

2005-05-04 Concentration (Week 3 Part 1)

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SPEAKERS

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And then everyone. And if you'd like, we could take a little bit of time for questions. People still might be coming in. So rather than starting right away, it's a good opportunity if you have any questions about the concentration practice. And if you could use the mic if you have a question, that'd be helpful.

I didn't have a chance to ask this at the last session, but while we did the meditation in session, I got extremely fidgety. Like, I felt like I was just going to crawl out of my skin. I couldn't concentrate on the breath. I couldn't concentrate on anything. I have never in years can remember a meditation that was that bad. So I think that occurred to me probably if that did happen. At home, I would say okay, now's not the time to meditate. But usually in a group, I find it really centering. I just don't know what was going on.

It's hard for me to know. But I do know it's a, it's a very bad thing to judge meditations as being bad. That that label is rather unfortunate. And messages can be difficult. It can be unpleasant. It can be challenging, but bad is kind of a really useful label for your meditation experience. The what you're describing is not so uncommon. Someone can meditate for quite a long time and suddenly come across a bout of phenomenal restlessness can feel like you're at the rodeo and you Bear, all you can do is kind of stay stay still, you're ready to bolt. And there's necessarily a sign you're going backwards. But it could be a sign, it could be a symptom of things are being revealed or released to be a tremendous amount of stuff that we keep bottled up or we keep kind of hidden or underground in our system. And as the mind gets concentrated, it's kind of like we're beginning to settle into the underground or settling into the, the deeper aspects of our being, or we're expanding out to include much more of who we are, depending how you want using analogy. Sometimes we're living with blinders on. And there's so much going into unconscious where the blinders on. And there's aspects of our life that we just don't pay attention to. And as the concentration deepens, the awareness becomes softer and more open. You can't do it the effort of kind of excluding thing doesn't work so well. And so then, with concentration and mindfulness practice these more subconscious are deeper held things

will reveal themselves will touch them. And as we touch them sometimes restlessness is what they are. And sometimes we get in contact with some deeper stuff, we can get very restless in the contact. so restless as you know, can happen. There's also a kind of restless, restless as it can happen. That is a symptom of concentration practice itself when itching. Just before they started happening, you can comment or you're feeling kind of agitated and before it started.

don't really remember I don't remember feeling really agitated beforehand. So I was really surprised when it came up during the meditation. Yeah.

So it often as people get calmer and meditation, and where they have what they call them, and people can call him as opening lines, great opening. Sometimes those are followed by difficult periods. It's kind of like you bow to the grain and so open in some way But then you're open, you know, and suddenly all this stuff that come pouring into that open space. And so people sometimes quite discouraged because you think, wow, I was so open what happened my great spiritual experience. So open, it didn't go away. It just got filled. And it's a good thing. It's good, good. Like it feels quite common for deeps. Not always but what people have what they might call a deep spiritual experience. But some, sometimes it's followed by a difficult period in the person's life. So that happens on a small scale on the big scale. What happens sometimes with weight as the mind gets strongly concentrated, there can be strange, unusual body. I talked a lot about unusual usual perception, perceptual distortions last week, but there can also be kind of related to that and maybe related to this strange sensory experiences that can happen. And one of the things that can happen is for some people is a feeling of their skin, crawling or itching are feeling there's insects crawling across your skin. And I've actually opened my eyes and meditation because I was convinced that there was an XSS or insects crawling across them, there's nothing there. And, and I don't know why that's some sometimes a symptom of concentration or a consequence of concentration. But sometimes as a person gets concentrated, these unusual things happen in the body for a while. And that can be one of them. So I don't know what it is for you, you know what it is, but mostly, I just wanna normalize it for you. And say that sooner or later, everyone has something like that. And, and a sign up to us kind of your term, a sign of a, if you're really restless and really unpleasant, really difficult to stay there. A good meditation is simply that you didn't leave you saw to the end, just simply and sometimes it's so difficult to sit there I mean, that that, that it takes all your efforts and resolve and patience and everything. Just Not to vote. And the fact you didn't vote that's actually able to work with well enough to vote. That's a good meditation, as opposed to thinking is supposed to be some infinite bliss, some great calm or something. I don't know if that was helpful. Yes.

