Meditation in the Noble Eightfold Path

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:43

So it's the second night of the retreat, and I trust that everybody's hanging in there. Hanging might be the operative word after a day like today. The first few days of retreat are not supposed to be easygoing. It's supposed to be difficult, and if it's been hard today, that's par for the course.

I was struck in the interviews today by how much equanimity and maturity people were bringing to these early days. Once you've gone through the experience a number of times, you just know that the first three days are going to be full of restless mind and aches and pains and a lot of discontent and struggle. People were just coping with that and not suffering too much with it.

I wanted to read a quote from a well-known spiritual teacher and see if you know who the author is: "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to suffering, and those who go through it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to true life, and those who find it are few."

Do you recognize the speaker? It's Jesus. I had not come across this in my Presbyterian upbringing. It didn't seem part of what they wanted to share with us about the church, but I discovered it in Stephen Mitchell's book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, and he attributes it to Matthew 7:13. The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to true life, and those who find it are few.

This practice is really simple. I think Joseph gave the basic instructions in about ten minutes the other morning, but it's obviously not so easy. In the first days of retreat, one of the common things that I see coming up in myself, especially when I do a long retreat, is a form of doubt that basically shows itself in the question: What on earth am I doing here? I can't remember at all why I signed up or why I came. I think of a hundred other things I should be doing with my time.

You look around and try to get some support from the people around you, and that doesn't necessarily help very much either. In the hall it looks like everybody's sitting like Buddhas—no ruffles on those oceans. You go out to walk and, frankly, it looks strange. Have you ever just stopped and looked at a walking period from kind of an outside point of view? It looks strange.

Ajahn Chah came here for the first time in 1979. His style of practice is not intensive like this—sit, walk, sit, walk, sit, walk. His style is more: "Hey, come live with me in the forest for five years. Don't get involved with much. Ordain as a nun or a monk, and your mind will quiet." They do a lot of talking and work and form community, so he thought this style was kind of extreme.

One afternoon in a walking period, he would go around to different people on the front lawn who were

doing their walking. He'd say something in Thai and give them this big smile, then walk on. He'd go to the next person, say the same thing in Thai, and then walk on. At the end of the day, a few people asked the translator what Ajahn Chah was saying to us when he would come and talk to us during walking. The translator said, "Oh, Ajahn Chah was saying, 'I hope you get well soon.'"

I hope we all get well soon. But it does look funny, doesn't it? It's kind of a funny thing we're doing, and sometimes it's hard to remember exactly what we're about here.

In tonight's talk, I really wanted to go over the basics of meditation the way it's described in the Noble Eightfold Path and remind ourselves of the mechanics of what we're about—just so when that question comes up, "What on earth am I doing here?" maybe there will be a little more of an answer.

You could say that our way of meditation could be put in the phrase "full awareness in the present moment." It's not a bad description of our vipassana practice. If we tease apart the different aspects of this phrase—the fullness, the awareness, and the present moment—we actually come up with the qualities of effort to stay present, awareness or mindfulness, and the fullness described by the word samadhi, usually translated as concentration.

In this little phrase, we actually have the qualities of effort, mindfulness, and concentration, which are the three aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path in the meditation section. These are the three qualities I want to talk about this evening: effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

I think it's important as we consider them to think for a moment about what the Noble Eightfold Path is for. The Noble Eightfold Path is the way to the end of suffering, or nirvana. The way I understand it, it's often represented in a diagram, as it is on the wall behind me, of a wheel that has eight spokes. Like all good wheels, the center is empty. The hub is empty through which an axle could go. Then there are the eight spokes, which are the eight points of the path.

We're kind of eccentric. We've wandered away from our center.

And we're kind of on the outside of that wheel. As we travel the eight spokes, we actually walk toward the center of the wheel, which is emptiness, or the unconditioned, or nibbana. So as I understand the path, the eight spokes all lead to one point, which is the center—emptiness, nibbana, the unconditioned.

I think it's particularly striking in the meditation section because that's where the descriptions are most evocative. I think that the Buddha was describing from an outside view the experience of nibbana. So these three qualities of effort, mindfulness, and concentration more or less describe the state of mind that the Buddha inhabited. And as we follow them as closely as we can, we imitate his mind, and we more or less jump into the awakened state, or as close as we can get.

