Deepening Concentration, Developing Happiness

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 56:14

At retreats like this, we talk a lot about how to practice and the difficulties we encounter in practice. And of course, this is very helpful. It's what most of us need—some orientation to the practice, how to work with the challenges that come up. Carol gave a whole talk on dukkha. I talked about restlessness. Guy talked about working with difficult emotions and states of mind.

But this emphasis on the difficulties is partly why Buddhism gets a rap as being all about suffering. There's a real wisdom in this, of course. Our willingness to face suffering, the difficulties of life, and really bring understanding to them is what allows the possibility of transforming them. But if you hear a glib kind of wash on Buddhism, especially around the Four Noble Truths, you'll often hear the First Noble Truth defined as "life is suffering." I don't know how many times I've heard that or read that in interviews and radio shows, where someone who doesn't know what they're talking about is talking about Buddhism. "Buddhism, what the Buddhists say is life is suffering. It's all about suffering."

I actually found the other day that Stephen Colbert had done a little segment on Buddhism as part of a series on religion. He was better than that in his definition, but his definition was "life means suffering." And of course he went on a whole rap about that and made it funny. But people don't understand what it is we're doing here. And his image of the Buddha was not a Buddha—it was one of these fat kitchen god things that people think are Buddhas. He's making jokes about the shape of that image, of course. And poor Lama Surya Das, who's a friend and Tibetan teacher, was game enough to go on the show and try to match wits with Stephen Colbert, which is usually a losing proposition. He did okay, but no one really comes out best in that debate.

This emphasis on suffering can lead us to a kind of gloominess of mind. And being on retreat, I know a few people have commented, "It's kind of gloomy here, isn't it?" As you see people walking around, they look very serious and everything's slowed down. There's no singing, dancing and garlands or whatever. We're not getting involved in that, no entertainment. And so it can really seem that a lot of this practice is about turning us back again and again to what's difficult, to what's wrong with experience.

I think it's really important to balance that and to actually remember that when the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, what he actually said is there is suffering. Suffering is a mark of existence, a fact of existence. There is a cause of suffering. But he said very clearly there's an end to suffering and a path leading to the end of suffering. We often don't talk so much about those last two, especially in the early

days of a retreat. Why are we practicing and where is this leading? But if we don't have a sense of that, how will we find the motivation to continue to practice, to work with the difficulties that do come up, that are a characteristic of experience? We have to have some sense of where this path is leading.

My sense of where it's leading—and I'm sure yours too, or else you wouldn't be here—is to really deepen our capacity for happiness, for calm and for contentment, and to bring more understanding, more wisdom, more insight into our experience, both personal and impersonal, and possibly to come to an end of suffering. We can view that in the biggest picture, of course, but even in a moment, in any experience, we can see that there's that possibility of coming to an end of suffering.

So as well as all of the teachings and the pointers and the guidance to being with suffering and understanding suffering and finding the cause of suffering, there are many teachings and lists about the path to freedom and the beautiful qualities of heart and mind that we need to develop if we really are to deepen in this path of practice and actually find an end to suffering. Lists like the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, or the Five Spiritual Faculties, or the Ten Paramis, or the Four Brahmaviharas.

I want to talk tonight about a list that we don't teach that much about, but it's one that actively points to the importance of happiness on the path and how developing these beautiful qualities of mind and heart are essential—that this is the direction the path and the practice moves in.

The Buddha was actually known as the Happy One, the Sugata. There are many stories and comments in the teachings about his happiness and the happiness of his followers. People often remarked on the sense of well-being that they observed in the Buddha and his disciples.

The kind of happiness the Buddha expressed, and that I'm talking about tonight, is not the kind of la-di-da happiness of getting what we want, or an ice cream cone, or even an iPhone 5, which you've missed out on—luckily for you. Couldn't go line up at Best Buy for your iPhone 5. It's not that kind of happiness. It's a deeper, more reliable kind of happiness that we cultivate here. And that's really more valuable, more important for us.

