, "But Sansanim, I've seen you at breakfast and you're sitting and eating at the same time."

Not at a loss for words, he replied, "When you sit and eat, just sit and eat." But do it wholly, do it

wholeheartedly.

So it develops from sustained moments of mindfulness. There's this fifth century meditation text from Sri Lanka called the Visuddhimagga. It is one of the key ancient texts in our lineage in the Theravadan tradition. It was compiled by a monk named Buddhaghosa, and it's still used today as a basis for teaching meditation.

In the Visuddhimagga, which means "path of purification," there are forty different meditations recommended for developing strong concentration. They include things like corpses, kasinas—which hardly any of us have heard of—they're like colored discs or just color or representations of the elements that one focuses attention on. There are recollections about death, about Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. And then the last two are ones that are much more common in our community today: mindfulness of breathing and the brahmaviharas.

Any of these can be used as focuses to develop strong samadhi. Usually these kinds of practices are lumped in a category called samatha practices. Samatha is usually translated as tranquility. Specific practices are offered many times to develop the quality of tranquility and at the same time develop concentration or samadhi.

Samatha practices are contrasted with the other side, which is vipassana—insight practices. That's really what we're engaged with here. So we have practices of samatha, practices for vipassana.

In the Buddha's teachings, he didn't distinguish between those two. He talked about the development both of tranquility and insight, but he didn't say, "Do this to develop tranquility and do this to develop insight." More of the flavor you get from the Buddhist teachings at the time is that when you practice mindfulness, you will develop both samatha and vipassana. You will develop both calm and insight. So that's the way we tend to hold it.

Yet it is true that some practices will emphasize one more strongly than another. So for people who really want to pursue the path of tranquility, we do recommend at times in retreat practices like mindfulness of breathing or practices of the brahmaviharas. This is something that sometimes goes on in these six-week or three-month retreats. People will choose to focus on a samatha practice for a period of time. It's something that you don't decide on the spur of the moment here. You really need to work it out with your teacher ahead of time, if that's something you want to do. And that means your teacher needs to know your overall practice by that point. So it's not something that we do a lot, but we occasionally do.

The Buddha said this very interesting thing: that samatha and vipassana have different purposes. Samatha is for the abandoning of lust—and that's in the broadest possible sense, all forms of desire. In other words, the development of strong tranquility itself can offset desire because there's so much contentment in the present moment. The mind is not pulled outside. Samatha is for the abandoning of lust. Vipassana is for the abandoning of ignorance.

Ignorance is the fundamental blindness that keeps us trapped in samsara. When we cut to the root of ignorance and truly abandon it, then the heart and mind are truly free. Heart and mind are truly free and it's possible then to abandon the cycles of samsara, samsaric existence.

And just speaking again in praise of samatha, there's this very beautiful passage—one of the most beautiful passages in the Pali Canon, which I want to come back to in a later talk—where the Buddha talks about more or less a glide path into Nibbana, into the realization of the unconditioned or enlightenment. And one of the first steps in the glide path is the stilling of all mental formations. And the Pali is sabba-sankhara-samatha. Sabba-sankhara-samatha. The last word means the stilling. It's samatha.

Saba means all. Sankara means mental formations. Samato—all mental formations go to stillness. This is the entryway into the realization of nibbana. Based on that understanding, I sometimes wonder if a better translation for samatha might be "stillness." It has a deeper ring than tranquility. You might like to think of that—stillness meditation. It's a very appealing notion for me.

We've talked about samadhi as the unification of mind. A synonym for this is ekagata, which is included as a definition at one point. But ekagata has often been translated in this tradition as "one-pointed." You can see the similarity—unification of mind or one-pointed. Which do you prefer? I'm drawn to "unification of mind," but the concept of one-pointed also works and applies. It implies one point of focus, like the breath.

When I was practicing with Pa-Auk Sayadaw, this is definitely what we were practicing. The one point of focus was right underneath the nose, around the upper lip. That was the only point I was meant to attend to all day long. This is a powerful practice, as a number of people here who have practiced it will testify. Very powerful and very useful. I learned a lot from Sayadaw.

But it's not the only way that concentration develops. This single focus is one approach that features prominently in our tradition, but concentration can also be developed on changing objects. This is what the Mahasi Sayadaw instructions do so brilliantly.

We've already started to expand, haven't we? We began with an anchor—focusing on sounds, body, or breath. That was, in a way, a form of one-pointedness. We were restricting the attention, honing in on something. But then we started to open up to body sensations, emotions, thoughts, sounds. We'll keep opening to more potential places to focus.

