Concentration

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:24

James talked last night on the factor of happiness in our life and our practice. Tonight I want to talk about one of the factors that is most direct in leading to conditioned kinds of happiness and that sets the stage for the highest kind of happiness—the factor of mind that we call concentration. I'll talk tonight about what this factor is, how we experience it, how it develops, what obstructs its development, and some of the deeper facets of its development, including the jhanas.

Concentration has been part of human experience for as long as there have been cultures, as far as I know. When you read of the most ancient cultures that we know of on the planet, they've all had these people called shamans who used their mental powers to access different realms, to provide healing, to get in touch with the animal world and spirits. They accessed these powers through techniques like drumming and dancing and chanting, all of which provide a strong focus for concentration.

At the time that the Bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama left home to go start on his spiritual quest, he first contacted two teachers in northern India. These two teachers led him to very deep states of concentration. So we know that some very sophisticated kinds of practices were available 2,500 years ago when the Bodhisattva started his quest. He left these teachers because he didn't feel that they brought the final solution to the question of suffering that he was looking for. The states of concentration that he entered with them would always have to pass away. He would have to come out and be confronted again with the situation of aging, illness, and death. So he continued his quest and thankfully found the kind of liberation that he passed on to us. Nonetheless, these very deep states of concentration were being taught 2,500 years ago in India.

Even today, I think there's something in our mindset about this concept, even growing up in the West. One of the ways you see it is that there are lots of cartoons about gurus, particularly gurus on mountaintops in the Himalayas. There was this one cartoon that I quite liked from the New Yorker. It showed obviously a guru in the high Himalayas who had a long white beard and dressed in just a loincloth, sitting on this little platform in front of a cave with the high peaks of the Himalayas rising behind him. Seated in front of him was a Westerner, a relatively young Westerner dressed in clothes like yours and mine, who had obviously just made this arduous trek up to the mountaintop to talk to the guru and ask a profound question. So the caption of the cartoon is the guru's reply, where the guru simply says, "If I knew the meaning of life, do you think I'd be sitting here in this cave in my underpants?"

Some of these cartoons stress the wisdom aspect, and I would put this in that category. Other cartoons stress the concentration aspect of spiritual life. In this, the archetypal image is of the yogi who is secluded

from the world, wrapped up in a meditation shawl with their eyes closed and downcast. That image conveys a strong impression to us.

In fact, you may feel that archetypal image every time you walk in this hall at the start of a sitting. You come in early in the morning and there are probably already people sitting here whose image is very similar to that archetypal image of the guru. As you tune into the qualities, I want to draw out some of the qualities that are in that image.

The first is the quality of stillness. The body of such a being is not moving. This is a feeling that you can often contact walking into this hall. I think this hall has something of a quality of stillness, whether people are in it or not. It is a factor that is manifested by certain spiritual teachers. The person who particularly comes to mind around this is Thich Nhat Hanh.

Before we built this meditation hall and the residences, we used to have Thich Nhat Hanh come and lead a daylong at Spirit Rock about once every two years. This hillside was open at that time—just a grassy hillside. So we would put a platform for him on the other side of the creek down there, and the audience would spread out sitting on the ground on this grassy hillside up here. In the middle of the day one year, there were about a thousand people who came to these events. He led everybody on a walking meditation down the walk, which now goes past the residences, across the stream, up the hill, and back to the meadows in the back, which will eventually be the site of a hermitage here at Spirit Rock.

We have a photo of Thich Nhat Hanh leading hundreds of people in walking meditation back to the back of the property. But what I particularly remember about his presence was the degree of stillness that he manifested in speaking, in moving. Everything came from a place of deep, deep stillness in him. He had so much power in that stillness that it affected everyone who listened to him and saw him. A thousand people on the hillside were calmed by this one man's presence. I actually felt he was casting a samadhi spell over the whole hillside through his own stillness. This is one aspect of that yogi in the shawl image.

Another aspect of it is the quality of the attention and the focus being inward, being drawn within. There is a sense that the yogi in secluding herself or himself from the world has left behind the things of the world and is going within to find the richness that the mind contains, potentially, all within itself. So there's a sense of going within to find hidden riches and treasure.

Finally, the other impression that one gets from the image is a sense of bliss—that in this turning inward and connecting with the riches of the mind, there is a sense of deep satisfaction, deeper than the passing sense pleasures of the world can offer, a deep sense of contentment and fulfillment.

These are all aspects of the quality of concentration.

In the Buddha's teaching, it's hard to overstate how important this factor of concentration is. It is the last factor in the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is presented as a sequential development, so samadhi is considered the ultimate unfolding of the Eightfold Path. Of course, it then wraps around and lays the basis

for wisdom or right view, right attitude as expressed in the first two, but is nonetheless the outcome of the development of the whole path in that sense.