You probably know that happiness is in right now. There's all this research being done on it, books being written on it. Type in "happiness" on Amazon and you get hundreds of thousands of responses of books with that in the title. But there's one book that I've really appreciated of all the many that are out there. James Baraz, who at Spirit Rock is our happiness guru—if you know James, you know he's also a happy one—recommended it. It's called *How We Choose to Be Happy: The Nine Choices of Extremely Happy People* by Rick Foster and Greg Hicks, who live in the Bay Area and often come to Spirit Rock, very aligned with meditation and the practice of meditation. They give a definition for happiness that I think really speaks to us as practitioners and what it is we're looking to cultivate.

Our definition of happiness is a profound, enduring feeling of contentment, capability, and centeredness. It's a rich sense of well-being that comes from knowing that you can deal productively and creatively with

all life offers, both the good and the bad. It's knowing your internal self and responding to your real needs rather than the demands of others. And it's a deep sense of engagement, living in the moment and enjoying life's bounty.

This is the kind of happiness, on a relative level, that these practices lead us towards. Of course, there's the deeper and ultimate happiness that the Buddha discovered. But on the way to that, this is the happiness that really nourishes us, that allows us to continue these practices. And this definition has a lot of words that we can relate to our practice: centeredness, well-being, contentment, knowing our internal self, living in the moment. This is what we're looking to cultivate here.

What we can really begin to see is that we can actually train in happiness. And again, all the research is proving that it's possible. That book I mentioned, *The Nine Choices of Extremely Happy People*, suggests it isn't just an accident or even a byproduct of something else, but actually choices that we make over and over again to incline the mind towards happiness. And in the context of our practice, we do that not just for happiness' sake, for its own sake, but really because it's onward leading. As we develop that kind of centeredness, that kind of contentment and well-being, a sense of being engaged in life, we can really develop a confidence in the practice and how it's unfolding.

As we open to these teachings, and especially the ones on developing the beautiful qualities of mind, I really find that they provide maps for us. And maps are great. It's how we all got here when we didn't know how to get here. How we find our way in the world is through these maps. Now there are so many maps available online. But the Buddha gave us lots of maps, and he gave us maps to find the way to this kind of happiness and well-being.

In talking about this tonight, I don't want to make it sound like this is some far distant goal—that when we finally get enlightened, we'll be happy, or when we get rid of all these imperfections, we'll be happy. Rather, there's the possibility of here and now discovering happiness, discovering a sense of well-being through this practice and its capacity to collect and unify our minds, to actually develop a mind that's trained, that is responsive. That's the kind of mind that allows us to make these choices towards more happiness, more freedom, less suffering.

The mind that's not so scattered, not so confused—and perhaps over these weeks now of practice, you've started to feel just a little bit of a sense of that. The mind isn't as confused, isn't as lost as it was in the early days of the retreat. You start to see, even in moments, that the mind can actually become an ally, a mind as friend, rather than this very conflicted relationship we often have where it's one of struggle and blame and judgment. Actually, the mind becomes ally and friend through this kind of training. The Buddha said something like—I'm paraphrasing—that the untrained mind can be your worst enemy, but the trained mind is your best friend. This is, again, really what we're doing here: training the mind. And we need to look at what we are training it for. What are we training it to do?

The list that I want to speak about tonight is called the Five Jhānic Factors. These are qualities of mind,

mental states that lead to the experience of jhāna and actually constitute, especially the first jhāna. Their deepening and progress develop into the other jhānas. Jhāna is a Pali word that basically means absorption. It's a meditative experience we can have that really is a marked difference from our normal state of mind and even from normal mindfulness, even quite deep mindfulness. It's a real shifting that can happen through intensive practice where the mind falls into a state that's absorbed, centered, focused, still.

Now these factors are normally spoken about in that context, and I've often given teachings on them at the concentration retreat that I teach pretty much every year at Spirit Rock, where we focus all of the teachings and practices around concentration. But I've really come to see that they're not only useful for the deepening of concentration. Any meditative practice goes through this kind of unfolding, and we can use this map to give us a sense of how the practice is deepening and what direction it might go in.

So I thought it might be helpful on a long retreat like this, where we really do deepen in our practice and there is the time to hear some teachings that we might not normally be exposed to, to get a sense of this particular list, this particular group of practices that the Buddha spoke about a lot. If you read the suttas, you'll see them mentioned frequently.

