Awakening Concentration

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:39

The subject of the talk tonight is awakening concentration. I wanted to talk about this factor of concentration because it's a very important aspect of meditation practice, but I think it's one of the least understood. Certainly in my own practice it took me a long time to get a sense of what this actually was in my felt experience of Dharma practice. So I want to open up the topic tonight and explore various aspects of concentration.

Concentration has been part of our human experience, I think, as long as there has been human culture. Throughout recorded history in ancient cultures, and today in indigenous cultures, there have been people who have used the technology of concentration to participate in their society. In traditional cultures, these people were known as shamans—men and women who use techniques such as drumming, chanting, singing, and dancing to put themselves into some sort of altered state of mind. Through this altered state of mind, what might be considered a trance state, they were able to contact different energies, sometimes talked of as contacting the spirit world. By contacting those energies they could bring them back and use them for healing, for good or for ill, or for magic. This ability to enter into other worlds through altered states is basically due to the power of concentration, a very old technology.

In the time of the Buddha, this technology had already been developed to a high degree in northern India. When the prince Gautama left his palace and embarked on his quest, he came to his first teacher. The teacher said, "I will teach you my Dhamma." The Buddha spent time with the teacher, learned to meditate, and attained the teacher's same level of accomplishment. He was invited to teach alongside him. The Buddha later described this as the teacher having pointed out to him the plane of nothingness. That was the highest meditative attainment that his teacher could offer him.

When Gautama went into that state, there was no suffering, there was great peace, and at that point he said, "I don't think this is what I'm looking for, because at some point one has to fall away from this attainment. It's not the nibbana, the final liberation that I'm looking for." So he left that teacher and went on and found another teacher.

This teacher taught him his Dhamma. The Buddha undertook it and practiced it, attained the same level of accomplishment as the teacher, and again was invited to teach as an equal. Again, Gautama declined, saying, "I don't think this is the nibbana that I'm looking for because with this also it will fall away at some point. We'll have to pass out of it." The second state that Gautama had been instructed in was a higher state than the first. It's called the plane of neither perception nor non-perception. As you can imagine, that's a subtle place. You're not perceiving and you're not not perceiving. That's pretty mystical. But even

at this point, Gautama said, "It's characterized by impermanence. It's not what I'm searching for." So he left that teacher.

It's interesting that he records his journey. The Buddha later described his journey in these terms because we see that in northern India at that time, very high states of concentration were practiced and were taught. These are two of the most refined states of concentration available.

Even today, some of this attainment percolates through in our culture. If you look through collections of cartoons, or if you're a fan of New Yorker magazine, which I am, you'll see cartoons that highlight this. There are a lot of cartoons about gurus. Some emphasize more the wisdom aspect. Some emphasize more the concentration aspect. One that I'm especially fond of came from the New Yorker. It showed a guru on a mountaintop, presumably in the Himalayas, sitting outside a cave, dressed only in a loincloth, long white beard, typical image of the guru. Beside the guru was sitting a Western seeker, dressed in modern clothes, clean-shaven, probably just flown in a few days earlier. The Western seeker had obviously just asked the guru a question, and the caption of the cartoon is the reply to the question. It's the guru saying, "If I knew the meaning of life, do you think I'd be sitting in this cave in my underpants?" This is the wisdom teaching.

But you'll also see in cartoons the concentration aspect of this guru archetype. It's when you see the image of a yogi who's at some distance from worldly life, sitting, probably cross-legged, and wrapped up in a shawl, a meditation shawl. Eyes closed and a sense of being withdrawn from the world. Actually, there are many of these archetypes around our hall. In that archetype, if you tune in to the image that's being portrayed, you get a sense of stillness, a deep sense of stillness, as well as this indrawn quality.

Actually, this meditation hall has a flavor of this kind of stillness. You may not feel it now because you've been here for eight weeks or two weeks, but as someone who comes in from the outside, still involved in daily life, I feel it very tangibly when I come into the hall and sit here. There's a kind of stillness that one can just tap into. I think it's probably the collective vibes of almost thirty years of meditators soaking into the walls.

