

2012-05-07 Concentration Part 2 of 3

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SPEAKERS

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So this evening, I'd like to continue the series of talks that I'm giving on concentration, concentration practice. So this is the second talk and I'll give the third one in the three part series. In two weeks. I won't be here next week. Next week, a Kevin Griffin will come and give a talk.

So the Buddha, in the ancient scriptures that survive at least gave various pointed encouragement instructions for people to develop their concentration. He said that one of the advantages of a concentrated mind is a concentrated mind is able to see things as they are. And the ability to see clearly had insight to is one of the important aspects of Buddhist spirituality for the spiritual practice to clear the Dust from our eyes to clear the obscurations declare the agitation and projections and the delusions that often accompany our ability to see and to be able to see things as they are in a very clear way. And in Buddhism this ability to see clearly is one of the steps towards liberation where the, the helps the freeing of the heart, the mind. And cause concentration practice is seen as one of the important means to help us see clearly how things are. Some people I'm not sure what the Buddha had in mind. But the Buddha also said, there's no need to fear concentration, no need to be afraid of it. And I do know there are people who get afraid of it. Some people are afraid of it because generally when concentration gets strong, and involves an altered state of consciousness, and some people find that a bit this concerning disorienting to enter into a state of consciousness that's our state of mind that's different than what we're habituated in. And some people only feel safe. If they stay in habitual habits of their mind back to activities in mind, various thoughts, they have ways of thinking about themselves ways of thinking about the world. But as the mind gets concentrated, there's less and less thinking that goes on. And if you depend on your safety, well being, comfort, security, thinking certain ways, then it's come time to some people find it challenging to no longer be thinking actively those ways. And, and so that people get a little bit of can get frightened by that or do resistance. And it takes a while sometimes for people to work through that fear and be able to realize it's actually quite safe and beautiful. To be able to settle the mind temporarily in meditation in a very deep place with this very little thinking going on. Some people get afraid of concentration because they're afraid of getting attached to it. And Buddhism puts, you know, big emphasis on this suffering that comes from being attached to clinging, clinging tightly to things. And we cling to our ideas, we cling to our desires, we cling to pleasure. And concentrated states of mind and meditation are generally quite pleasant. Sometimes they're extremely pleasant. And so they're very satisfying states. And some people are afraid that if they go into those states, they'll get attached to them. And that will be to their disadvantage. So I think it's instructive that Buddha said, don't be afraid of concentration. And what I've seen is that you don't need to be afraid of it because there are problems that can crop up with doing concentration practice of various kinds, but the whole process is self correcting. So with further practice, it works itself out to iron out the problems and you can continue and usually quite satisfied is quite satisfying.

So important part, as I said last week of concentration is not a kind of overt laser, like one pointed concentration of the mind. But rather it's what's called a unification, a unification or a gathering together of all the different aspects of our psychophysical being in exactly the same way as it when you'd have this, for some reason, really intense interest in something. Sometimes if there's a danger, you get really interested. And all your faculties are absorbed in dealing with this mountain lion that's walking down the street. And you're not thinking about you know, your childhood sweetheart anymore. You're not thinking about where you're going to get your next job. You're not thinking about, you know, all kinds of things and normally you think about what the For dinner, but you're you're thinking about that mountain lion and everything. So all your senses are focused on safety and taking care of this. Sometimes interests can be zeroed in quite strongly when not because of danger, but because of very intense desire. And I can still remember very well, how incredibly focused my attention was around pursuing young women when I was a teenager. I once went through the whole telephone book. There was a I went from the front to the back, and then my friend went from the back to the front. And all we knew was their first name and the street she lived on. And so we called every house that lived in every phone number associated with that street and asked for her and about halfway through the phone book, we found her. So you know, that takes a lot of certainly persistence with so desire can get you focused as well. Some people have, can have very satisfying experiences of being concentrated, absorb unified around something. When they're doing an activity that they're very interested in and enjoying, like sometimes reading a book, you can some people find they can pick absorbing the world through the book, and time disappears, the world around them kind of disappears. And kind of like everything their their world gets kind of condensed or composed or settled on just the story that they're reading. And sometimes it's quite pleasant, not because the story is necessarily a great story, but because of the psychophysical sensations that come into play. When the mind gets concentrated. People who are hobbyists will find sometimes as well then they really get into the hobby. You get you get focused, you get it, you know, and it's not like yours. super concentrated, but your interest is strong enough and your involvement is strong enough that everything gets unified, everything gets collected, you're not thinking about anything else about except doing the hobby that you might be doing. The so it's the same with meditation. That that really helps to be really interested in what you're doing. And if you're interested in something else if you're interested in what to have for dinner, or you're interesting, your childhood sweetheart or you're interested in being angry at your neighbor for playing loud music or if you're interested in more interested in what's in television, and there's a whole you know, long list of things you could you know, people are interested in, and when you sit down to meditate, you'll find out very quickly with your minds interested in and, and sometimes it's quite humbling sometimes it's quite embarrassing. To find out how much energy the mind puts in certain around certain thoughts and concerns. And what needs to happen in order to develop concentration in meditation is The your interest in the practice needs to be greater than the interest in other things is to be a switch. And some people who meditate are not really clear about this kind of switch that needs to happen this switch of, of where the primary focus is, at least if you understand the principle, I'm supposed to be interested in my meditation now and being here and now, rather than being interested in there, and then that helps to have that know that principle. It doesn't necessarily mean you can still do it, but at least you know, that's the idea, then there's some hope. If you don't know that, then you know, you might think that's really important to gallop off into your thoughts.