The process that we're doing here, as we sweeten the mind, as we develop these wholesome states—what needs to happen at the same time is a willingness to work with whatever the obstacles are. This is the kind of suffering that I spoke about at the beginning. The willingness to do that work of working with, diminishing, releasing, abandoning all of the mind states and choices that we make that lead us to suffering. We need to do that at the same time that we're cultivating these beautiful states.

With this particular list, the challenges, the difficult states that are worked with are our old friends, the hindrances. What's interesting about this list of the jhānic factors is that each one is actually a balancing force or an antidote to one of the five hindrances. There's a matching there. And so we have this two-pronged approach to our practice that's actually happening naturally. We don't have to make an agenda about this.

But what we're doing is reducing the obstacles, the hindering factors, the states of mind and heart that lead us to suffering, while simultaneously cultivating the supportive factors. And we're actually doing this all the time that we're mindful. Mindfulness has this natural tendency—we don't have to make an agenda out of it—but mindfulness's natural functioning is to increase wholesome states that it notices and decrease unwholesome states and hindrances that it notices. Just by bringing mindfulness, that natural wisdom of letting go or cultivating is there.

But we can also engage a little, be a little more proactive in that process by understanding more clearly how it actually works. This process is going on all the time that we're practicing mindfulness—we're increasing wholesome states and decreasing negative ones. But this work happens more quickly, you might say, or more efficiently and effectively, through our willingness to notice hindrances when they're

there.

We've talked about this already. Part of that can come from our willingness to recognize that if the mind isn't settled, if there isn't some basic degree of ease in our current experience, some form or other of one or more of the hindrances are present. And our willingness to recognize those and actually work with them skillfully continues this cycling of increasing wholesome states and decreasing difficult ones.

All of the practices that we've already shared with you, the practices you already know about working skillfully with hindrances—the classic practice we gave is that acronym of RAIN: Recognition, Acceptance, Interest or Intimacy, Non-identification or Nature. This is one of the most skillful ways of working with these difficult states of mind: feeling them in the body, recognizing the emotion, naming the hindrance that's present, seeing the thoughts that go with it, and bringing wisdom to it—seeing it as impersonal, seeing that it's conditioned, seeing that it's impermanent, that it will also change.

So all of these practices that we've been working with are going to be implied as I go through these lists tonight, this kind of wisdom that we can bring to practice. But I'll be offering some other ways of looking at working with the hindrances using this lens of the jhānic factors.

In this list of the five jhānic factors, the first two factors are usually talked about together. They're called vitakka and vicāra. Guy mentioned them briefly the other morning—I forget what the context was, but probably saying something like how important they are for our practice. Vitakka is usually translated as aiming or directing attention, or initial application. It's that directing of our mindfulness to the chosen object. Vicāra, which goes together with vitakka, is the sustaining of that attention. It's the continued connection with the object.

Sayadaw U Pandita, when he talks about these two, describes them as aiming and rubbing. It's that sense of staying with, really deepening into our connection, our understanding of our mindfulness of a particular object or experience.

In the traditional translations, the two are actually defined—or the literal meaning has something to do with thinking. They're often defined as applied and sustained thought. This was always a little confusing to me because, you know, we're not wanting to encourage a lot of thinking about our meditation process. But I think what it's referring to is using that cognitive capacity of the mind, that mind that knows, that can name, that can recognize—using that functioning of the mind to bring more clarity to our experience. It's a little bit what we're doing when we're using the noting practice, taking that functioning of the mind and using it to help us connect a little more deeply with the experience.

So vitakka and vicāra is this act of connecting with whatever experience it is and sustaining it in a momentary kind of way. The functioning of these two is the foundation of any kind of meditative practice. And if you look at it in a larger context, it's the functioning that has to happen anytime we learn anything. We have to connect with whatever it is that we're studying and sustain for long enough to have the

information, the learning, actually land. And so it's a very useful way to understand the mind and its workings.