Some teachers transmit this quality directly. The person who has most impressed me in this way is Thich Nhat Hanh. I don't know if you've had the chance to experience him personally, but he used to come to Spirit Rock once every couple of years to lead an outdoor day of meditation on the land. A thousand people or fifteen hundred people would show up. We built a special platform for Thay to sit on. He would address the people through a sound system, the meditators seated in this kind of bowl-like amphitheater that the land naturally formed. He would give a dharma talk, offer meditation instructions, lead walking meditation. At one time, he led a walking meditation for a thousand people up to the other end of the property and back—it was a really impressive sight.

I sat at one of these day-longs and took in the dharma talk, the instructions, but what most impressed me was the quality of his being. I had never experienced anyone who was that still. The stillness just seemed to radiate from him—through the stillness of his body, through the refinement of his gestures, through the

settledness in his voice. I was not the only one who felt it. It was as though, sitting up on that platform, he was casting a spell of concentration over the whole thousand-person audience. It was really something to feel.

I actually felt as I was listening to him—I don't know if this is true or not—I felt that he was so still because he had lost his fear of death. He struck me as someone who had seen so much and gone so deeply within himself, he was no longer moved by the fear of death. That was part of the source of his stillness.

Also within this indrawn stillness in the archetype of the meditator is a sense of bliss. There is a sense of contentment, fulfillment, and satisfaction. These are all aspects of concentration.

Some meditation paths are made up of concentration alone. The purpose, the fruit of the whole path is a state of concentration. This is not true of the Buddhist path, as you well know. The main purpose in the Buddhist path is liberating insight or wisdom. But it includes concentration as a key factor. In fact, it's very hard to overstate the importance of concentration within the Buddhist teachings.

As I've been reading the suttas over the last several years, I've kept coming upon the emphasis on concentration again and again and again. It just pops out at you as you read the Buddha's words. Concentration is the last factor in the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is presented as a sequential development—the first factor leading to the second, the second leading to the third, and so forth. Concentration is the final factor, which means that it's in some way a culmination of the path. Then, of course, it leads back into the first factor, which is wisdom. So it becomes a cycle, but it's considered an advanced development.

When the Buddha summarized the Eightfold Path and described it to other people, he described it in three parts. We often talk about this as the foundation of ethics, called sila, the foundation of meditation, and the third part, the foundation of wisdom, or paññā. But when the Buddha described the path, he described it as sila, samadhi, and paññā. For the meditation section of the path, he used the word samadhi.

We often think of ourselves as the mindfulness club. There's a whole outer movement called mindfulness-based stress reduction based on the principles of our meditation practice. So we generally tend to think that when it comes to meditation, the heart of what we do is mindfulness. And there are good reasons to think that—the Satipatthana Sutta, for one. So why didn't the Buddha say, "Sila, sati, paññā," describing the path? But he chose to emphasize samadhi—sila, samadhi, paññā. Concentration is very significant.

Concentration is also in the seven factors of enlightenment. It's the next to last factor. That is also a sequence, so it's a high factor in that list. And it's one of the five spiritual faculties.

For those who are into lists, I want to be exhaustive here and mention the list of the iddhipadas. This is often translated as the basis of spiritual power. The Buddha was asked, how does one progress along the path? What are the engines that develop power along the path? And he named basically four factors,

which you may have heard of before: zeal, energy, purity of mind, and investigation. This is normally how the iddhipadas, the bases of power, are talked about.

What is often not talked about is that in the suttas, every single one of these factors is paired with concentration in the Buddha's description. So it's zeal with concentration, energy with concentration, purity of mind with concentration, and investigation with concentration. Concentration is being pointed to as the foundation of the development of spiritual power. What that spiritual power gets directed to, we can talk about later. But concentration is the very base of it.

With all this emphasis on concentration in the words of the Buddha, I started to get curious why it doesn't come up that often as a topic for Dharma talks. Just reflect back on all the retreats you've ever been to. How many Dharma talks have you heard on the topic of concentration? I had never given one until a year ago myself, and I hardly remember ever listening to one.