Yes, we we've been practicing over these weeks, I've discovered that I can initiate a concentrated state without too much difficulty, but sustaining It is very difficult for me. So I don't you may be talking about that. Tonight. You said you might talk about obstacles, but I don't know if you want to say something now, but I'd like to hear something about that.

I feel like almost anything. Can you describe what a concentrated state is like for you?

Yes, I feel my breath physically gets calmer. I'm able to really experience it in the body. And at the same time, sort of get a sense of the whole body breathing as well. Whatever spot seems to be the most apparent, and my mind is not bothering me very much that feels concentrated. But when I begin to realize I'm not concentrated, I realize I've been following this strain of thought.

And okay, so one of the things that's, that can happen as people get more concentrated or they tend to get calmer. And as they get calmer in meditation, they tend to people tend to become more complacent. And kind of relax, everything's cool. I kind of soothe ourselves in meditation. And one of the, one of the great obstacles to continuing developing continuity in practice, standing in the obstacles is complacency, to kind of be lulled into a sense of everything's okay in school, you know, wherever Everything is fine. And people meditated for some time. And everything is fairly comfortable in meditation into the kind of perimeter kind of light kind of states of concentration. Sometimes they just put themselves to sleep. And I've done that for long periods of time. And I just was nodding off my meditation, because I was complacent, you know, wasn't really. So sometimes what's needed is to kind of kind of awaken kind of alertness or arouse dedication or effort in the practice to bring some balance. That's one thing that can be. There's many things, one of the, one of the principles here is, you should try to understand better what happens to you. As always, if you if you if you if there's an obstacle, develop concentration, it's really important to study what the nature of that is. So it might take many meditation sessions to really get a handle on it. But to begin looking at what happens, can you kind of find what happens just before your mind begins wandering off and you'll lose that state, and it might it might go 20 times without noticing that, but you keep trying at some point. You might see. And you might see it as something very interesting happens just before. And if you can see what happened just before, then it gives you information that you can use then to stay with it rather than getting distracted. And

a follow up to that. When I have these sessions like this, then it feels like I'm doing more work than concentrating on what work I mean, I'm trying to pull myself back and I guess I associate concentration with that sort of calm, clear sensation, and maybe I'm misunderstanding what concentration is. In other words, if I feel like if I'm constantly having to change what I'm doing, by coming away from thought and trying to come back to breath without thinking, that doesn't feel like concentration so much as it feels like making a big effort to change something or important part of concentration

is learning how to work with a distracting mind. And a lot of us working with it, this is bringing it back and bringing it back until it begins to relax, and get tamed and kind of lose its power over you. And so that sometimes takes a lot of bringing back. So there's a time especially when a person is, you know, has a distracted mind where meditation can be can be at times a lot of work, a lot of manual work, and that's what's required. And then as as the mind gets tamed or settled or relaxes, then at that point,

African starts switching becomes more and more effortless, and deep states of concentration, they're still strong effort, but the effort feels effortless, you know, doing or making it happen. It's like if you want to go for if you know, I've seen that if I go running, I haven't run for a while especially and you know, the first 500 yards. You know, I don't like it one bit. It's unpleasant, you know? This message is coming off my body saying, stop, this is ridiculous. You know, and, and it really feels like I'm kind of have to kind of keep going and trudging along, like I've wait somehow, you know, my arms and my legs and just, it's a lot of work and I have to kind of make the effort to kind of Rouse myself to keep going. And then at some point after 500 yards, or, you know, some point, something begins happening inside, physiologically or mentally, I don't know exactly what, and I kind of get into a groove, certain kind of good energy gets aroused, and then becomes self sustaining. And then after a while, it feels like it's almost effortless to run, even though I'm burning a lot of calories. It just kind of like it's going along really well. And so, meditation can be the same thing. There are times when it's like manual labor, and that's what's required. And, and, and then at some time, when these clicks are kind of, then it becomes,

you know, effortless, more effortless

and so a lot of people associate Meditation with calm. And meditation should be a concentration practice should be calming. However, if we associate meditation with calm too much as the only Association we have, then people can know them slow themselves into too much calm. You can have excessive Calm, calm, always needs to be balanced with effort. And they both need to be strong. And so we often people kind of focus on one factor rather than both together. So that, you know, it's fine to get calm, but the calmer you get, the more you need to balance that or meet that with a healthy sense of vitality and energy in the practice. And so people think meditation is only about getting calm. And so people are so stressed out in society of ours, that they need to relax. And so they're kind of pushing the real estate relaxation factor in meditation, and at some point, they overdo it. And then when you get over the calm sometimes it's really easy for the mind to drift off. Thank you How's that said any better? Can you hear me now? Yes, right behind

me every once in a while I read something about the jhanas. And I really don't understand what that means. And especially I've heard it said in the context of concentration meditation, more so than mindfulness, and I was wondering if you had the time to explain maybe a little bit about that.