When we talk about aiming and sustaining, this is not something that happens once and then you hold on. It's something that happens momentarily, over and over again. It's not that you sit down at the beginning of a meditation, aim your mindfulness at the breath, and try to hang on to that for the next forty-five minutes or an hour. That is not the way this works, and that would just lead to frustration. I don't even think it's possible to do it in that way.

But we're always aiming and sustaining with every arising experience that mindfulness knows. So it's as short as an in-breath and then an out-breath, and perhaps even shorter than that—discrete experiences as they arise. Any experience, a sound that arises at the ear door, there's that initial knowing of it, and then the sustaining is keeping our attention there for as long as the sound continues. The sound ends, there's a new experience, and there's another vitakka and vicāra. So we're doing it over and over again.

This is really the workhorse of meditation, doing this over and over again. If the vitakka is there, if there is that initial connection, vicāra has the potential to arise and to continue. Vicāra can't arise unless the vitakka is there. The vitakka is there, the vicāra has the potential to arise. And sometimes it's just very brief and we're lost.

Other times we can really feel that there's this seamlessness to the practice. And all that needs to happen is for the vichara to last long enough until the next arising—the next in-breath, the next out-breath, the next sound, the next sensation, the next mind state, the next thought that arises.

This happens also with thought. Wherever we notice the thought—beginning, middle, or end—there's the vitaka and the vichara, to notice the nature of the thought. Sometimes we can experience the actual thinking process in the mind. So it can apply to any experience that we have.

But it's the development of these two qualities that supports the deepening of the continuity that we've been emphasizing so much. It's so important for the deepening of our mindfulness. It's these two factors, vitaka and vichara, that allow the continuity, that bring a kind of seamlessness to practice.

And again, I'm not assuming or implying that one is therefore mindful all the time. But we go through these periods where there is just this sense of continuity, this sense of flow in the meditation. When there's a break—when there's vitaka, vichara, and then a gap where we don't connect again with something else—that's when the hindrances come in. The mind abhors a vacuum, and so it makes something happen. The tendencies of mind toward doubt or restlessness or whatever—that's where they come in. But if these two keep coming, if we keep developing them, this is when we can really deepen in continuity.

Vitaka is said to be the antidote to sloth and torpor—or when it really gets bad, "toth and slorper," when you can't even get the words out. All of that experience I'm sure you're familiar with: sleepiness and

dullness and fogginess and spaciness. Vitaka brings that zing of energy. It's like that clarity of knowing that recognizes the experience, whatever it is, can break through the fogginess that is sloth and torpor.

In talking about sloth and torpor, sometimes teachers give a whole talk on this hindrance, and it's really interesting to see all the layers and textures of how it manifests. But to say just a few words about it: there are different kinds of sleepiness. There's the garden variety of sleepiness that all of us had the first few days of the retreat, or perhaps even longer, just getting adjusted to the schedule, to being here. And then there's a different kind of sleepiness that happens just through our biorhythms, through the course of a day or days of practice.

But we can get more interested in this third kind of sleepiness that we call sinking mind. Sinking mind is an experience that happens when the concentration, the steadiness, is actually deepening, but there's not quite enough energy, not quite enough zing in the vitaka to bring wakefulness. So it's just an imbalance between the calming factors and the energizing factors. We can experience sinking mind when we feel kind of mindful—sort of mindful. If someone asked, we'd say, "Yes, we're mindful, we're with the breath." But all of a sudden it's like someone turned the lights out. The energy drops, you often find yourself jerking forward, and you wake up and realize you've really been in a kind of fog.

When you notice that happening, sometimes just the little jerk that occurs is enough energy to break through the trance. But vitaka is what will actually support working with the sleepiness. Just bringing more clarity to noticing arisings, noticing the beginnings of things, can actually bring more energy.

What I see is that vitaka, when it's clearly seen, has a little bit of positive reinforcement. There is this little bit of energy in the connecting with experience. And as we understand this process, it actually feels more pleasant to have that energy than to get lost in the fog of sloth and torpor. We kind of see the newness in experience. Vitaka is all about this moment being new, fresh, never repeated—even though you might be thinking it's just another breath. Vitaka allows us to connect with it with this sense of clarity. So it really is an energizing factor.