So I got curious. Why is it that we hardly ever talk about concentration, even though it's so central? Well, I realized one reason might be we don't know anything about it. But another reason that occurred to me is that we're a little bit nervous to talk about it because it's such a powerful factor of mind. When you hear it described, it's very easy to generate gaining ideas or a kind of wanting mind around the attributes of concentration.

I was reluctant to give a talk on concentration at first, but having done it, I think it has been helpful for people, so I'm doing it again in this retreat. I think it's worth the risk because you all are committed meditators, dedicated to understanding. If there's any group who's going to be able to hold this with some balance, I hope it's you. So I'll be listening out for things that are said tomorrow in interviews with your teachers. If I hear too many reports, I may not give it again, but I hope that you will hold it with a sense of balance and recognize that concentration is a factor that develops slowly over the path, just as mindfulness does, and not be impatient about its development.

I want to say one other thing about concentration. I'll be describing in this talk how to develop stronger concentration, what some of the attributes and benefits are, and some people may become interested in pursuing it. But it may also not be so appropriate for other people to pursue as a special project. In particular, I feel if your work at this time is healing—healing from trauma, healing from deep wounds, healing from childhood relationship difficulties—it's not necessary to make a special project of concentration. If you simply stay with the ground that you're involved in now, which is primarily sensations and emotions, that will be enough concentration for the healing work. Don't feel you have to make a special effort in this other direction. What you're doing now is just fine.

So what is concentration? Concentration is the English translation of the Pali term samadhi, but the first thing I have to say is it's not a very good translation. In fact, I think it's a little bit misleading. There's no word in English that adequately translates the word samadhi. It's interesting that that's so. You know how the Eskimos have like a dozen words for snow because they're so intimately acquainted with all the

different varieties of snow? What does it mean when in a whole culture there is no word for an important mental state? In fact, I don't know of any European language that has a word for samadhi. What that means is that European culture doesn't understand, doesn't know, doesn't experience this quality directly. They don't have a word for it. It hasn't been perceived accurately.

So that's why as meditators, I think it takes a long time to get a handle on what this factor actually is, how it feels in our practice. It took me a long time to figure out how it was different from mindfulness. It was hard for me to tease those two apart. So that's part of what I want to talk about tonight. What is this thing?

The reason that the word concentration is misleading is that in English, concentration refers to how we focus our attention. We say something like, "I'm trying to pay attention to my book. Please don't distract me with the television." So we're saying that the attention needs to be exclusive and any other phenomena are a distraction, an interruption, something to be avoided. The term samadhi doesn't have any of this connotation of an exclusive attention. That's simply not there in the term samadhi. In English, we're misled into thinking of it in this way.

You can have a very wide open focus of attention and have a great deal of samadhi. You can have a situation where there is no exclusive attention, there's no primary object, and the samadhi can be strong. A better translation—in fact the best translation I can think of for samadhi—is unification of mind. The Buddha himself described it in this way. The mind being unified is what samadhi is about. What does it mean to unify the mind?

When we unify the mind, we reclaim the power that has been dissipated through sending attention off in all different directions—into past and future, into liking and disliking, wanting and not wanting, judging and evaluating. All these movements that take the mind out of its natural relationship to the present are giving away its inherent power, leading to distractedness and fragmentation.

When we reclaim that power through non-distractedness, the mind becomes unified. It becomes concentrated in a way. I like to think of it as being concentrated the way frozen orange juice is concentrated. Have you ever tasted a spoonful of frozen orange juice directly? It's really strong, isn't it? What has happened is that all the excess, all the dross has been squeezed out—the thin water, maybe the pulp, everything that's not essential has been removed, and what's left in that condensation is a very strong kind of essence.

In the same way, when the mind gets unified, it becomes strong. It reclaims all that power we had been giving away. In that strength of mind, one of the first things you feel is stability. For once, the mind is able to stay on the chosen object because in reclaiming its power, it has found its stability. There's a quality of strength and firmness and steadiness that's the first thing you feel with concentration.