As we practice vipassana, all of our practice is based on the development of mindfulness, as expressed in the Satipatthana Sutta, among others. We could be known—perhaps we should be known—truly as the mindfulness school of Buddhism. This is really our foundation.

But it's very interesting. Even though we consider mindfulness the heart of our practice, when the Buddha summed up the Eightfold Path, he didn't call it conduct, mindfulness, and wisdom. He called it conduct, concentration, and wisdom. The formulation in Pali is sila, samadhi, and panna—the three main divisions of the Eightfold Path. Not mindfulness, but concentration. You can see that in his estimation, mindfulness is simply a tool to develop the quality of concentration, which to some degree is higher along the path of further development from mindfulness.

Concentration is also listed in the seven factors of enlightenment. It's included in the five spiritual faculties. And it's part of the iddipadas—this list of the four bases of spiritual power. Not only mundane powers, but supramundane powers that develop during practice. Concentration is associated with each of the four. So it's a very important factor in the teachings, and I think that generally in the West we have been slow to convey its real importance. It's been somewhat underrated for years as we've brought these teachings into the West.

So what is concentration? It's the usual translation of the Pali word samadhi. In the Eightfold Path, this factor is called samma-samadhi. It's usually translated in English as concentration. It's not actually a very good translation, and in some ways it's quite misleading for Westerners.

Now, I'm not going to toss that word out because it's so universal. I think we should go ahead and use it. But it's important to understand why it's not a good translation of the word samadhi. Unfortunately, there's no word in English that is an accurate translation of the word samadhi. This in itself is an interesting situation. When we have a culture that does not have a word for a central quality of mind, it says something about our culture. By and large, we don't know what this word means. And to be honest, it took me years to figure out what it meant in my own experience.

You know how the Eskimos have seventeen words for snow? When you get familiar as a culture with a factor, it has lots of expressions. And samadhi does not in any European language that I know of.

So why is the word concentration misleading? In concentration in English, the meaning is about attention. When you think about it, it's about where you put your attention. And specifically, it refers to a narrow focus of attention. "I want to concentrate on my homework. Don't bother me with the children or the TV or the stereo or whatever." So the idea is our attention is narrowly focused and we want to exclude everything else.

First of all, samadhi is not primarily about attention. The second thing is that samadhi does not have an

exclusive connotation. This gets a little tricky, as I'll go into later, because in some ways we can develop samadhi with a narrow focus, but we don't have to. And that will become clearer as I go along. But basically because samadhi does not have this sense of exclusive or narrow attention, you can have a great deal of samadhi when the attention is wide, wide open. There can be a very expansive attention that's open to sounds, the arising of all phenomena. Samadhi can be present and you're not having a narrow focus of attention.

The best translation for samadhi, although it's a little cumbersome, is unification of mind. Samadhi is the state of mind that has come together, that has collected itself. What happens when we collect the mind is we find that it is actually a very powerful organ.

In our daily life, we lose touch with this native quality of the mind. Sally mentioned this poem of Wordsworth's the other night, where he says, "The world is too much with us. Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." This is a description of our ordinary mind, running to the past, running to the future—fantasies, recollections, imaginations, regret, blame, confusion. Our ordinary mind is all over the map. And as we jump all over the map, we're giving away our native power.

With samadhi, we start to reduce those wanderings. And in that reduction, we collect it into the present moment, usually around a chosen meditation object. And in that collecting, the mind regains its native power. So the first hallmark of the mind that has achieved this kind of unification is that it's strong.

It's in that strength that the mind becomes steady, firm, unyielding, and stable. And this is not the firmness or steadiness of hardness. We can try to make our mind that way by contracting, but rather this unification can happen in a very soft and receptive way.

This unification also brings peace because we've reduced the mind's wanderings. Some other synonyms that bring out different aspects of samadhi are undistracted, collected, composed, and wholehearted. These are all different qualities within concentration.

As the mind gets brought back together, the two most important things you notice are that it's able to maintain its contact with the present moment for extended periods of time—there's this connection with presence that is more than just fleeting—and secondly, there is a sense of tranquility, peacefulness, or settledness that comes.

This leads to the quality of the mind becoming unmoving, unshakable, and imperturbable. This is why in the factors of enlightenment, concentration is the factor immediately before equanimity, and equanimity is the last of the factors. Concentration in its stillness and strength sets the stage for the mind that isn't moved by pleasure and pain, that isn't swayed by changing circumstances.