Vichara, on the other hand—the sustaining of awareness—is the antidote to doubt. And I think this is also interesting, because doubt is in some ways the most difficult of the hindrances. Actually, the most difficult hindrance is the one you're experiencing right now, right? Usually. But if you step back a bit, doubt is really challenging because it puts everything up for discussion, for debate, for questioning, for judging and comparing. "Why am I here? What am I doing here? What am I supposed to be doing? If I'm doing it, am I doing it right? Everyone else seems to know what they're doing and I don't." Or, "No one knows what they're doing, not even the teachers." And we can just go in this spin of questioning and challenging. Of course, some degree of doubt, some skillful doubt or inquiring kind of doubt, is helpful. But this kind of doubt really keeps us spinning around and not landing in experience.

Vichara is that experience of actually connecting with what's happening and knowing it. Vitaka is that momentary recognition: here is something. Vichara allows us to know what it is, allows us to connect,

allows us to deepen. And so we can start to trust our experience as we settle the mind and actually know what's happening, know a breath.

Know a sound and know its nature. Know a thought and know its nature. This is actually what deepens our faith in our capacity to do this practice—this sense of steadiness. Doubt keeps us superficial, on the surface. Vichara allows us to connect and keep opening to experience.

I actually had a very exaggerated experience in this area of vichara and doubt. A number of years ago, Guy and I were going to fly to Australia to visit my family. I go regularly, and he comes every now and then. The airline we were traveling on offered a free layover in Fiji, where we'd never been before, so it seemed like a nice idea to take a few days there. We both had the idea that Fiji might be a good and cheap place to learn how to scuba dive.

Now, in retrospect, perhaps that wasn't wisdom actually working. It's like when you see ads in the paper: "Cut-price LASIK surgery—we do the cheapest in town." And you think, "Yeah, right. What I want is the cheapest person to direct laser beams into my eye, the one doing it cut-price." But we were on a limited budget, so we thought this was a good idea.

We flew to Fiji, and to get to the place where we'd booked, we had to take a little plane. Then from the plane—there were no roads on this island, or certainly not over the island—we had to get a little boat. We landed at this tiny resort, just a group of little thatched-roof houses on a very pretty little beach. And we started to learn to scuba dive there.

A few things we didn't factor in. One, cheapness perhaps isn't the best guiding decision-making point. Two, it was January, which is cyclone season in Fiji. And this little resort did not have a swimming pool to learn in—you had to do it out in the open ocean. Instead of a calm Pacific, it was already getting quite surgy, even though the cyclones weren't approaching yet. They actually did approach—that's another whole story. They literally blew the roof off the whole place while we were there. But in those early days, it was just surges and a little brisk breeze.

To learn how to scuba dive, they show you all the equipment. It's a dangerous thing—you're going underwater and going quite deep—so there's a lot of equipment, a lot of things to learn. Then you go out and actually have to do it. Once you're underwater, as they say, no one can hear you scream, because you've got this big thing in your mouth. There are all these dials and buttons to look at. You're wearing weights to help you sink, a flotation vest to help you float, and it's like meditation—you have to learn how to balance those two.

Off we go, trudging in and out. Our dive instructor was Ezra, this big Fijian guy. Even though the equipment had clearly been through its paces—it wasn't brand new and sparkling—I really trusted Ezra. He was a great guy.

We walk in—it's a shore dive, you just walk in and it gets deeper until finally you're floating. The ocean

gets deeper and deeper, and the idea was we would do a very gradual descent for our first scuba dive. So off we go. Ezra is first, Guy is second, and I'm following along. It's getting deeper and deeper, we're going down. But at some point, I'm not going down anymore. That's when you have to start balancing the weights and the buoyancy. In scuba diving, there's a little tube with two buttons on it.

One increases the air and one decreases the air. So I'm pressing the button, thinking I need to decrease the air. And I'm not going down. So what do you do? You press it again. You press it harder. You press it more.

Meanwhile, they're going deeper and deeper, and I'm not getting any deeper. So my next move is to press the other button, right, if the first one isn't working. Well, of course, in hindsight, that's the one that increases the air in the vest—it's coming from your oxygen tanks. So they're getting deeper, and I'm going up and up and up.