This sense of unification also brings peacefulness because we're no longer in conflict with past or future. We're all together in the present and there's no necessary conflict. Other synonyms that describe this state

are undistracted, collected, composed, whole, and wholehearted.

I especially like this concept of being wholehearted. This is a really good practice direction. Can we do everything we do in a truly wholehearted way? Can you be with the breath wholeheartedly? Can you be with a step wholeheartedly? Can you be with your work wholeheartedly? And if you're going to think, can you even think wholeheartedly?

Sometimes we try to sneak a little thought in and pretend it's not happening. "No, I didn't do that. I'm with the breath. In, out, in, out..." while thinking about the future. That's what leads to the dissipation of energy. If you're going to think, think wholeheartedly. That means think with your whole heart and mind and body. Bring that same quality into each breath, into each step. That's what brings the mind into unity. That's what collects all that dispersed energy.

So the first important characteristic of concentration is this stability, or you could say a tranquility that comes into the mind. The corollary of that, what flows from that, is the ability to stay attentive to the present moment for some period of time. This stability then leads in the direction of the mind's being unmovable, unshakable, and imperturbable. That's why concentration precedes equanimity in the factors of enlightenment. The state of stability leads into conditions, paves the way for the quality of equanimity.

The stillness that develops from concentration and equanimity is very close to Nibbana, very close to the deathless. There are very few factors that the Buddha described as happening between equanimity and the deathless. It's almost as if this is as close as language takes us to Nibbana—this quality of stillness and equanimity. That's why the factor of concentration is so helpful.

If you feel in life that you're a victim to the forces around you, if you feel that you're being pushed and tugged and forced around by either the events of daily life or your own inner movements of mind, samadhi is the counterpart, the antidote to that. If there's a feeling that life is too much, that meditation practice is too much, that your own mind is too much, samadhi is the factor that gives a steady rudder in the middle of that and lets us move through meditation and through life with a greater sense of groundedness and stability and the inner strength to handle the changes that come.

It's very helpful in meditation practice to get to know the factor of concentration when it's present. How can we recognize it? The first thing to look for is that sense of stability that lets you sustain your attention in the present moment. Start to notice this when it's present. Recognize that this is an aspect of concentration. If you're with a number of breaths in a row, if you're with sounds for an extended period of time, if you're with a body sensation and the mind is not becoming distracted, those are all instances of growing concentration.

There's an exercise that I often do when I sit retreats to develop this quality a little more strongly. I'll mention it to you in case you feel like trying it out. It's a way of counting the breaths—a very classic concentration practice. The way that I tend to do it is to combine it with the noting practice and use a

number in place of the touch point. So I'll say something like, "Rise, fall, ten. Rise, fall, nine."

And count downwards to one. Or it could equally be in, out. Doing it backwards from ten makes it a little less likely that you go on autopilot, but you can still go on autopilot, so be careful of that.

Then the rules of the game are: if you miss a breath, you don't get to count another number. You have to go back to ten and start again. In fact, the rule is—the way that I play the game—you have to experience a piece of the in-breath or the out-breath before you can say the next number. If you miss either of them, you go back to the start. But if you can stay with ten breaths in a row and get down to one, then you start again at ten.

If you want to be competitive, you can see how many groups of ten you can put together. I would sometimes count this with my fingers because I got curious. So I would do the ten to one just in my mind, but when I got to a set of ten, I would move a finger apart. Then I would count how many groups of ten I put together.

This is a way of both strengthening your concentration—because you'll find that the counting will let you know pretty quickly when you start to wander. It's a good feedback mechanism. It's also a way of measuring your concentration. So you can try this once or twice a day if you just want to check out where your concentration is at right now. It will be a metric of that.

Don't get judgmental with yourself, please. Use it as an impersonal and objective measurement. Don't beat yourself up about it. It is just what it is. It's not going to change overnight. This is just a way to tell you where it's at.

Another metric is when thoughts come along and you get distracted—how long are you away for? Because as concentration deepens, you will be away for less time when you go away. So it's another thing to look at. Am I away for one breath, three breaths, half a minute, a minute, ten minutes, fifteen minutes? Another way to measure it.