It's said to be from that unmoving quality that the mind is able to open to the unconditioned, to the direct realization and knowledge of nibbana. In a way, the stillness sets the stage for the immovability, which is the closest mimicking of nibbana that we know in mundane terms.

How do we know when concentration is present? It's very helpful to start recognizing it as we encounter it in our meditation practice. Know that it's a quality that has a wide range—it's not either present or absent, but present to differing degrees all the time.

One of the simplest measures, though not perfect, is to know how long your attention can remain in the present in a more or less unbroken way. This is a crude measure of concentration, but it's a way to get a handle on it and to start knowing when it's there. In the practice we've been doing for the last several days, one way to recognize it would be to know when you are in contact with a number of breaths in a row.

Now, the presence of thought does not mean that concentration has gone away. It's only a loss of concentration if you let yourself get distracted and carried away by the content of thoughts, particularly several in a row. But if a thought arises and is seen clearly with a return to the breath in the present moment, that's not a distraction—that's clear mindfulness. It's when the content goes on over several thoughts and we lose contact with the present that concentration has been interrupted.

One exercise whereby you can start to gauge your own level of concentration is the exercise of counting in relation to the breath. I think James talked about this on the first day of the retreat at the afternoon sit, giving instructions on how to use the counting.

Just to review briefly, one way to do it is to count each breath starting at ten and counting downward to one. The reason to count down is so that it doesn't go on autopilot so easily. If we count up, we can automatically say one, two, three, but we're not really present.

So you might notice an in-breath, an out-breath, and then note ten. An in-breath, an out-breath, and note nine. And so on down to one.

The rules of this particular game are that if you miss a whole breath, you don't get to say the number, and then you have to start again at ten. But if you get any part of a breath—we play by easy rules here—you get to say the number.

So see where you get to. Can you go from ten down to one and be with some part of every breath? If you can, then see if you can do it again and maybe get twenty breaths in a row. It's not easy—twenty breaths in a row is not easy, I have to warn you. But just see where you're at and don't get too high an expectation.

I did this practice a lot when I was in Burma, and I would count the groups of ten on my fingers. As my fingers were sitting on my thighs, I would mark off the groups of ten. Often, if I'm using this technique, I'll try to get up to one hundred breaths before I open up into a choiceless kind of practice or become aware of other things.

This is the technique of counting breaths. It's just one measure of concentration, but it will put you in the ballpark. Then you can notice the variation—some sittings you may get to two breaths.

Other sittings you may get to ten. And then you'll notice it relatively. Oh, that was good. Really, this sort of staying in the moment over time is just a measure of concentration. It's like the thermometer that you stick in chocolate when you're melting it for fudge. It measures the heat. It's not itself the heat, because you don't need time to tell you if the mind is concentrated. Once you get to recognize the feeling of it, the mind-body experience, the felt sense, you'll know when you're concentrated in just a moment. You can just take a look in a moment and know, yes, the quality of concentration is high or not.

So it's very helpful if you can start to notice in your practice where the level of concentration is at. As it says in the Satipatthana Sutta, this is under the third foundation of citta or mind: "The practitioner understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind." This is a direct instruction from the discourse on mindfulness.

In fact, I'd say it's very helpful if you sort of continually monitor this factor and the factor of mindfulness, and one other factor—energy. So if you keep your eye on how's my mindfulness, how's my concentration, and how's my energy, this turns out to be quite insightful. Because in a way, these three stand for the different factors of enlightenment.

What we're really about in developing our meditation practice is strengthening or feeding—as Carol used the word the other night—we're feeding the factors of enlightenment and we're starving the hindrances. In a broad view, that's the purpose of meditation practice. And that's the way the journey to liberation takes place: we're feeding the factors of enlightenment. So you want to find out how fat they're getting. And the way you do that is you notice where's mindfulness, where's energy, and where's concentration. Because these three stand for the whole range of factors.

In the factors of enlightenment, mindfulness is the kicking off factor. It's the one that starts the others growing. And it's also the balancing factor, the one that keeps them all in balance. Energy stands for the three arousing factors. The first three factors of enlightenment are arousing, the last three are pacifying. Energy stands for the arousing factors which are investigation, energy, and rapture. Concentration stands for the last three which are pacifying: tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

Now you'll start to see that when mindfulness, energy and concentration are all strong, you have a certain kind of experience in meditation. It's not that there's one state only that goes with that—there are many different ways that you can experience reality when these factors are high—but they share certain qualities. There will be a sense of clarity, there will be a sense of ease, and there will be a sense of not being taken over by thought. Because of that steadiness of concentration, thoughts come and go, but you aren't swept away with them.