The whole practice of meditation is just trying to approximate over and over, as best we can, the nature of the Buddha's mind and heart. And I think these three steps particularly describe that quite eloquently.

I'd like to start by talking about mindfulness. This is really the heart of the meditative path. Very simply, we could say it's paying clear attention to something in the present moment—something real in the present moment. There's a sign in a Las Vegas casino that says, "You must be present to win." It's true in Las Vegas and it's true in meditation. If you're not present, you don't win this particular game.

But when we do dwell in the present, we find we can avoid a lot of problems, because the moment is basically so simple. As the Dalai Lama said, the moment is the only place that we can experience love.

This quality of being in the present is often described as bare attention. This term was coined by Nyanaponika Thera. It's a great description because it points to an awareness that isn't actively interfering or really even engaging with its contents. It's an awareness that isn't choosing or comparing or evaluating or judging, or projecting, or interfering. It's an awareness that is simply with the bare experience of what is.

What is is the truth. It is the Dharma. Practicing the Dharma means being with the truth, being with the moment just the way that it is.

We've forgotten how to do this. We've gotten lost in so many concepts. And sometimes it takes a shock to bring us back.

Somebody came to see Picasso early in his career, when he was not yet a world-famous celebrity. The guy said, "Why don't you paint something more realistic?" He didn't quite dig this abstract cubist stuff. Picasso said, "What do you mean? What do you consider realistic?" The guy pulled out his wallet and said, "Well, I've got a photograph of my wife. Why don't you paint more like this?" Picasso said, "Is that realistic? Is that what your wife looks like?" The guy said, "Yeah, that's really what she looks like." Picasso said, "Hmm, she's very small, isn't she? She's also rather flat. Is that really what she looks like?"

Through all of our concepts about reality, we've wandered away from direct contact. Our practice really brings us back in touch. And we find some very interesting things about it.

This won't be news for any of you, but I'd just like to refresh it for us in our experience. So I'd like to ask you to try a short experiment. Just sit for a moment. Eyes can be open or closed—it doesn't matter. Simply be present without any particular focus and be aware of what is. Then notice when the mind starts to drift into thought activity. If it's drifting into thought activity, let that thought activity go for a little bit. And now come back again to the present moment.

Make that effort to come out of the thoughts, attending in the present moment. And let the mind, if it wants, drift into thought activity.

So just take a look now within your experience. You can stop that exercise. Within your experience, what is the feeling in you when you're just easily in the present moment? Any comments? Anybody willing to share? What did that feel like?

Peaceful? Bright? Open? Vivid. Spacious. Embodied.

Thank you. So these are some of the qualities of present moment attention. Then when the mind moved into the thought activity, what did that feel like?

Tense. Removed. Drifting, heady, busy.

Thank you. Let's try it a little bit different way. I want to ask you to think a particular thought and encourage you to get into it. I'd like to ask you to think the thought, "I'm really a bad meditator." And see if you can summon up some conviction as you think about it. Just take a moment, maybe close your eyes and think that.

Okay, and let go of that thought. What did that thought feel like?

Contracted. A heaviness around the heart. Strained. Depressed.

Wasn't very pleasant, was it? Okay. Let go of that thought. Again, close your eyes for a minute and just let yourself think the thought, "I am." I am. And now let go of that thought.

What did that one feel like? Was it as strong as "I'm a bad meditator"? More neutral? Did you feel any of the contraction? Some did? Okay. Some did, some didn't. So for some it was quite neutral. For some there was still some contraction.

Now again, go back into not thinking any thoughts. Just experience the state of awareness and presence. And now just come back and open your eyes if you like. How did that feel? Again, not having any particular thought. Relief? Did it have that kind of open, spacious, vivid quality again?

Good. This is really the contrast between the state of awareness and the state of being engaged in thinking. Meditation is kind of a bipolar condition. And we're either in this present moment awareness to some degree,

or we're lost in this tissue of thoughts that brings with it qualities of being contracted or tense or strained or removed, cut off.

Our human situation is one that we have a whole kind of tidal wave. You could say a karmic momentum that's lodged in us, that's built up from our past hopes and fears and plans and aspirations and intentions and actions. All the places we've put our energy over the years to find satisfaction, to find happiness, to avoid the unpleasant, have generated an impact, a momentum in our hearts and minds.