But these two ways—how long we're in the present, how long we're away—are just measurements. They don't give you the actual flavor of concentration. These are like thermometers. If you're melting chocolate and you want to make fudge, you have to stick a candy thermometer in the chocolate so you know when the temperature is right. The little red liquid goes up and hits 350 degrees, and then you know to start working with it. The little red liquid is not the heat itself—it's just a measurement of the heat.

The counting is not the concentration itself. It's just a measurement of the concentration. What you really want to get to know is: how does the concentration feel just in the present moment? What does that feel like?

As you start to measure it and then check into your inner state, you'll get familiar with the sense of stability, of peacefulness, of strength, of firmness of mind that's present. Then you can recognize the

samadhi from that. It's very helpful to start to notice when samadhi is present and when it's not.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, under the third foundation of mindfulness, which is citta or mind, the Buddha singled out concentration as one of the states of mind to be aware of. It's a short section. The Third Foundation doesn't list a lot of things to look for. But concentration is one of the states the Buddha said to be aware of. He said the practitioner understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind.

Along with concentration, it's also helpful to monitor your levels of mindfulness and energy. When I'm in retreat, I try to keep an eye on all three of these most of the time. So if somebody just dropped in and said, "How's your mindfulness, how's your energy, how's your concentration?" I could tell them because I would have been tuning into that.

If you look at these three factors, they're really shorthand for the seven factors of enlightenment. Mindfulness is the balancing factor. Energy represents the three arousing factors—it's a placeholder for investigation, energy, and rapture. And then concentration is the representative of the three tranquilizing factors, which are tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

So by staying in touch with just these three, you're really getting a look at the span of the factors of enlightenment and the balance of the arousing and the pacifying factors within that grouping. You'll start to notice that when these three factors are all strong—mindfulness, energy, and concentration—your sitting will feel a certain way. Actually, it feels pretty darn good.

These are the times that you tend to be clear, connected with the present moment, stable, alert, awake, fresh, connecting. The mindfulness is just kind of there moment after moment.

On the other hand, when these three factors dip down and are low, you'll feel the other end of the meditation spectrum. This is when we feel tired, scattered, vulnerable. It's a time when thoughts easily carry us away. It's a time when the hindrances may be really active and we don't feel we can do anything to corral them or keep the mind in the present. The mind's all over the place.

As you start to pay attention to how these factors go over the course of a day, a week, a whole retreat, you'll start to see they all go through their own ups and downs, quite independent of where you're putting your effort. Quite independent.

Concentration, for instance, manifests its nature of impermanence quite a lot. You may have noticed this. You'll come in and one sitting will be really collected, really still, stable. You'll go out for walking meditation. You'll really be with your walking, but you'll come back in and everything has changed. A lot of thoughts, a lot of emotions, a lot of images, kind of wild energy in the body. It may not be that you did anything wrong at all. Your effort may have been quite steady and on track, but it could just be that concentration has gone through part of its cycle. It's exhausted that lifespan. It's fading away. Then the next aspect of experience comes up, which is more scattered.

So in seeing these factors, the way they do their own lives, their own dances, we learn not to take the changes so personally. It may not be that we did anything wrong at all. It's not our fault. But it's simply the factors coming into fruition, stabilizing for a while, and then passing away.

As we track the changes over time, it gives us more confidence it's not that we did anything wrong. Then we notice, okay, energy's low, concentration's low. Do I give up? That's not going to help. Blame myself, get down on myself, get discouraged? That's not going to bring them back together. Just be steady with the effort. Be patient and be steady with the effort, and then you'll see they'll come back together again. Again, not because you made a super effort this time. Just the steadiness of your effort allowed them to collect again.

So in many ways, with these factors, we're along for the ride. A lot of the meditation journey is being along for the ride, and the factors are out of our control. We make our best effort, moment after moment, but then sit back and enjoy the ride. Just show up, and that's the trip.