On the other hand, when all these factors are low, then you have a state where the mind is either very agitated, scattered, restless, or else it's dull and there's not much connection. And then because of the lowness of the factors, you're easily swept away by thoughts, and then all the disturbing emotions that thoughts lead us into and subject us to.

Now what's very interesting about starting to watch these three—mindfulness, energy, concentration—is that you see they will always manifest their own impermanence. Try as hard as we might, we will never arrive at a cozy plateau where all these factors just kind of stay there and we cruise for the rest of the retreat. If you were waiting for that to happen, I'm sorry. These factors are always going to be going through change and manifesting impermanence. Even if your effort stays pretty steady, these factors kind of have their own lifespans and will come and go.

So where's the beauty in that? The beauty is you don't have to take the changes so personally. Concentration might be really strong in one sit. You go out to walk, you're quite inspired, you're connected, you put in good effort, you come back again, you can't wait to get back into that state. Oh, it was so delicious. It was so peaceful. I can tell it's gonna be even stronger next sit. And then you sit down and it's totally shot, and there's all this turmoil of thoughts and emotions and the mind is active and where did it go? What did I do wrong?

You didn't necessarily do anything wrong. It could just be the decay of that factor of concentration.

So as you watch these things go through their changes, you learn not to take it so personally. We're observing, we're making a moderate effort, and the factors build up, come together, have a great experience, and then decay. And then we're in the whirlwind for a while.

Out of that whirlwind, we can get really frustrated and think, "I've done it wrong. I've got to figure out what I was doing right before. Maybe it was the T-shirt I was wearing that morning. Or I'd had just the right amount of oatmeal and then no more. That was the thing that did it." We can get just as superstitious as athletes about these little tricks.

But you start to see that even if our effort is steady, these factors come and go. So then we don't worry about it so much. Because we've watched them fall apart, we also have confidence that they will come back together. Our steady effort at mindfulness is what pulls them back together again. And then we have one of those peak experiences where mindfulness, energy, and concentration are all strong—there's clarity and some ease and some stability.

So just be patient. Just be patient and keep your effort moderate. When you get into the difficult time, don't feel like you've got to do everything in your power and you've got to put it back together. Because you can't put it back together. Mindfulness can put it back together. And you just have to be steady in your effort toward mindfulness.

How does concentration develop? Basically, it is through sustained mindfulness. It is through the accumulation of enough moments, one after another, of presence and attention to what's happening that gives rise to this factor of concentration. So the key is: do one thing at a time and be wholehearted in it.

You see, as you give yourself wholeheartedly to the moment, you're manifesting samadhi. You're putting the mind in that place of wholeness and unification, and then it can build on itself. It has a foundation to

grow from. So that wholeheartedness is a key part of mindfulness.

That's why the Korean Zen teacher Soen Sunim put a lot of emphasis on this teaching. He said, "When you sit, just sit. When you walk, just walk. When you eat, just eat. Be whole in everything that you do." He was the master for years and lived at the Providence, Rhode Island Zen Center.

One of the students came down in the morning for breakfast and saw the Zen master sitting there eating his breakfast and reading a newspaper. The student was very disillusioned and said, "But Master, you told us just do one thing at a time, and here you are eating your breakfast and reading a newspaper. How is that helpful?" He said, "And when you eat and read, just eat and read. Nothing else."

One of the other things you get from this wholeheartedness—and I think James mentioned this last night—is that interest is really important in bringing the mind together. Interest is really a support for concentration. Because when you're interested in something, what happens? All your energy goes there.

When that big check arrives from the contract that you just carried out, wow, there's a lot of interest in seeing that. When there's a new person in the Sangha who looks sort of like they're catching your eye, the interest is really there. So when the breath has that same kind of appeal, that interest really holds you there. It can happen. It can be really beautiful.

In order to strengthen concentration, you don't have to do anything different from your present practice. I want to make that really clear. Your present practice in these sustained attempts at mindfulness automatically will give rise to concentration. It will happen directly. So don't feel like you have to change anything. The whole idea is to aim and sustain moment after moment, and concentration will develop.

So what to do when it goes away? Because it will—it will go away. This is where the kind of moderate effort is important, because very often we can get tied up in knots trying to get the concentration back. It goes away and you remember how sweet it was, and you'll do anything to get it back. It's like the one thing that makes this whole experience worthwhile is being in the present moment and being peaceful. Otherwise, it's not really a vacation here. So you may try really hard.

How do I get concentrated? Oh, I've got to really pump it on the breath. I've got to really force it. And that will do it. More effort. That's what's needed. More effort. And so you put a lot of effort in, but it's not really about the breath. It's about feeling good again. It's about getting back to that concentration. And then, strange to say, it doesn't happen. And you find yourself getting more frustrated, and then, oh, I guess it's more effort. And then you just get tighter, and you tie yourself up into a bigger knot.