And when we sit, that's what manifests as this drifting into thought. Although we might have our intention to be just in the present moment, it generally doesn't take too long before this karmic wave starts to assert itself. And we're away. We're away from the present.

This experience is one meaning of the equanimity phrase that I'm sure a lot of you know: all beings are

the heirs to their karma. This is one way in which we inherit our karma. All those intentional actions, all those investments of time and energy live on in us through this force of the karmic momentum. It's really made up of our past clinging, our past investments.

And as the Buddha said, by whatsoever a person clings to, by that Mara will track them down. As meditators, we are sitting ducks. Mara is on our scent and knows just where to find us because we aren't defended. We have taken away all our usual escapes and defenses against this karmic momentum. And when we sit and open ourselves to the present, we're opening ourselves to that karmic force of our own hearts and minds.

This really provides the juice or the grist for our meditation practice. It's a powerful thing. You can tell, especially in these first few days, because it's what sweeps us away again and again, despite all our good intentions—this projective power of mind based on past clinging.

So often in the beginning of a retreat, people will come to interviews and report, "I could be with about two breaths, and then I was away for 20 minutes." This is not uncommon in the early part of a retreat. So if this is your batting average today, know that you're not alone. That's the force of this momentum.

This image of being swept away is one that I think illustrates the feeling of the experience of being caught in this wave of thoughts. And it's interesting that when the Buddha described our current situation in the suttas, he used a lot of water imagery, just like this. He talked about the difficulties of mind being compared to the influxes. He talked about the flood of becoming, the tides of conceiving, and the ocean of existence.

We often feel that we're at the mercy of this tide. We very seldom have any choice about what comes up, what is swept in with it. Sometimes it's really pleasant. I'm sure many of us have spent good parts of today thinking about pleasant experiences in the past or looking forward to pleasant experiences in the future, remembering vacations or family or loved ones. Sometimes it's painful and we don't have that switch to determine. The painful often comes unbidden. And so we think about regrets, remorse, blame, and anger related to past incidents. We can easily develop fear or anxiety about future incidents to come.

The advice is to be mindful. But at first, this doesn't seem to make much difference. We can be mindful at a number of moments through a period of meditation. It doesn't seem to do much to that karmic tide. And so it doesn't feel like mindfulness is any big deal.

The problem is that our mindfulness is like a baby. And this karmic momentum is all grown up. Because we've been following it for most of our life. According to the Buddha, we've been following it for countless lifetimes. So it's an adult, fully born, strong, capable. Mindfulness is just a little twig in the face of that for us.

But the important thing is to take a look and see how that mindful presence actually feels. This is the important thing. And so to notice the times when we're not lost in those thoughts, to notice the time when

we're in touch with the vividness, the peace, the embodiment, the ease of the present moment, and to trust in that.

It may be a baby form of mindfulness, but it's real. And that baby form of mindfulness will grow up just by giving it our time and energy and attention over and over and over. And when it grows up and becomes strong, then it has the power to undo that karmic momentum, that karmic tide.

Again, with a water image, the Buddha said that mindfulness can dam any flood. Mindfulness can dam any flood.

It can interrupt the flow of conditioning. It can stop the momentum entirely. So every time we have a moment of mindfulness, we're applying a kind of brake to that wheel that's been built up with so much momentum. And as we apply it over and over again, sometimes that wheel comes to a stop.

So it's important to get in touch with the feeling of those moments when you're in touch with the present, to whatever degree. Start to know that feeling. Know that this is the feeling you want to connect with again and nurture and grow.

There's no technique for getting to that kind of awareness. The technique is just a tool for honing it, as it were. But the actual summoning up of that kind of awareness has to come from someplace really deep in us. The more we do it, the more easily it comes forth. We're conditioning the mind in that direction. But there's no technique to bring it forth. The more we get to know it, the easier it is to find.

And we start to realize this is what it means to imitate the Buddha's awakened mind. In touch with the actuality of our experience, we find there is a quality of freedom in it. Just as Carol was speaking about last night, learning to trust in this awareness. It not only is the doorway to freedom—there is freedom here and now when we touch that.

Something else that's useful in relating with mindfulness: we have a lot of training in vipassana of being mindful of the difficult. We spend a lot of dharma talks discussing the hindrances and greed, aversion, and delusion. We tend to spend a lot of time on the first two noble truths in dharma talks. And we become quite expert, especially in the early years of our practice, about working with the negative, working with the difficult.