So how does concentration develop? Basically, it develops through sustaining our mindfulness. The factors in the Eightfold Path related to meditation are right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Right effort leads to right mindfulness, right mindfulness leads to right concentration. If we can be wholehearted in our mindfulness, the concentration will develop. So that's why the basic instruction is give full attention to one thing at a time. And as you're mindful with that, the concentration will grow.

There's a Korean Zen teacher named Seung Sahn who made this a very central part of his teaching. He said, do one thing at a time. When you sit, just sit. When you walk, just walk. One thing at a time. He was teaching at a center in Providence, his main center. He was eating breakfast there one day. A student walked into the dining room, and you may have heard this story, but Seung Sahn was eating his breakfast and reading a newspaper. The student was shocked. He came up to the teacher and said, "But teacher, you said to just do one thing at a time, and here you are eating your breakfast and reading a newspaper. How can you do this?" He said, "Yeah, do one thing at a time. When you eat and read, just eat and read."

So whatever you do, be wholehearted. One of the key factors in sustaining attention actually is interest.

When you are interested in what you're paying attention to, the mind naturally comes together around that. That's why if you can develop an interest in the breath or in sounds or in your walking, it will really help strengthen the mindfulness and the concentration.

In that sense, there's nothing different you need to do in what you're already doing. The practice that you're already carrying out of vipassana will develop concentration. There's not some special thing that you have to do differently.

There is one suggestion I'd make. A lot of you at this point in the retreat are working with an open attention where you let the attention move from object to object depending on what's predominant. This can bring a great feeling of ease and relaxation and naturalness to the meditation. But sometimes in that

open attention, we neglect a little bit the effort of connecting and sustaining in each new moment. It's really the connecting and sustaining to each new arising that makes the mindfulness really crisp and serves to deepen the concentration.

So as you practice with open attention, the downside can be that you get a little bit too relaxed in that openness. And the connecting and sustaining stop being really crisp. In that, you're kind of missing an opportunity to keep deepening the mindfulness and concentration. So just an encouragement with the open attention particularly—re-energize your commitment to connecting and sustaining with each new arising that comes.

Sometimes, of course, the concentration is going to go away. It'll be going along, it'll be strong, it'll collapse due to various factors, then there's often a very strong desire to get it back. And you can be in the grip of that craving, not even recognizing it, thinking that you're making an effort for a wholesome state of mind, but what's actually happening is that you're striving to have that concentrated state back because it felt so good. This is still craving, even if it's in a wholesome direction. And sometimes we'll try really hard at that point to get the concentration back.

But we may be forgetting one part of the teachings, and that is the proximate cause of concentration. In the texts it says the proximate cause of concentration is not strong effort or undying effort or courageous effort or heroic effort. The proximate cause of concentration is happiness. Isn't that interesting? What brings the mind together? Happiness, contentment, acceptance. It's such a beautiful understanding when you start to see that, because it lets the mind simply settle into its own nature with a sense of relaxation.

So this quality of relaxation is also really key to deepening concentration. The striving, straining, grasping, craving movement is antithetical to concentration.

This came really clear to me in one period of retreat. I was here at IMS, practicing metta for six weeks. For those who are interested, we teach loving-kindness as a way of developing concentration. I'd been in retreat for about ten days and the practice had been deepening. I was feeling calmer and collecting around the phrases. The phrases were getting steadier. Everything seemed to be going okay.

Then something came in from outside and disturbed the flow, disturbed my concentration. I got thrown off. It passed, and I tried to regroup and return to the concentration that I'd had, and it wasn't coming about. So I tried harder. "I've got to get back to that concentration. It felt so good. It was going so well." It wasn't coming back. I tried even harder.

It was about three days into this period of struggle that I went to see Joseph, who was one of my teachers then, and I described the situation. "It seemed to be going along well. Something happened. It fell apart. I can't get back to that concentrated place. Try as hard as I can, I can't get it back. What's wrong? What's going on?"

Joseph just looked at me with a little smile and said, "Guy, we don't do this practice for ourselves. We do it

for the other."