In the Mahasi system, as this opens up, we may start by connecting with the breath, but we allow the attention to go to anything else that draws it, becoming mindful there. We are still developing mindfulness moment after moment, but with different objects. This is what you've been doing already as you've moved through these instructions. The mindfulness has been developing and the concentration has been developing.

As long as there are still these moments of mindfulness, even if the objects are changing, the

concentration will grow. This is based on a concept called khanika samadhi. Khanika means momentary. So there's a momentary focusing, a connection with each new object. Then that drops and moves to the next, with a focusing on the new one. The samadhi builds up moment by moment on changing objects.

This works very well in the Mahasi Sayadaw system and can take one to very deep levels of concentration. You'll see it as it unfolds for you.

And it's another very effective way to develop concentration that's not just single-pointed. But it unifies the mind by bringing fullness of attention moment after moment.

Now there's one other approach to *ekagata* that I want to share. Ajahn Sumedho, who is a wonderful teacher in the Thai forest lineage—the first Western disciple of Ajahn Chah—established Chithurst Monastery in England and Amaravati Monastery in England, from which there are now many branch monasteries and nunneries throughout North America, Europe, and Australia. He's a really wonderful monk and teacher.

Ajahn Sumedho likes to translate *ekagata* as "the one point that includes everything." So it's not like focusing on this tiny area underneath the nose. What's the one point that includes everything? How about the present moment?

This really opens up from a narrow focus to potentially a very wide focus. How wide is the present moment? How wide is your consciousness? It's wide. And that's all in the present moment. So I love this approach also to the significance of *ekagata*. If the mind is fully in the present moment, however wide the focus, concentration will develop.

So these are three different approaches to this unification of mind. We will all continue to develop this factor as we continue with the retreat. It's really unavoidable. As long as you keep developing the mindfulness, the concentration will grow from it.

There is a wide range of individual abilities with concentration, much more so than with mindfulness. If we ask all of you to be mindful for a moment, I really feel each of you will get there. In that moment, mindfulness will be there—no problem for anyone here. If we ask each of you to become strongly concentrated by tomorrow, the results will not be uniform.

Concentration is an innate strength for some people. It's a little bit like athletic ability. I tend to limit myself to one sport because otherwise I get too distracted. The sport that I really love is tennis, because I've played it for a long time and I love to watch people play it well.

In the world of tennis, I've really loved watching Roger Federer and Serena Williams play because they have this natural athletic ability that involves power, strength, agility, speed, and hand-eye coordination. They are so fun to watch. Unfortunately, they're both retiring—so sad. But they've been beautiful to watch. They have abilities that I could never, ever have reached because they came in with that athletic potential.

Concentration works a little bit like that. Some people come in with a real power for concentration. I was not one of those people.

I remember being on a staff retreat here—I think it was around 1979. The staff here at that time was Carol and I together. I think we were eleven people in total running this facility. Now the staff is about fifty, but we have the Forest Refuge also. I don't know if we actually worked harder or we just ended up not doing as well, but anyway.

There were eleven of us, and in the winter we would have a week's retreat together. The center would close down, and we'd be on retreat together. We were four or five days into the retreat, and we were sitting in this upper walking room—we closed it off to save heat. Sometime through a sitting, I opened my eyes for some reason and looked at one of my friends who was sitting next to me, another staff person whom I'd gotten to know over the past year.

She was sitting there in some other space—not making it up, but genuinely absorbed. And I had never gotten to that space before.

And I just thought, "She's got something I don't got." But I realized that wasn't in my blood or whatever. So I was happy for her, but I wasn't there.

You may have heard stories about Dipa Ma. She had that. On one of her first retreats—it might have been her very first retreat, I'm not sure—she went deep very quickly. She was walking up to the meditation hall, which was at the top of a number of stairs, and all of a sudden she couldn't take another step. She couldn't move forward. She didn't know why. But she just stood there, like five minutes, ten minutes. And then finally she looked down—a dog had gotten a hold of her ankle. And she hadn't felt it. She was so wrapped up in her inner experience, she didn't know that a dog had bit her ankle. Finally it let go and she could continue walking. But she was so absorbed.

There's a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jumnian who used to come and teach at Spirit Rock. In his early years, his father had been a monk at one point and taught him meditation when he was young. His father had taught him meditation. At one point, Ajahn Jumnian, who didn't really like to meditate, was carrying out his father's orders and went into a deep state of absorption. And the father said, "Okay, you can come back now." Didn't return. "Come back now." He just stayed meditating. His mother would come over: "Darling, it's time for dinner. Please come." Didn't budge.