So in doing this, we forget one key thing about concentration. And it's a very wonderful lesson to learn. The proximate cause of concentration is happiness. Happiness. So what's the source of that happiness? The source of that happiness is our real acceptance of the present moment just the way it is. And you'll start to see this is the avenue to peace and therefore concentration.

So we have to come back into the moment and kind of take it just as it is, just on its own terms, not trying to make it something different or to try to find some personal gain out of it. It's that gaining and striving mind that blocks our access to peace, blocks our access to concentration. And this is part of the right attitude that Carol was talking about. How can we approach the present moment with the right attitude? It's to take it just the way it is. So then the mind can really settle into the way things are. And then the peace happens and then the concentration becomes stronger.

So anytime you're in conflict with the present moment, wanting it to be something different than what it is, not liking it the way it is or looking for something else instead, that will block the peace and the concentration from developing.

This came through to me really strongly when I was doing loving-kindness practice at IMS a few years ago. And I had gotten pretty settled in in the first week of doing the loving-kindness practice intensively. And it is a concentration practice. And the concentration was starting to develop and it felt quite good and the metta was coming through.

And then something external happened that threw off my balance. I lost my connection, my mind got stirred up, and when that passed, I settled back into doing the phrases of loving kindness and my mind wouldn't collect again. And I got very frustrated because I really like that concentration aspect. So I tried harder and I pushed on the phrases and I said them faster and I tried to force some metta to come, and none of it worked.

And then at that point, I had an interview with my teacher, who was Joseph Goldstein, and I went in and told him about the situation. I said, "Joseph, I just can't get back to that concentration. I'm really frustrated." He said, "Guy, the metta practice isn't for ourselves. It's for the other." Bingo.

And then this light went off. I was corrupting the practice. I wasn't caring about the other person. I was just using them as an object so I could feel good. So how much metta is in that? There was zero. So what Joseph was telling me is, look, you've got to go back and care about the other person. "You mean the concentration comes out of the caring?" "Yeah."

So I went back, I gave up my quest, I just got back to simply caring about the other person as I was sending the metta, and then all of a sudden the concentration was back again.

So the same thing with the breath. If you want to use an in-breath just as a springboard to feeling good and getting concentrated, it won't get there. You have to be seriously interested in the breath for the breath's sake. And so what it really requires is this real innocence. No ulterior motives, but just really being interested in the present moment for the sake of the present moment. Being interested in the breath just for the sake of the breath. Or a sensation, or a sound, or an emotion, or a thought. Not to get anything out of it, but just to see it the way it is.

Then the concentration will unfold.

When I was a yogi, I think I knew this, but I see it even more clearly as a teacher, that we all have really different aptitudes in the area of concentration. It's like athletic ability. I'm a tennis fan, and the people that I really enjoy watching are the ones who have this natural athletic ability. So on the men's side, I was a huge fan for years of Pete Sampras, who has this kind of just grace and power and speed and fluidity around the court. And on the women's side of the game, the Williams sisters really have these qualities too. This is natural athleticism that is so fun to watch.

Well, in meditation also, some of us have a natural aptitude for this quality, especially of concentration. And one of those people with this aptitude is a Thai master named Ajahn Jumnian. I don't know how many of you have met Ajahn Jumnian, but he comes to Spirit Rock every year, usually in May, and he is a trip. He has this incredible energy that's one of the byproducts of concentration. He has a lot of joy. And when you listen to him teach, you can just feel the radiation of his energy and his happiness.

So when Ajahn Jumnian was four years old, his parents were both practicing Buddhists in Thailand and I'm sure went regularly to the temples to visit and offer dana. And Ajahn Jumnian had no doubt seen other people meditating. So one day, at the age of four, he sat down on the floor of his house, cross-legged, he closed his eyes, and he went away. And he didn't come out.

And so his parents sort of tapped him and knocked on the door and shook him and called his name. No response. He just sat there, not moving, not responding, somewhere else. So they got worried. So they went to get the local priest and said, "Please, can you come help with our son? He's gone. I don't know what's happened to him. I don't know if he's going to come back."

So the priest comes around and looks at him and says, "Oh, he's just in a state of samadhi. There's nothing to worry about. Just let him be and he'll come back when he's ready."

So sure enough, about 24 hours later, Ajahn Jumnian's eyes popped open and he got up and moved around and he was quite fine and bright and eager and very happy. So at this point, his parents knew they had a prodigy on their hands. So they started training him from the age of four. They took him to the local Buddhist teacher, and they took him to the local shaman, because concentration is the base of the shamanic path. So Ajahn Jumnian, from a very early age, got training in both these streams, and he still has both these talents. It's very interesting.