And just then, all the craving unhooked. And I saw that I had just been involved in a selfish pursuit to get back to what felt good. And I'd completely lost touch with the fact that the metta practice is about caring for somebody else—or for ourselves, too, but caring for somebody else.

I went back to the simplicity of caring for others, and very shortly everything fell back into place. What it taught me is that my attention had to be innocent—innocent of any ulterior motive. When the ulterior motive was basically selfish, the metta practice did not work for concentration. And of course there wasn't metta there either; there was frustration. When the original intention got reawakened—this practice is about caring for people—then the mind came back together.

In our vipassana practice, the analogy is mindfulness of the object for the object's sake. If we're trying to use the breath to get ourselves into some great feeling state of mind and body, that's selfish intent, and that won't allow the mind to collect in this contentment and ease. But if we can discover that there's a real genuine interest in the object itself, then the mindfulness grows off that. Then the attention is really there in an unforced way, and the concentration can deepen very nicely.

So we need to bring to our vipassana practice an interest in the breath for the sake of the breath, walking for the sake of the walking, a sound for the sake of the sound—not for what I'm going to get out of it. That short-circuits the process. Remember that the sequence has to be interest leading to mindfulness and mindfulness leading to concentration. If you try to go directly to concentration, you'll tie yourself up in a knot. So come back to that original intention of connecting with what is. Find that innocence, and everything will collect around that.

Something else I knew as a yogi but see really clearly as a teacher is that there's huge variation from person to person in ability for concentration or aptitude for concentration. It's a little bit like athletic ability in sports. Some of us have it, some of us don't.

My particular sport obsession is tennis. In that game, I love to watch people like Pete Sampras and Venus and Serena Williams play, because they are, on the male and female sides, the most talented athletes that I've been able to see in the last ten years. Their movements have grace, power, coordination, and a speed that is just native to them. You see other players who practice maybe twice as hard, work a lot harder, and never reach the same level of skill as Sampras or the Williams sisters.

This is a little bit the way it is with concentration. Some people have a really natural ability for this quality. Some don't.

One of the people who I've met who does is a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jemnian. Ajahn Jemnian has a monastery in the south of Thailand near Krabi. He's about sixty-five years old now. He comes to Spirit Rock once a year and teaches in California for a week or two at a time.

One time he recounted his life story to us. He was brought up in a Buddhist household. His parents went regularly to the temple, to the wat, so he was surrounded by the Dharma from an early age. Well, one day when he was about four years old, he sat down on the floor of his house, cross-legged. He closed his eyes, and he went into a trance. His parents talked to him, and he didn't respond. They shook him, and he didn't respond. They shouted at him, and he didn't respond. He was gone.

So his parents naturally were a little bit concerned. What do you do if your four-year-old child sits down and just goes away? They called in the village monk and said, "Our child is in some strange state. Can you help us figure out what's going on? Can you bring him back?"

The monk came over and looked at the young boy, made his determination. He said, "Oh, nothing to worry about. He's gone into an absorption state. You should be very proud of him. Don't worry." And the monk left.

Sure enough, the next day, after twenty-four hours, Ajahn Jemnian popped his eyes open, came back, started moving, walking about, bright-eyed, full of energy. He was absolutely fine. He had just fallen spontaneously into a deep state of absorption.

The village monk recognized that this kid was something special. He had a prodigy on his hands. So from a very early age, Ajahn Jemnian was trained in Buddhist meditation, but also, because this was in Thailand sixty-five years ago, in shamanic practices, because concentration is the doorway to those powers. He received both trainings as he was growing up, and he still lives in both worlds.

He's a very advanced master of both Vipassana and loving kindness. He's done a great deal of metta and has a really joyful expression and energy. He also still works as a shaman.

I was sitting, hearing his teachings one day at Spirit Rock. He'd been talking up in the front of the hall for an hour or so. And he looked out at a woman in the audience and he pointed to her and he said, "Do you have a stomach ache right now?" And she said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do." Ajahn Jimnian also has psychic powers.