And we sometimes forget to pay as much attention to the wholesome when it comes. I saw this in my own practice again and again. A moment of peace or happiness would arise, and I could have been noting quite steadily—anger, guilt, fear, blame, resentment, panic, desire. And a moment of peace would come, and I would sort of stop noting.

I realized that what was happening in my mind was this subconscious belief: "Oh, this is what it's supposed to be like." So I would just take that moment for granted. This is what it's supposed to be like, so I wouldn't think to notice it. But then I wasn't really tuning in to my own growth. I wasn't tuning into the

beautiful qualities that were starting to unfold in me.

It's really important to tune into the beautiful—as important or more important than tuning into the difficult. Because the corollary of taking the wholesome for granted, because it was supposed to be like that, meant the unwholesome was not supposed to be there. So when the unwholesome was there, it meant I'd done something wrong. That's the very denial of equanimity. There's no ground for equanimity if we hold a view like that.

When we see with more equanimity, we see the arising of the wholesome and the arising of the unwholesome on more or less equal footing. And I think that's because this pure state of mindfulness, the empty state of open awareness, doesn't have any bias. It's not really enthralled to the negative, and it's not really enthralled to the wholesome. It's free of both. And it can see either one with equal ease.

It's very interesting in the suttas of the Buddha that they all tend to be very balanced in this kind of way. If he talks about the first two noble truths, it's always balanced by the last two noble truths. Suffering and its cause are always balanced by teaching on the end of suffering and the way.

So we begin to bring this kind of even-handed seeing into our own practice, into our mindfulness, delighting in the wholesome. We appreciate it when it's there. We don't take it for granted. We know it and appreciate it as a sign of our growth and development in the dharma.

Right mindfulness includes with it also an attitude of real acceptance. Because we don't think that the unwholesome is something that's gone wrong. It's just part of the makeup of our nature. So this acceptance actually has a kind of friendliness to it. And there is actually within true mindfulness a quality of metta, or loving-kindness—this embracing quality.

So a way that our metta practice and our vipassana practice come together is in this experience of a warm attention to whatever is arising for us.

So also noting that quality of warmth when it's there, that inclusive, friendly quality.

I gave part of this talk in Italy last year, and I had to share a story to illustrate this friendly quality, so I'll tell it again because it's a story I enjoy. I don't know if you remember a few years ago, there was a movie called Life is Beautiful, starring Roberto Benigni, the well-known Italian actor. He won the Academy Award the following year. It was a very moving story about people who tried to maintain their spirit in the concentration camps in Germany.

When Benigni won the Academy Award for it, he could hardly stop talking—he's a very ebullient kind of guy, as you probably noticed. So having won the Academy Award, he got to go to the White House to meet Clinton, who was president back then. When he met Clinton in the Oval Office, he ran up to him and jumped into his arms, saying, "I'm so happy to meet you!"

This is a very good illustration of that kind of friendliness—jumping into the arms of our experience,

saying, "So happy to meet you." And Clinton, who I think is six foot four, held Benigni quite easily. The Secret Service guys were kind of freaking out, but it didn't bother Clinton at all. A good image of our metta.

This mindfulness is not only free in the moment, but it's onward leading. It goes further. It goes deeper. Its power builds as we access it, moment after moment, and it starts to change our relationship to our experience—which is to say, to our life—one moment at a time.

There's a quotation from the Dhammapada, where the Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." It's important to remember this. When we first touch the mindfulness, it seems weak. But one drop after another, huge jars can fill up.

When I was a monk in forest monasteries, the jars that were recommended for drinking water were these large earthenware jars about four feet tall and three feet in diameter. They'd be put beside the roof of our kuti. Cloth would be tied over the top, and when it rained, the water from the roof would pour off into the jar. Little by little over the course of the rainy season, the jar would fill up.

So that's the size of jar we need to think about filling with our drops of mindfulness. It's not a quick filling, but little by little that jar will be filled. Inevitably, it has to be. No moment of mindfulness is wasted. They all go to filling up the jar. It may not feel like anything is happening for a long time, but things are happening.

I had an interview with someone a couple of weeks ago from a group that my wife and I lead in California, Spirit Rock Senior Students. He was talking about the feeling of slowness of progress in his practice, but he said he actually still had a lot of faith. He told me a story about when he was a teenager and needed to earn some money over the summer. His girlfriend's father offered him some grunt work, which was to break up the concrete floor of a carport in their yard.