And so then that becomes that and then so then one of the things that happens is the mind gets concentrated, we let go of best we can of the things we're thinking about that have nothing to do with the meditation, nothing to do with here and now being present. And that's a big training and it might take a while to happen. training of letting go letting go letting go. And then might you might have to let go 10,000 times before something in the mind begins to release, relax, soften. It's not uncommon for some people to have the experience of if they say they sit for 40 minutes, meditate, meditate for 40

minutes to find that the first 20 minutes perhaps, or the first 30 minutes, maybe the mind is actually quite active still and busy and thinking a lot. And there's a big process of bringing the mind back then go over your thinking, bring the mind back to the breath, perhaps the focus. And it just seems like you're doing that over and over again. And then something after a certain period of time gets settled, or releases are relaxes. And then for the last period of meditation, sometimes people call finally I'm here I've let go. I'm not so caught up in all those concerns. I did this many years ago, when someone gave my wife and I tickets to the symphony. I don't go to Symphony very much I hadn't. It wasn't something I was familiar with that much. But we got very relatively good seats that let us at least I thought What's that mean? It helped us look kind of down from the side into the big is called the pit orchestra pit. And since I wasn't familiar with this kind of experience I was fascinated what was going on in that orchestra pit and I was my mind was commenting on everyone the violin players, the flute players and watching what they're doing and I was so fascinated was going on that I wasn't listening to the music. And after a while I'm not listening to music, I have to listen to the music. So I tried to listen to music my mind got involved in the you know, the people in the orchestra pit. So finally I thought you know, I'm not here to watch you know, watch the play the music. I'm here to listen to the music more than watch. So in order to really have the ability to focus on it, I close my eyes so that I wouldn't be distracted by what was going on. And that helped a lot and then I can take in the music and be present for it. And then my mind settle down and the wanting money. desire in mind the cleaning mind that wanted to understand and do and comment on things, finally quiet down. And then after the first after, after the intermission, my mind was settled enough that I could listen to the music and keep my eyes open. But it took some intervention on my part to kind of overcome this strong tendency of my mind to be thinking and evolved and commenting and judging everything that I could see. So sometimes it takes a while to settle down. But as we so important part of this concentration practice, is learning to switch our attention from what we think is important to at least in principle, understanding what's important is here and now and the focus of meditation, and try to be more interested in that and the other interests we can have. It's not an easy thing to do. But, but it partly involves willingness, a willingness then to let go, the things that are more seemingly more interested in the mind is fascinated by let go, let go, let go and try to invoke And focus in something relaxes and gives, and then beginning to kind of settle more fully on this experience that we're focusing on, but not focused with this laser, you know, like we're looking bare bare at boring down at it. But the, the idea of concentration there, like his composure, to become composed on the experience. And I'm very fond to the idea that the word Samadhi in Sanskrit or Pali, is very close. I know it's the way it's constructed the word some means width, and the D your ID means is that kind of root word meaning of it means to stand. And so, same thing for composure to come is with and pose could means to stand. So they say that, you know, the melodically they kind of relate, you know, related. And so the idea of being composed on the experience is important part of Samadhi or concentration in Buddhism, and what composure means for me, and why I like it is it's something that's integrated with all my being, I'm going to compose myself. It's something I do very much with my body, you know, compose myself around the experience, take a deep breath, relax, take a little bit different posture that allows me to be grounded, settled stable, in the situation that I'm in.