This went on for a day. And he showed no signs of wanting to leave his meditative state. It was probably quite comfy in there. Finally, his mother used her sweetest maternal voice and pleaded with him: "Please, darling, come back. We are missing you so much." And then he came out.

But his father realized at that point he had a meditation prodigy on his hands. So as he grew up, he was trained in both Buddhist practices—both samatha and vipassana—and also in a shamanic tradition in his village. He learned healing arts through his shamanic training.

When he was teaching at Spirit Rock, he would sit up on the stage, and you wouldn't see this most of the time—he was wrapped up in his monk's robes. But in the middle of a teaching once at Spirit Rock, he had his translator point out a woman in the audience and say to her, "Is your stomach upset now?"—because he had psychic powers.

The woman said, "Well, yes." She was a little surprised. "Yes, as a matter of fact, it is."

Then he opened his robe, and underneath he had this big vest that was full of hundreds of pockets and pouches and zippers and clothespins and so on. In that, there were amulets and statues and medicines and pills and lotions and potions. He took out this little bottle of white fluid and said to the translator, "Have her drink this. That will help her stomach." So she did. I don't know what happened after that—she didn't report back to us. But he had very strong powers of concentration.

So some people have it in spades. Others of us don't. I did not. But because of that, I realized that it was something I needed to develop. So I worked really hard to develop concentration. What I did—this happened mostly in the nineties—

I would come here in the fall to sit six weeks, practicing Samatha with the Brahmaviharas. After doing this a number of times in a row, and then practicing with Pauk Sayadaw for about two and a half months, my concentration improved significantly. It's still not great, but it's much better than before.

I'm deeply grateful for the time I spent in those periods of Samatha practice because I believe it changed the cells in my body. The relaxation and ease I discovered, the inner peace that emerged through that practice, transformed my body on a cellular level. I still feel the benefits today.

What blocks Samatha development? I think it's fairly obvious—getting lost in thought. When we're no longer developing mindfulness moment after moment, we lose the accumulation of power that mindfulness provides. As we get lost in thought, we stop developing concentration. That movement has been short-circuited.

The main factor—and this is why we stress it—is the continuity of mindfulness throughout the day. This is what will develop concentration. Things that obstruct it include excessive thinking and thought trains. Not just a single thought, but entire thought trains will block this development.

The other major obstruction is, of course, the hindrances. When Monica spoke about the five hindrances we work with, I'm sure you received the clear message that these obstruct mindfulness until we learn how to work with them skillfully. We can actually develop mindfulness with the hindrances present if we observe the hindrance itself rather than the object it's pointing toward. But if we become captivated by the object it's pointing to, we lose the development of mindfulness. The hindrances also obstruct the deepening of concentration.

I want to say one more thing about the positive development of concentration, specifically in the direction

of jhana. Most of you have probably heard of these states called jhanas—states of strong concentration, often described as absorptions, because the mind tends to become collected within itself, folded inward. This was the territory the Buddha-to-be was exploring with his first teachers, though we begin at a much more accessible level than the states he described.

Jhana is the outcome of sustained concentration development for many people. It is possible and achievable in this day and age for some practitioners. The entry point involves examining what are called the five jhanic factors. There are four jhanas total, and the entry point is the first one, with each successive jhana becoming deeper.

The first jhana is composed of five factors of mind. We work toward it by developing what we can of these factors, which then influence the growth of the other factors. If you're interested in developing concentration to the level of jhana, these are the five factors to monitor. We're not teaching jhana in this retreat, but I want you to know about it. You might consider exploring it on a future retreat if it calls to you.

The five jhanic factors are—I'll say them in Pali, then explain: vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, and ekaggatā.

Ekaggatā we've already discussed—unification of mind. Pīti means rapture; you've probably heard about it from the seven factors of enlightenment. Sukha means pleasure or happiness, which you may have encountered from various sources.

Tonight I want to focus on vitakka and vicāra. In early translations, these were rendered as "initial thought" and "sustained thought." But what would initial thought have to do with jhana? What would sustained thought have to do with jhana? Not very much. These translations miss the mark because vitakka and vicāra aren't about thinking at all.

The way this has been taught to me is that vitakka means aiming for or connecting with the object of meditation—aiming or connecting. Think about this in relation to the breath. When you sit down to become mindful of breathing, what do you do? You direct your attention to the sensation of breathing. That's vitakka.

Once you land there, vicāra comes into play.

Vichara means sustaining your attention with that experience for a little while. Half a breath is enough. So you connect with the breath and then you sustain there. Half a breath or a breath is enough. That's what gets the concentration engine going.