You can imagine how much concrete goes into a carport—probably twenty feet by twenty feet. That's a lot of concrete. So the father gave him a sledgehammer, pointed him to the concrete and told him, "Your summer job is to break it up." But he also helpfully gave him one technique: "Start near the corner."

So he started about eighteen inches in from a corner, and he just started pounding the concrete with a sledgehammer. Nothing happened. Pounding and pounding and pounding, no impact whatsoever. Pounding and pounding and pounding. Finally, a little crack appeared right around where he'd been hitting, and that was the way in. Then he started pounding around the crack, and pretty soon he had that eighteen-inch square out, then on to the next.

It wasn't an easy thing, but the mindfulness practice is like that. We apply this mindfulness to this wave of karmic momentum again and again and again, and it doesn't feel like it's having any impact. But after we do it enough times, sometime there's a crack in it. It comes to a halt. We open to just the freshness of the moment, really uncontaminated by the past. And then we see there's been an impact. And we keep going.

We keep going with that constancy.

The Buddha compared it to an ocean-going vessel that's been brought up onto land near the ocean and just left out by the ocean.

And he said that the riggings and the sails of that ocean-going vessel will easily weaken and rot away in the elements of the salt air, the wind, the sun, and the rain. They're just left exposed to those elements. He said, in the same way, our fetters, our bondage, easily weaken and rot away under the influence of meditation practice. We just have to have the trust to be steady with it. It does rot away.

So this is the quality of mindfulness. I want to say one last thing about mindfulness before we go on. We often think of mindfulness as paying attention to the here and now. But there's another aspect to it that's really important, and you get this if you read the Satipatthana Sutta, the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness. When the Buddha describes mindfulness, what he says again and again is the quality of knowing our experience. This is what comes through in every passage in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Joseph referred to this yesterday morning: knowing that I breathe in long or knowing that I breathe in short; knowing that a feeling tone is pleasant or unpleasant or neither; knowing that the mind has desire or aversion or non-desire or non-aversion; knowing that the hindrances are present or absent, and so forth.

So in addition to this awareness, there's a quality in mindfulness of knowing what our experience is. This is an important point, because this knowing, which is key, is an aspect of wisdom. This is the entryway for wisdom to come in. And it's really wisdom that liberates us.

Let me give a really simple example of this. Wisdom is to see and understand things the way they are. It's not anything in our memory. It's not something that we've learned or stored up. It's a present moment clarity of knowing and seeing things the way they are. That's what's freeing.

Carol was talking last night about this beautiful, very helpful line from Ajahn Sumedho: "It's like this." Desire is like this. Non-desire is like this. Fear is like this. Confidence feels like this. Suffering is like this. Non-suffering is like this. The reason I believe that's so powerful is because it really draws out that wisdom aspect of mindfulness. We're seeing what is, but we're seeing it in its true nature and with some perspective.

This is also what's happening in the noting practice. If you do the noting practice, you're giving yourself a verbal cue moment after moment of exactly what your experience is, and that strengthens this wisdom quality of mindfulness. In the end, it's not necessary to verbally label it, but it's helpful when there's a struggle, when there's a conflict.

In the Thai forest tradition, mindfulness and wisdom are so closely related that they often talk about them

as one word: *satipaññā* in the Pali. *Sati* is mindfulness, *paññā* is wisdom. They often talk about the growth of *satipaññā*, both together.

Now, mindfulness and effort. Sometimes we can abide in the present moment effortlessly. I'd be interested to hear your reflections at some time: what was it like when I asked you earlier in this talk to just abide without any particular effort in this sitting? Sometimes we can do that for a fairly long time in an easy way. Sometimes when we apply more effort or more technique, it can actually intrude on that ease. So it's wonderful when that effortless abiding comes and you can rest there, but it's never guaranteed.

So effort is stressed in the Eightfold Path very highly. In fact, I would say that of the wholesome factors that the Buddha talks about in the suttas, probably the four that come most often are energy or *virya*, which is the forerunner of effort—it's the source of effort—mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. We basically have three of those factors here in terms of effort, mindfulness, and concentration, with wisdom being the fourth. So effort is really all that separates us from liberation and from freedom.