One day he was teaching a daylong at the lower hall. And in the middle of the daylong, he pointed to one woman who was sitting about halfway back and he said, "How are you feeling?"

And she said, "Well, now that you mentioned it, my stomach is really upset."

And so he said, "Oh, okay, I have something for you." And he opened up this big vest that he has that he carries around with all sorts of trinkets and amulets and potions and lotions. And he took out this bottle of white fluid and he said, "Here, drink this." And he gave her the bottle and she drank it. And he kept on teaching. He came back about 20 minutes later. "How are you now?"

She said, "I'm totally fine."

Powers of mind also come from samadhi. Very interesting.

But my point is, some people have a natural ability in this direction. Some people don't. I was not one of those who did. And I remember being on a retreat at IMS early on. We closed the center down, and the staff were sitting together. Carol was there also at that time. This was about 1979. And we were sitting in a circle. There were only about 10 or 12 of us at this point. And I happened to open my eyes in the middle of a sitting, and I looked at a friend who was sitting nearby. And she was in a posture that was kind of like she was absorbed in some divine communion with some higher realm that I hadn't even a clue about in my practice.

And sympathetic appreciation was not the first mind state that came to my mind. I thought, what am I doing here? She had that capability and I really didn't.

So I had to work really hard at this factor of concentration and I've put in months and months of practice doing particular concentration techniques. And over the years, I've gotten up to a middling level of concentration, but not an exalted level of concentration.

So I want to just recommend for those of you for whom it comes naturally and easily, it's a wonderful quality to enhance and develop. For those of you for whom it doesn't come so easily, it's also a wonderful quality to develop, and it absolutely can be developed. It's really just a question of putting in the time and commitment to bring it out. And it's a very helpful quality, as I'll talk about more.

What blocks concentration are primarily two things. Discursive thinking. And by that I mean not just the passing thought that you can see clearly and let go, but when you get off on a train of thinking. And you kind of jump on that train and you ride it for a while. That's what I mean by this phrase, discursive thinking. You follow a train of thought for a while.

So one thought arising and seen and returned to the present object, your chosen object, not a problem. The thought can be seen clearly as just another arising. Mindfulness is intact. Thoughts are not problems. Our getting lost in the content of thought, however, is a loss of mindfulness and therefore interrupts the development of concentration.

The other thing that disrupts it basically are the hindrances that Howie talked about a few nights ago. When we don't see the hindrance clearly, it takes us on a ride of its own creation. We get lost in the projection of the storyline of what we want or what we don't like or all the restlessness or doubt that comes. When we can turn and see the hindrance directly, we see desire as desire, we see aversion as aversion. Again, mindfulness is established and it can continue to develop the concentration. But hindrances typically lead us astray and we lose, ordinarily, some concentration to them.

So these are what impede it. So now I want to talk in the remainder of the talk about deepening

concentration and why we care about it. Why should we care about developing this factor of the path, this factor of samadhi?

The most important reason is to develop concentration as a base for stronger and deeper insight. Yes, concentration feels good in and of itself, but in and of itself it's limited. It doesn't have the power for the complete freedom of mind that the Buddha was looking for, which is why he left his concentration teachers. So similarly for us, the most valuable aspect of concentration is that from its foundation, we really have the ability to develop insight much more strongly and clearly.

The reason for that is concentration in bringing the mind to tranquility wears away or takes away temporarily the forces of greed and aversion that move the mind and keep us agitated. When the mind is under the sway of likes and dislikes, wanting and not wanting, it doesn't see clearly. When those are stilled, the mind sees more clearly. So this is the first and most important factor of concentration. The contribution of it is that it lets us see clearly and insight comes from that.

But secondarily, in and of itself, it makes a great contribution to our sense of ourselves, not only on retreat but in daily life. Concentration brings a tremendous sense of well-being and ease. The access to it is through relaxation, and in its wake come peace and stability. So the concentrated mind becomes the foundation for living in the world with a real sense of inner peace.

This is from the Dalai Lama: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." Samadhi is the doorway to that sense of inner peace. And I actually don't know any way to get there other than the development of samadhi. Insight also delivers it. But again, we need a certain base of samadhi in order to have deep insight.

You often hear talk today of certain practices being concentration practices and other practices being insight practices. In the tradition, these are called the directions or the paths of samatha, or serenity as it's often translated, and vipassana, or insight. And these are often presented to us as dichotomies or opposites. You know, which are you doing? Are you doing a samatha practice or are you doing a vipassana practice?