That was that's one of the main topics for next week.

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So I've been trying to get a feeling for I've been trying to get concentrated. I mean, that's kind of I sit down, sit on the cushion, and it's trying to get concentrated. And kind of I'm under the impression that it's, it's sort of I'm never going to be able to kind of make myself become concentrated that it's more or

less just trying to get the right tone, the right feeling. And at some point, I'll be concentrated not out of my effort, the effort kind of gets you into the vicinity and then accidentally you become concentrated kinda as a byproduct, almost. I mean, is that I

think it's good. I think I think it's a good way of looking at it, that when there's kind of qualitative shifts in concentration in meditation, that it's not something we do. So it's like you can just push a button that suddenly you get concentrated. It's more like you're creating the conditions for concentration. You're doing you have to do your efforts. And then but you're not responsible for the moment you get frustrated when castration kind of kicks in. So it's kind of so you know, if you if you persist, it's kind of delicate thing to talk to to negotiate. But if the person, if there's too much self, too much self effort, I'm the one who's going to do this, I'm going to succeed and try to get concentrated. And you're pushing, I'm going to do I'm going to push or you're probably not going to get concentrated. So there has to be some kind of, you know, some sense that you're really doing this, you're applying yourself, but there's a sense of allowing something else. Some other you know, it's not something mysterious me or something, you know, some other aspect of the psyche to kind of kick in and work. So it's kind of like the image I like of you know, healing a wound or cut. You have to do all the work of cleaning the cut and putting a bandage over it. But you can actually with your small little, you know, thinking mind, engineer the healing us have to create conditions so this amazing capacity of the body can function on its own. So in the same way the concentration is kind of amazing thing when the mind gets concentrated kind of kind of gets kind of gets collected and settled in a groove. And so we kind of do the work and kind of Shepherd along Shepherd along and at some point when the conditions are right something else happens

either so but the work to their dealings lets him barely settle in a bomb the breath and it's more or less. A lot of times, they will What should I be noticing or feeling or concentrating on it? You know, I don't know quite what to say I notice the breath and notice the sensations and stuff, but it seems like I should be picking out a certain thing or settling on a particular sensation.

But one of the factors that is important for concentration is the factor of one pointedness. So there has to be some sense of the mind, choosing one basic one thing, usually a small object, sometimes it can be a big one, but someplace one thing, and it's going to be the focus is going to be held there. But not fixated, not tight, but held in that one place. So for example, with a breath, there's a variety of places you might feel the breath, but often, I'll use area just a couple of inches below my belly button. And I'll just hold my attention there. And I'll do my best to the attention doesn't waver, just stay there. And it's kind of a dumb thing. I mean, dumb in the sense that doesn't require a lot of intelligence, there's not a lot of exploration and kind of understanding that not analyzing the details of those sensations. It's just like, I'm gonna be there. And of course, the mind wanders and all kinds of things goes on, but I just keep it there. And there's kind of there's kind of this simple faith or devotion to Okay, just stay there to stay there. And then eventually, the more absorbed you can be without very simple If sensation or a simple object of concentration, they get more and more absorbed, more evoke, letting go of everything