So he said, "Come up to the front, please. I have some medicine for you." And he unwrapped his robe to reveal this great vest that he wears. He wears this vest that is stocked with every imaginable item of paraphernalia that a wandering monk could need. It's got Buddhist images. It's got amulets. It's got trinkets. It's got his pens and pads of paper. It's got potions and lotions. It's got his business card. It's got photographs of him that he hands out.

In one pocket of the vest, he had a little bottle of white liquid. So the woman came up to the front and he gave her the bottle of liquid and he said, "Please, please drink this." So she went back to her seat and drank the liquid. About twenty minutes later, as he continued his teachings, he said, "How's your stomach now?" She said, "It's absolutely fine. The pain went completely away."

This is Ajahn Jimnian's magic—Dharma magic and shamanic magic both. He was a meditation prodigy from a very early age based on his strength in concentration.

I, on the other hand, was at the other end of the spectrum. Concentration did not come easily to me at all. Very weak in the early years of my practice in concentration. In fact, I look back at all the friends that I grew up with in the Dharma, and I think that I probably had the weakest concentration of all the people that I knew then, all my Dharma buddies. Mine was the weakest.

I wasn't really aware of how deficient I was in this for quite a long time, and ignorance is bliss in that way. I trundled along quite happily, but at some point I started to realize that my friends were having experiences that I wasn't, and I got kind of interested.

So a little over ten years ago, I just decided I wanted to strengthen the factor of concentration in my own practice. I started coming to IMS in the nineties and doing six-week periods of retreat during the three-month course, oriented to developing stronger concentration. Here we mostly teach it through the Brahma Viharas, first with metta and then with others if people are interested.

I did a number of these retreats in the nineties and it made a significant shift in my concentration level. It really did. It made a quantum leap in that. So I know that if it worked for me, it can work for any of you.

But the other moral of the story I want to pass on is that it took a number of years for that to happen. Making a real improvement in your concentration is not something that's going to happen in the next sitting. It's not something that's going to happen in the next week. It may not be something that's going to happen in the rest of this retreat.

But if you really take it up as a direction for yourself in practice and you apply yourself to it over, let's say, the next five years—both in retreat practice, aiming to cultivate this quality more, and in your daily life, taking practices that emphasize this nature more—you will see a significant shift in your level of concentration.

But I want to emphasize that it's a long-term process so that you don't think that it's something that should happen overnight. And so not to get involved in too much gaining idea about it. It takes a lot of patience, a lot of dedication and effort, but it is well worth the work.

So I highly recommend it for those of you who are drawn in that direction. It really can be developed, and from it we gain all these benefits of inner strength, stability, greater calm, greater sense of abiding in the present moment, and a deeper relaxation really throughout our being. It really calms all the faculties of our human nature. This calming of the faculties is one of the great gifts of concentration.

But in the teachings of the Buddha, it's considered the secondary purpose of concentration. The primary purpose in the Buddha's teachings was for deepening insight. As the mind becomes steadier and calmer and stiller, it becomes more able to see things as they are. And it's seeing things as they are that frees us.

Imagine if you were on a merry-go-round, which is what many sittings feel like for the unconcentrated mind, and you're whirling around and around. You're on a horse, a carousel, going around and around at a pretty good rate of speed. One of your friends has picked up a newspaper and comes over to the merry-go-round and stands by the side of it and holds up this newspaper. You whiz by, but you're going by too fast to read the headlines. So you can't tell what the newspaper says.

But the merry-go-round slows down. Your ticket time is up. You come to rest in front of the newspaper your friend is holding. Ah, then you can read the headlines. And the headlines say: everything changes. The cause of suffering is clinging. The way to release is to let go. That's the freedom. You see that clearly as the mind calms down. So from this place of deep stillness can come the insights that really liberate us from our clinging and from our suffering.

I want to close with a short statement from the Buddha. This is from the Majjhima Nikāya, from the section where he was describing his own enlightenment experience and what happened to him that night under the Bodhi tree. The word "taints" that is used in this passage is another of the lists in Buddhism. It's more or less synonymous with the defilements. So you can think of it as another expression of the defilements.

"When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady and attained to imperturbability, 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."

Let's just sit together for a minute, please.

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