As far as I know, the Buddha never talked about samatha practices as distinct from vipassana practices. But as I read the suttas, the sense that comes across to me is that as we practice mindfulness, we generate samatha, or serenity, and we generate vipassana, or insight. Both unfold from the practice of mindfulness.

Both are described in the suttas in this way. But the fact is that later practitioners and later commentaries do present certain practices which more strongly develop the quality of samatha or tranquility. And it's these same practices that strengthen more directly the factor of concentration or samadhi.

So the Visuddhimagga, which is a 6th century text from Sri Lanka, lists 40 different objects of meditation that are particularly recommended for developing concentration. These include visual images called kasinas, which are disks or representations of colors or elements; meditation on corpses in various stages

of decay; recollections of the three gems—that is the refuges—or the contemplation on death; mindfulness of breath; and the Brahmaviharas.

In our styles of teaching here at Spirit Rock, we primarily teach this strong development of concentration either through the Brahmaviharas or through mindfulness of breathing. These are the two routes that we most often recommend. For people who have done a lot of Vipassana practice in the past and who want to take a month or six weeks to explore concentration in a little more depth, we often will work with you on those practices through the interviews. We tend not to give the instructions up front, but there are people here who are doing metta practice or breath practice regularly, particularly for the development of concentration and the strengthening of concentration. And that's something that we offer when someone has done a certain amount of Vipassana practice in the past.

But concentration will develop naturally in doing your practice as you're doing it. And I want to mention some ways in doing standard Vipassana practice that you can strengthen that factor.

One way is to continue to place an ongoing emphasis on your primary anchor, which may be the breath, could be body sensations, could be sounds. But the one that you keep coming back to again and again, keep making that a primary object for yourself. That will strengthen the quality of concentration.

Use the technique in being with the breath of noting or counting, because both of these help keep the mind from wandering off.

Use the walking periods for formal walking. This is highly recommended as it provides that continuity of mindfulness from the sitting to the walking and back again.

In the informal practice times—meals, work meditation, around your room, showering, and so forth—use continuous noting. Note what activity you're with: eating, lifting, chewing, or if you're brushing your teeth, reaching, touching, lifting, squeezing, brushing, and so on. That continuous noting also keeps you anchored in the present. We might talk more about this in the instructions soon.

Slow down throughout the day. The calming of the body will help to calm the mind.

Guard the sense doors. You don't have to look around for entertainment every time someone passes you by. You don't need to know who that is. Rather, try and keep that focus on your chosen meditation object.

When you sit, have an emphasis on keeping the body still and unmoving. Again, the stillness of body will contribute to stillness of mind.

Once you settle in, if sitting 45 minutes or an hour is comfortable, extend your periods of sitting. Sometimes that will let the mind and body settle to a deeper extent than they had been able to in a shorter sitting.

Be really moderate with your food. Overeating makes you drowsy and you lose that sharpness.

Be moderate in your sleep. As the retreat goes on, people's sleep needs often go down. Don't sleep more than you really need. Don't wake up in the morning, feel refreshed, and then roll over for another dose, but have a thought that you just want to sleep the minimal hours that you really need. As your sleep needs reduce, you can expand your hours of formal practice and basically take the schedule as a starting point and then expand your hours of practice beyond that according to what is comfortable for you.

Now these sound rigorous, and it can be challenging to practice in this way, but don't get the sense that this is like an extraordinary thing to do. This is how all of us were taught, and this is how all of us practiced based on the teachings that we got at that time. So it is really recommended as your standard mode once you settle into a long retreat, if you're able to.

As concentration deepens, the first thing that one encounters are these five jhanic factors, which Howie talked about, and I think James mentioned also last night. Vitakka is connecting, which we've talked about a lot. Vicara is sustaining. We've talked about both of those quite a bit in being with the breath. The third one is piti, often translated as rapture. To me, that's a little bit of an exuberant translation. Sometimes—I'd say most of the time—piti doesn't come with a lot of affect. Piti is simply the kind of pleasure that we have when we connect with the meditation object in an ongoing way. And when piti is strong, it has an impact in the body.

The bodily energy starts to increase as a result of piti, and we may feel that in different ways. It can be goosebumps on the skin, or a sense of jolt of energy that passes through quite quickly, or waves of energy that pass through us like showers, or what's called all-pervading rapture where it more or less fills the body.

The fourth factor is sukha, translated as happiness or comfort, or the translation I like is contentment. Sukha is one of the factors that has the most affect to it. There's usually a sweet and pleasant quality to sukha that is quite fulfilling and therefore lets the mind settle into that quality of contentment. That's where the riches start to be unfolded, and then the mind likes to settle within those riches. This is really the base of deep contentment.