else that's, that's different from that. A lot of letting go going on and getting absorbed really settled on that. Sometimes you can get really concentrated, you know it properly, sometimes you get concentrated, you have no idea where you've been concentrated for you so absorbed in that focus. So you're doing and then this meditation ends and you're like, wow, you know, wow, you know, I'm in an altered state, but it doesn't seem so altered when you're in it because you don't have the contrast to see it because you're just like, it just was one little sensation, you're staying right there. So the idea is coming, we want to tether or hook your attention in one place, and kind of keep keep it there and best you can. Some people do it with a whole breath, what kind of wide area the breathing and some people choose a very precise hear their breath. Some people choose the sensations of the air going in and out through the nostrils. I like to do, usually down here, some people in the middle of the chest, and then you want to just keep it there. And it's I think it's useful in a sense to think of it as being a dumb thing. Because if you're, if you're, if you're trying to be too intelligent about it, you're figuring it out and trying to analyze and try to engineer it to happen. And, you know, it just, it's too much activity in busyness of the mind that's gonna keep you agitated. There's some kind of simplicity, a very simple thing, just keep your mind right there. I don't but it doesn't mean you don't use your intelligence. But you use all your intelligence for the purposes of stilling the mind of absorbing the mind in this thing. And but there is this call quality, just kind of keeping it there. And then so, I don't know if I said this earlier, but I think most people have some experience of getting concentrated. means that for example, reading a really good novel, you get absorbed in a really good book. Sometimes it's a movie or something. Sometimes you know, Some have said sometimes that you don't need a lot of you don't need a great ability to concentrate in order to get concentrated. The amount of concentration you use to take the written exam of the DMV is enough. I don't know if that's true, but most people when they take that exam, you know, are just doing it and they're focused on doing it, then, I mean, it's usually not a problem looking out the window and you know, wondering what they're gonna do Tuesday and I mean, this is what they're doing. And so it just somehow training the mind getting developing the wisdom of wisdom, enough wisdom, to be able to have the mind resting in one place. All the rest of our being composed and settled on that one activity. And trusting it's okay to let go of everything else. Trusting it's okay to let go of, of thinking about Tuesday thinking about DMV exam, thinking about anything else am I trusting, so just let go of everything except the simplicity Do this thing happening right now. Have you ever seen it was popular some years ago? These postcards are paintings, they were full of dots, different colors. And you know, just abstract dots. But then if you kind of you know, you know you can recycle up from here. You do these things with your i's and cross like you go cross it do all kinds wherever you can kind of, you know, and then eventually and suddenly you saw this amazing 3d you know, painting of a mountain and a boat and you know, pirate and you know, all these you know, you know, so the whole bunch of stuff ever seen those, you know, some of those and, and you know it some people don't get it, but some people get it or something takes a long time to get it over. You get it, you kind of get it you learn this kind of odd are odd kind of thing, you kind of have to let go. And you have to do something at the same time. It's kind of like, you know, it's, it's a shift. Getting concentrated is a little bit like that, too. It's kind of like, it takes a while to get the hang of it to learn what it's about. And, and once you start getting a hang of it, then it becomes easier and easier. But, you know, how do you first learn how to do it. So it's a lot of experimentation, a lot of effort, a lot of

trying, and then letting yourself get calm, absorbed. And then at some point, something happens, some shift happens. And if that shift happens often enough, they begin kind of learning actually, a little bit more how to do that and how to relax or open up or do that shift that keeps you right there. Okay, It's very hard to get concentrated, if we feel bad about ourselves. So if we're feeling any kind of bad about ourselves partly because feeling bad about yourself is a distraction. You know, it's, it's gonna it's, you know, it's a preoccupation with thoughts and opinions and ideas. And any kind of, in fact, you know, it's, if you've spent as much x you know, usually people think badly about themselves or feel badly about themselves. There's a you know, it's a lot of energy goes into that. If you spent the same amount of energy feeling really good about yourself, it probably is also an obstacle to meditation. But however, having a warm Kind regard for yourself having kindness or friendliness towards yourself. Having some feeling basically having a good disposition towards yourself. Be kindly disposed to yourself is really helpful for developing concentration. So you're not in conflict with yourself. There's just fragmentation and war and fighting going on. Now for some people that's a tall order takes a lot of years of work to have this basic friendliness towards oneself. Some people can do it relatively easily, but it's really a well worth thing to develop and cultivate. And in Buddhism, you're allowed to think well about yourself. It's not automatically taking this from egotism or selfishness. Basically, you want to treat yourself in the same kindness and kind regard they would you treat a neighbor or relative or a loved one or a stranger in some traditions. You treat yourself as a you know, a certain level of kindness and friendliness. So let's start with a session of meditation. Now if you'd like to stand and stretch for 30 seconds or so you're welcome to do that.