Classically, effort is defined as abandoning the unwholesome and developing the wholesome.

And virya carries this beautiful sense. In fact, in Tibetan, the word for virya is sandrul, and in Tibetan understanding it means taking delight in what is wholesome. I love reflecting on this quality of effort—that the energy of effort, the very purpose of effort, is for us to take delight in what is wholesome.

This means delighting in qualities of heart and mind like wisdom and clear seeing, generosity and metta, non-clinging, renunciation, contentment, and compassion. I often like to pause and reflect that this is what unites us as a group. We're brought together as a sangha because together we all love and take delight in what is wholesome. Otherwise, we wouldn't be spending six weeks or three months cultivating these factors.

The Buddha said that just as the river Ganges flows east, when a person develops right effort, that person will flow to nibbana, to liberation.

In retreat practice, the primary form of right effort in Vipassana is simply to be present to what is—just to touch what's coming out of the nothingness into existence in this moment.

John Donne wrote: "I throw myself down in my chamber and invite God and his angels hither. And when they are there, I neglect God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door."

In the middle of this beauty and mystery, we give ourselves to distractions. So our effort is to come back out of distraction and contact that present moment.

But this brings up an interesting question: Have you ever tried to really find this so-called present moment? Is it findable? If you have one, I'd love to see it.

Yesterday morning during sitting, there was an insect making a very loud chirp every few seconds somewhere in the courtyard. In Zen, they have a saying: "How do you stop the sound of the river?" As I sat there, I experimented with trying to stop the sound of that insect chirping every few seconds. What was interesting to me is that the more I tried, the further I got from it. But the more I relaxed, the closer it came to me.

This effort is really a graceful kind of dance, and a crucial part of it is the quality of relaxation. The more we can relax really deeply within ourselves, the more the present moment is just there. When we strain after it, it runs away.

You can play with this sense of relaxing very deeply and easily within yourself as you begin a sitting, and see how the moment comes closer. Because fundamentally, the present is ungraspable. It's not solid. It's not a thing. It's a changing experience.

We often think that with effort we have to do something special to do it right. I especially found this when I started doing metta practice intensively a few years ago, never having done it before. The biggest question that came up for me in the first week was: "Is this going to work for me?" I remember feeling this in my early days of Vipassana too—"Is this going to work for me?"

But the wonderful thing is we can't be aware wrongly. If we simply make that effort to touch the present, it will start this chain of change and opening.

When Ajahn Sumedho was teaching at Spirit Rock this past April, he said that in his opinion, the biggest obstacle for experienced meditators in the West was that we didn't trust our practice enough. I think this is a really accurate observation.

We simply need to surrender into this relaxed presence with the present moment, and the Dharma will take care of the rest. It's like Munindra's statement: "If you sit and know that you're sitting, the whole of the Dharma will unfold for you." We really can trust this.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't make effort. When we're lost in distractedness, we need to make the effort to come back. But having made that effort, that's really all we need to do. The rest will be taken care of for us.

The unskillful sense of effort is trying to make something special happen—struggling with our experience. You might take a look today: Where has the struggle been? Where has it not been easy to open and relax to your experience? Is it physical discomfort? I spent a lot of time working with this in the early years of my practice. I had the idea that I had to be completely physically comfortable throughout my body before I could meditate.

It didn't happen very often. I would spend an entire day trying to sort out these blocks. Then the body would be relatively clear, and I'd have one meditation. I'd go out walking, come back, and find more

contraction. Then I'd have to start all over again. It was a complete waste of time.

If I had simply relaxed into the discomfort with equanimity, my deepening would have gone much more easily, much more quickly. I had to learn this the hard way.

The wandering mind is often quite frustrating in the early days—this inability to focus, being all over the place. But if we try to stop the thinking, we just become more tense. And of course, thoughts are not the problem. A stray thought comes and goes; it's not an obstacle to mindfulness. Thought isn't the problem—it's our hanging onto thoughts that creates difficulty.

We get fascinated by their content, mesmerized by them. The stickiness is from our side, not the thought's side. The thought is quite happy to arise and pass, just like a sound. It's we who grab it.

So becoming aware of the feeling of peace, ease, and openness when we're present, and becoming aware of the sense of struggle when we're caught in some kind of distractedness—of course we know we ought to let go. We all know that's a good idea. But sometimes we just can't.