And ekagata—as the mind settles within itself, it becomes really collected, and that's that sense of one-pointedness. Now, one-pointedness suggests a narrow focus of attention, and this is a way to develop samadhi. You can collect the mind around a narrow focus like the breath. When I practiced in Burma a year ago, my teacher told me to focus on the breath as experienced just above the upper lip in an area about the width of a fingertip. That was my focus for six weeks. I came to him and I said, "I've got really strong body pain in a sitting today. Should I pay attention to that?" He said, "No, stay here." That was the only object that I was given. So that does generate strong samadhi.

But another way to generate the one-pointedness is just to collect the mind around whatever is arising. This is called momentary or khanika samadhi. So the mind, the attention is with a sound for a moment. Connect and sustain. The next moment with a sensation in the knee. Connect and sustain. Then a thought.

Then an in-breath. Then an emotion. Then another sound. It's moving, but in each moment there's a fullness of attention. So the mindfulness is steady, even though the attention is moving. This will also develop samadhi in this form called khanika or momentary samadhi.

So we don't need to understand the one-pointedness or ekagata as being about a narrow focus. The mind can collect around a broad range of phenomena. Ajahn Sumedho has a really nice way of explaining this. He says that ekagata is the one point that includes everything. So what's the one point that includes everything? How about the present moment? Now. Now is the one point that includes everything. So when the mind collects in the present moment, however wide that is, that is also ekagata.

As the jhanic factors become stronger, they offset the hindrances. This is a wonderful experience. We don't realize how frequently and really incessantly the hindrances are tormenting us until they stop. And when the mind moves into this state where the hindrances are temporarily suspended, it feels just great. It's called access concentration or neighborhood concentration because it's getting close to the jhanas. The Pali word is upacara samadhi.

The Buddha said that for one who has encountered this, when these five hindrances have been abandoned in oneself temporarily, one sees that as freedom from debt, health after a long illness, release from prison, freedom from slavery, and a land of safety. These are very strong comparisons—release from prison and freedom from slavery. This is what it's like to have an extended period without the hindrances being present. This is the ripening of the jhanic factors.

As they continue to become stronger, they culminate in what's called the absorption of the first jhana. And in the first jhana, the mind collects so strongly in itself that it becomes temporarily very stable and unshakable. The hindrances are way left behind, and all the factors have come together in a balanced way that is very strengthening and to a certain degree deeply satisfying.

So we do have people in these month-long retreats who are encountering and practicing the jhanas. This is not something that is done only by monks from 2,500 years ago.

This is happening for people today in this meditation hall on this retreat. But it is basically a retreat practice. Learning the jhanas, in our opinion, takes about a month of dedication to see if there is currently the ability to access them. Some people will be able to, some people may not. That's okay. But anytime you undertake a period of concentration practice, you will still be strengthening the factor of samadhi.

The first jhana has all five of the factors in balance. The Buddha described it like this: rapture and happiness drench, steep, fill, and pervade the body so that there is no part of the body unpervaded by rapture and happiness.

In the second jhana, because the attention then becomes so effortless, the factors of connecting and sustaining actually fall away. They're not needed. We don't need to make the effort to connect and sustain because the mind is naturally so present, so connected. So in the second jhana, there's a refining of the

experience, and the second jhana is characterized only by rapture, happiness, and equanimity.

But still in the second jhana, the quality of rapture, this bodily energy, can feel quite intense, so intense that it can have an aspect of not being pleasurable, being a little too stirred up. So the third jhana, there's a falling away of the element of piti or rapture, and the only two factors present are happiness and one-pointedness. Sukha and ekaggata. And it is at this level that the Buddha said, this is a sublime abiding. The third and fourth jhanas are said to be a sublime abiding.

In the fourth jhana, even the factor of happiness drops away. And that jhana is only characterized by the presence of one-pointedness and this deep sense of equanimity.

Above these very deep states of absorption are four other levels called the formless attainments. The mind of infinite space—opening up from the fourth jhana, one opens up to the expansiveness of the experience. The sense of the body has generally fallen away at this point. And one just becomes aware that space is unbounded.

After being with that, one is lifted into the fifth jhana where one starts to tune in: space is unbounded, but there is a knowing of it. And this is called the plane of infinite consciousness. And then that, in its greater refinement, goes to the sixth jhana, which is called the plane of nothingness. One sees that the consciousness is illuminating nothing. There is nothing there. And the seventh jhana is considered even transcending the perception of nothingness. It's a plane of neither perception nor non-perception—almost too subtle to describe or imagine.

So these are the fruits of concentration, then laying the development for that insight that can see beyond all conditioned phenomena for the direct realization of nirvana and the process of enlightenment.

Let's end on that note. Thank you for listening.

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