That's the interesting thing about scuba diving—it's three-dimensional. I'm trying to keep up, but now I'm on the surface and they're descending. After some time—and I have to say it was some time—they noticed that I wasn't there. I could see Guy looking around. He doesn't have a clue. But Ezra finally realizes, "Oh, look up." There I am, floating on the surface.

So he has to come all the way up. And the technique that I had missed, that he had told us, was that when you press the button, you have to hold it above the tank, above your head, for the air to release. And that's what I wasn't doing.

This is what happens. He had told us that, but my mind was busy with a thousand things and didn't pay attention. *Vicāra* is what allows us to stay attentive, to stay present, and get the information we need to actually navigate—whether it's scuba diving or navigating our own minds. I really saw that without that information, I was stuck there on the surface. It didn't allow me to deepen.

And the doubt, the pressing—that's also my natural tendency. If one button doesn't work, try the other one. Who needs to read the instructions? You just press all the buttons until something does something. I personally know that this is a quality I need to develop. Staying steady. It allows us to validate our experience and know for ourselves, to start trusting ourselves instead of flailing around and staying on the surface.

So these two qualities, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, are enormously helpful in our practice. It's such a simple concept—aiming and sustaining. But for me, I found it very valuable. It's like, "Oh right, that's what I'm doing. And can I stay with this, whatever this experience is, just that little bit longer? Can I know it perhaps a little more deeply, a little more clearly?"

These are the workhorses of our meditation. As we develop this capacity over and over again—and I'm talking not just seconds or moments, but days and weeks—it really allows for that sense of continuity I spoke about, and it develops the third of these jhānic factors: *pīti*.

Pīti is also one of the seven factors of awakening and serves a similar function, arising out of a similar experience. Here it arises out of *vitakka* and *vicāra*, aiming and sustaining. *Pīti* is usually translated as rapture or joy. And it's interesting to see that it arises naturally out of a mind that stays connected. It's not an excitable experience that happens randomly, but rather emerges through this process of sustaining the meditation in a continuous way.

What happens with *pīti* is that the mind gets absorbed and fascinated with its chosen object—or even changing objects; it doesn't have to be one object. It becomes effortless to stay connected.

When we talk about this connection, there are two basic kinds of deepening in meditation. One is where we take a single object—perhaps the breath or *mettā* or many other objects—and that develops into deep *samatha* practice, tranquility practice, deepening into *samādhi* and perhaps into *jhāna*. But in this kind of practice, what we're developing is *khaṇika samādhi*.

This is moment-to-moment mindfulness, or moment-to-moment concentration. Even though the objects are changing, it's the continuity—the vitaka and vicara and the continuous nature that we develop—that allows a deepening of the concentration, bringing about this sense of absorption, of piti. It's like a magnetic attraction. There's not so much a sense of having to corral the mind. I talked about sheepdog mind the other day. That's not necessary once this starts to develop.

Joseph talks about practice in this way. He says at the beginning it's like mindfulness is a ball on top of an upside-down bowl—it just easily rolls off. The slightest thing and it's really hard to get it to stay. After a while, it's like a level field. It'll move around, but you have to kind of push it to get it to move. And ultimately it becomes like you're the upside-down bowl, and the mindfulness just rests. It can move a little around in there, but it takes some pushing to get it to move. It just rests really easily. So this is what can start to happen as the mindfulness becomes steadier.

Now, rapture is a mental factor—these are all mental factors—but rapture particularly can be experienced in the body. It can be showering kinds of rapture, momentary rapture, a kind of goosebumps. A common experience of rapture is a lifting, a lightening. Rapture can also be felt as a real heaviness or solidity. All kinds of pushing or pulling experiences can be a manifestation of rapture. Lights, pulsing—a lot of things can be this deepening of concentration leading to piti.