In those times when there's a caughtness with thought, when we can't let go, we can also tune into compassion for yourself in that moment. This is the truth of suffering. It is the fact of bondage. And being open to our own suffering opens us to the suffering of others.

The last of the three factors in the meditation portion of the path is samadhi. There's no word in English that really translates this effectively. It's usually translated as concentration, but that's a little off the mark. When there's no word in a language that translates a concept, it means we don't have that concept in this culture. In fact, in no European culture do I know of a word for samadhi. It's simply not in our vocabulary.

It took me a long time to figure out what samadhi was about, what concentration was truly about. Concentration in English means something like narrowing attention exclusively down to this little part of existence, not wanting to be bothered with anything else. There's an excluding quality going on.

Samadhi doesn't have this exclusive property. The samadhi mind is concentrated rather like frozen orange juice is concentrated—meaning that all the good stuff has been squeezed together and all the dross has been tossed away. Once it's concentrated in that way, it has come together. It's very strong. Concentrated orange juice, if you take a bite of it, is intense. It's powerful. So is the concentrated mind, the mind that has collected itself.

This is probably a better translation of samadhi: collection. The mind that has collected itself is stable, steady, still, unmoving. And it's strong. There's a strength to it. Because of this strength, it's not so easily moved by the arising of the hindrances. This is one of the great benefits of samadhi.

You can sort of take your samadhi temperature by finding out how long you're able to connect with the present moment. That's the measure, the metric of samadhi. But it's not samadhi itself.

Samadhi is an inner experience. And the length of time of connecting in the present is just like a thermometer reading of it—it's not the real thing. So get familiar with that sense. When you're easily in the present, when there's that stability of attention, that's the quality of samadhi.

One of the great opportunities in retreat is to develop samadhi much more than is usually available in daily life, and a great support is slowing down. When the body slows down, it sends a message and the mind also tends to slow down. So that karmic momentum tends to be interrupted a little bit. As you move around the building, as you get lunch, slowing down somewhat—to the degree that it's comfortable for you—will help develop the samadhi. And as Trungpa said, this slows down the speed of neurotic mind.

So just to sum up: mindfulness and concentration need to be balanced. Mindfulness brings in qualities of awakeness, alertness, brightness, interest, and clarity. These are all energizing qualities. The samadhi brings in qualities of peace, stability, stillness, and calm.

One of the ways to check your practice is: are they both present as you meditate? If the mindfulness side—the awareness, alertness, brightness side—is on the strong side, then there will be a kind of disturbing energy. If the concentration side is stronger, there may be stillness, but there won't be very much knowing. That means that wisdom quality that really sees and knows our experience as it is won't be functioning. It won't be bright and alive. One of my teachers, in a kind of facetious way, describes this as "stupid samadhi." He talks about it quite pejoratively. It just means that it needs a factor added to it, which is this alert, aware, interested clarity of mindfulness.

So be aware of those balances. Mindfulness is kind of like water—like clear water that goes with anything. It doesn't have a special flavor of its own, but that's why it can accommodate every other flavor. It goes with anything, and that's why it's available in any situation. It is the liberating factor because of its entryway to wisdom. Wisdom comes in via the doorway of mindfulness. And that's why the Buddha said that heedfulness is the path to the deathless. Heedlessness is the way to death. And I love the Pali rendering of this which is from the Dhammapada, which says: "Heedfulness is the path to the deathless." It's also the open door to all the wholesome qualities that delight in the wholesome. Wholesomeness really flowers through mindfulness.

I wanted to talk about these topics tonight just to illustrate a little more of the mechanics of our practice. But also to remind us all: however much we talk about the mechanics, however much the Buddha talked about the mechanics, what goes on here is a total mystery. I don't know how it works. I don't know why it works. I'm not even sure the Buddha did.

What I know is that this silent awareness heals us and frees us. How does it do that? How is it that when we drop this karmic momentum of self-interest, some purity starts to shine through and acquires a tremendous momentum, an unstoppable momentum? Where does that wholesome power come from? I don't know. It seems to be built into the very fabric of our hearts and minds, into the very fabric of the universe.

But I do know that all we need to do is stay in that silent awareness and let it work through us. Let the Dharma do its work.

I'll close with this quotation from 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, for the attainment of the true way, and for the realization of nibbana—namely, this establishment of mindfulness."

Let's just sit together for a minute.

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