So these two factors, vitaka and vichara, you can apply over and over and over again in your mindfulness. And it's helpful to start tuning into them. You aim for something, connect, and then you sustain it or you rub it. You rub it with your attention. So you have the sense you get close to the breath through aiming, and then you rub it. You rub that sensation by sustaining.

By the rubbing, you get really a feeling for what's there. You see its individual characteristics—rough or smooth, long or short—and you also see its universal characteristics. It's impermanent. If you try to hold on, it's unsatisfactory. There's nobody there doing the breathing. Aiming and rubbing is something we can do again and again with any of our focuses.

If you're interested in increasing the development of concentration here, what can you do? What specific steps can you take? There are a number. This is going to be the last part of this talk. I'm just going to run through a bunch of things. I'm not going to comment on them much. You can work with them or ignore them as you like. But here are some tips.

First, you can take a primary focus on the breath. You can continue with that as a primary object. Even as other objects come in when the attention is drawn, by staying with the breath as a primary focus, you're going to be building that stability more and more.

If you use noting or counting with it, it will heighten that continuity of mindfulness. Counting is not just for beginners. When I was practicing mindfulness of breathing with Pauk Sayadaw, he instructed me to use counting, and I used it in virtually every sitting for two and a half months when I was practicing with him.

Even if you're not with the breath as a primary focus, the continuity of noting will be very helpful for developing many moments of mindfulness. When you're using noting regularly, you really know when you're with mindfulness and you really know when you're not because the notes have stopped. So the noting practice is very helpful for sustaining the continuity of mindfulness.

Then in all the activities of the day, see if you can stretch out the continuity of mindfulness—in eating, in walking around, moving around your room, taking a shower, doing your service meditation, whatever. See what can sustain the continuity of mindfulness there.

Fourth, use walking periods for formal walking. There will be more moments of mindfulness, I will wager, in a period of formal walking than in a period of walking the loop. I'm just guessing, but there probably will. So I don't know to what extent everyone is engaging formal walking in your daily schedule. If you're not yet, I really encourage you to try a period morning or afternoon where you do a sitting, move immediately to a formal walking, and back into a sitting. Just that degree of continuity, if you haven't been doing it so far, will make a notable difference.

Fifth, slowing down in all your movements. So when you're moving around the building, between the meditation hall and your room, between your room and the dining room, when you've finished a meal and you're coming back into the meditation hall, walk slowly, move slowly. One meditation master said, "Yogis should act like old persons." Act like you're already a little decrepit, even if you're not. And that will slow you down and bring in more mindfulness.

Guarding the sense doors. Now, sometimes people think guarding the sense doors means we shut them

off. You know, "I should just keep my eyes down and not look anywhere else. And the less sense contact I have, the better. And it's better if I don't see or hear or smell or taste. That'll keep me more protected."

That's not the meaning the Buddha put on guarding the sense doors. It's fine to be open. What guarding the sense doors means is being very careful when you do see or hear or smell or taste. Don't let the mind proliferate off that.

Don't get caught up in reactive formations—judging each other, desiring each other, craving more of that food. Watch what happens on the basis of sense contact closely. Guard it that way. It's not that you can't look. Don't pursue what comes out of it. Let it go.

And the last thing to say is: to the extent that you are able to, without pushing too hard or striving too hard, extend your hours of formal practice in a day. That will definitely help in the development of the momentum of concentration.

When I would sit in retreats here—the three-month course and six weeks and so on—I would take the schedule from 5 in the morning until 9:30 at night as my starting point. When it said sit, I sat. When it said walk, I walked. And then I would, as the retreat went on, add on to that. Normally I found that six hours of sleep a night was fine for me. Sometimes I would reduce it further. But six hours was kind of a good cruising level for me. The rest of the day I was just doing sitting and walking.

Now, this works well for some people and not for everybody. So if you are young and strong and healthy, or you are older and strong and healthy—and I mean both mentally and physically really well—then you're in a position to try this. If you are suffering from bodily limitations, from ill health, from aging joints, from sore knees, if there's a lot going on internally with emotions and there's past trauma or history of difficulty, this might not be the right fit. But strong, healthy, interested, keen, eager—this can be really useful. Talk with your teacher to see what makes sense for you. But it can be really, really helpful.

I apologize for going on, but I have one more quote. So I'm going to close with this quotation from the Buddha: "When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, and steady, I directed it to the knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: This is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taints. I directly knew: Birth is destroyed. The holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more coming to any state of being."

So let's just sit for a moment, please.

When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taints. I directly knew: birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more coming to any state of being.

So thank you for your attention. We have about twenty-five minutes for walking now, and then someone will cheer you up at the end of the day. Thank you for listening.

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