As soon as we start talking about this, most often people's eyes light up and it's like, "Oh, that's what I should be having in meditation," or "I want more of that." But this is not something that we can or even should go and try to get. It's a natural result. Sometimes it's very subtle, and sometimes actually rapture is unpleasant. The movements or the pressures or the experience can be very aggravating to the mind. It can actually be tiring at times. So again, it's not that we want more piti in our experience. Sometimes piti arises and it has these characteristics. Sometimes it's blissful, but sometimes it's not. We're not doing this practice just to get the experience of piti. This is part of the progression that I'm talking about.

As I said, piti is also in the seven factors of awakening. Rapture, when it comes, counterbalances aversion, counterbalances that sense of not wanting, because we're delighting in the object. The mind is just really happy to be paying attention to whatever it's paying attention to. So any form of aversion—judging, ill will, irritation, aversion to ourselves, to our body, to sounds, whatever—rapture is the beautiful antidote to that. When the mind is really absorbed in its object, it's impossible for those mind states to come in.

You might remember Joseph's story about being at a really terrible retreat where the conditions were difficult, and complaining to Sayadaw U Pandita. And U Pandita's only advice was, "Just be more mindful," which didn't seem like it would help very much. But Joseph tried that, became more mindful, and found that aversion just didn't have a way in. If he was really with his direct experience, there was no room for it. This is what can happen with rapture—there's just no room for the hindrances to come in.

So we really see this direction of practice: as we develop continuity, as the mind gets more collected and unified, it brings with it this reduction in suffering. Again, these are factors that come and go. It's not like we land in this and everything's great from now on, but there's this potential to really reduce the tendency of the mind to move into aversion and not wanting.

Piti is usually quite a strong experience. It can have its subtlety, but it has a strength to it. It's interesting that the next factor that develops in this particular list, the fourth factor, is that of sukha. Sukha is usually translated as happiness or pleasure. It's the opposite of dukkha. And I love it that, you know, it's a Pali word, but you can see its connection to sweetness, to sucrose. It has that feeling or flavor—this sweetness. Steve Armstrong defines it as happy contentment of mind and body.

It has a softness to it, a more subtle experience than rapture. Piti and sukha have a strong connection—some teachers even talk about "piti-sukha," not really distinguishing the two. But I think it's really helpful to understand this progression, this natural progression from the absorption that comes with rapture, that kind of intensity. The natural progression is to this subtler experience of sukha, of sweetness.

Sukha comes with a kind of pleasantness. Often we smile when we have, especially our first experiences of sukha as a meditative experience—to just feel that potential for this kind of happiness in this mind and body, just as it is. So the mind has become absorbed, the vitakka and vicāra have provided the foundation, the mind has become happily absorbed in its object, and this feeling of absorption has arisen. But then what arises is this really sweet, subtle experience of sukha, of contentment, of ease. There's a softness to it. And again, you might have already had this, just in moments where there's no tug on the mind at all.

What sukha balances is the hindrance of restlessness and worry. As we find this kind of pleasure and start to trust it in our present moment experience, the mind isn't so agitated. It's not so caught in the push or pull of experience, going to the past and worrying about that, regrets and remorse, or to the future with planning and agitation. This questioning that we're in so often—am I okay? Was I okay? Will I be okay?—the experience of sukha is a direct experience of some kind of fundamental okayness that we can

begin to trust. This contentment, this experience where the mind isn't in the push and pull of wanting and not wanting, past and future, but is actually just content with things as they are. This is the beautiful power of sukha.

In the progression of the factors, sukha leads to the last factor: ekaggatā. "Eka" means "one" in Pali, Sanskrit, and Hindi. Ekaggatā is usually translated as one-pointedness or non-distraction. And again, there's this movement that's happening. It's often also used as synonymous with concentration, and it has a flavor of equanimity. There's a balance of mind that gets developed, a calmness, even a coolness. It can be quite noticeable after the sweetness of sukha, this coolness of ekaggatā. But it is a deepening, a refining of the sukha. We're not looking for happiness—we're abiding in this sense of well-being and stability of mind.

Ekaggatā is the antidote to greed, to wanting, because the mind is really at rest, at peace. It's in balance. It's not needing to go out and get something or push something away. There's some feeling of completeness in the present moment, in this experience, just as it is. For many of us, this is a really unusual experience—to not be wanting something, something better, something different, something improved, but just some kind of okayness, some kind of steadiness of mind in the simplicity of experience, whatever you might be doing, whether formally sitting in the hall or just moving around the retreat center. The practice begins to show us that this type of well-being is possible, even in these very simple conditions, even with the amount of renunciation we are experiencing here.

So how does this all work? How do these factors come together? It's not as though we have a moment of restlessness and we just say, "Oh, more sukha—that's what I need. Let me just bring that up." It doesn't work that way. There's a process that really has to develop these factors. But it begins by working skillfully with the hindrances, just as we've been talking about. The more we're willing to do that—to name them, to disidentify with them, to bring wisdom in, to bring skillfulness to our relationship with them, to really not give energy, to not believe the story that the hindrances are telling us—and to actively cultivate and nurture the wholesome states of mind, whatever they are, whenever we experience them.

And we do that in the same way—by naming them, by recognizing them, by actually feeling them in the mind and body. We begin to inhabit or integrate these beautiful qualities of mind and heart. So I'm often encouraging people in interviews: Did you notice that? Did you name that? Peace or calm or ease or acceptance or letting go. These are actual felt experiences. And that's what gives us the feedback that we're on the right track, that the experience is developing as it should.

And again, in talking about it tonight, I don't want to hold anything out as what should be happening, or suggest that if you're not having this, the meditation isn't working. This is a very gradual process. All of us weave in and out of little tastes or deeper experiences of it throughout the retreat. Even though the jhanic factors are somewhat sequential, they don't go in lockstep. We can have moments of sukha or a moment of clarity, of ekagata—that one-pointed coolness of experience—any time in our process.

But they all develop out of the vitakka and vichara, that willingness to just again and again aim and sustain, connect and develop our mindfulness, the meditation. These two are the only ones that we have any real control over. The others develop out of them. We can nurture them by noticing them, inclining the mind, understanding the territory, recognizing them when they arise. But vitakka and vichara are the cornerstones of our practice, the foundation, and we need to do that over and over, to just be willing. The patience I spoke about this morning—it's this willingness to do them over and over again.

The way this practice develops is that we have whatever moments of absorption, even if it's just a few breaths or a few moments where there's that sense of just settling in, just being with without the hindrances having so much impact. This sense of absorption can develop, whatever degree of joy or bliss, strong experiences in the body and mind can develop. But what naturally happens, as that brings its own steadiness—the absorption of that, the mind getting trained, getting connected—the natural development is this refinement into sukha.

And I think this is what I wanted to really point out: this natural arc that you'll find in so many of the Buddhist lists, where they begin with the foundational factors that often require some effort. We need to bring intention into them. The Seven Factors of Enlightenment certainly act that way. A lot of the lists act that way. So we need to bring that clarity of intention into the practice. And then they often arc into some kind of energizing factors that really give us motivation to keep going. But then they all move in the direction of more subtlety, more refinement, more simplicity, more coolness even.

I just think that's a beautiful map or model to hold. We often think what we're going for are peak experiences. We want the drama and the excitement. But all of these lists have this kind of trajectory toward more refinement, more letting go, more calmness, more ease, more contentment, more well-being. Because it's from that place that the mind can really open to insight. This foundation of well-being, of contentment, of equanimity and ease—that's when the mind really can deepen and discover the truth that the Buddha talked about, the nature of reality, but also the possibility of a real and true, deep and lasting happiness.

So just have a sense of this map, not to go after it with striving, but being willing to do this important work—connecting and sustaining gently, persistently, with patience.

I want to finish with some words from the Dhammapada, the verses, the poems of the Buddha. This one is about happiness and its importance:

Ah, so happily we live without hate among those with hate. Among people who hate, we live without hate.

Ah, so happily we live without misery among those in misery. Among people in misery, we live without misery.

Ah, so happily we live without ambition among those with ambition. Among people who are ambitious, we live without ambition.

Ah, so happily we live, we who have no attachment. We shall feast on joy as do the radiant gods.

Let's just take a moment to let the words settle.

Ah, so happily we live, we who have no attachment. We shall feast on joy as do the radiant gods.

Thank you for your attention.

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