Composed means you're not kind of awkward anymore in your body, you're not kind of disconnected to different parts of your body or imbalanced in your body. There's a balance and a grace with being composed and settled. And so to be concentrated on the breathing, for example, is to compose oneself on the breath. And when I hear my when I compose myself, I'm breathing, then it's kind of like I try to get into a posture, I try to feel it I try to settle into it physically with my body. I tried to let my body be the means by which I concentrate As opposed to being the inner eye that looks to get concentrated, it's more of a kinesthetic sense of settling and composing myself around the experience. The attention the inner kind of eye, in a sense is part of what gets focused on it. But it's only one thing. So as this begins to happen as the mind begins to concentrate and settle, there's a number of wonderful things that can happen. One is that we conserve a lot of energy. A fragmented mind agitated mind, takes up a lot of

energy. I don't know what the exact number is, but I've read that in physiological studies, that one of the biggest energy consumers in the human body is the brain. And a lot of our thinking, and a lot of the reactivity and emotions that the brain produces is where a lot of the energy goes. As the mind gets concentrated and settled and calm. There's not a lot of energy need any more for your neurosis. Or, you know, those of you are not neurotic at least, you know, for some all the concerns and things you're chasing with your mind and spinning around about. And so as the mind gets concentrated there's a, there's a wonderful energy gets released in the system, but there's more energy available for the practice of concentration where energy is not being dispersed or fragmented or draining out of us. And there's a kind of feeling of kind of a lightness and buoyancy and that begins to happen in the body when we start getting concentrated in a good way. I find that when I get concentrated, well, that I need to sleep less. And my sleep needs go down on retreat when I know meditating mode, most of the day. I can get by quite happily with about four and a half hours tonight, and for long periods of time, where I can't do that in daily life. And even in daily life, the quality of my sleep is a little bit dependent on the quality of my meditation. The more focused my meditation is more settled and concentrated is, the better my sleep is. Some people on retreat, not everyone has reduced sleep through meditation, but sometimes it's much more dramatic. And with me, I've known people who've gone two hours a night for weeks on end. Because there's so little need for that, whatever it is that sleep does for a renewal, refreshment, recovery, processing or whatever it goes on in that area. And people managed fine with that kind of very low level asleep. Sitting at you know, 40 minutes, half an hour every day. I don't know how much you'll get that benefit, but I've certainly meditated. Sometimes and meditated through my tiredness and felt completely refreshed from the experience of meditating. So the so what's needed to get concentrated frontal assaults and getting concentrated, seldom work. So to say I'm going to get concentrated and or all else, you know, and really kind of bore down and try is not a very effective way. So there's one, one story that I like in this regard. I have two stories to tell. I apologize. They're about men, both of them, but maybe you won't mind when you hear the stories. So it was a monk who was a young aristocratic youth quite capable, smart, competent, had done a lot in his life and very successful in everything. He did. He decided that maybe because he was so successful with things in the world or lost some interest for him, he decided to go to the monastery and pursue enlightenment. So he entered the monastery. And, and the abbot asked, asked him, Why are you here? And he said, I'm here to become enlightened. And then he asked the abbot, if I, how long will it take?

And the abbot said, Oh, probably about 10 years. And then he said to the abbot, oh, but I'm quite capable. I can pick up a lot of effort. I can try really hard. If I really make an effort and try hard, getting enlightened, how long will it take? Oh, in that case, it'll take about 20 years. There's something about trying hard and using the ego and using the self conscious effort that interferes with meditation, and it's very hard sometimes to learn the most part of making good healthy effort and not be too self conscious about it. And part of being self conscious about it is being too caught up in the goal of trying to accomplish something and do something trying to prove oneself. And it takes a while to learn this, this the art of doing unselfconscious effort or making effort which isn't mixed up with a lot of desire and clinging and wanting and pushing and measuring oneself. And so how to make effort without making effort almost this kind of the challenge. The so the other story is a man another man who was quite wasn't so successful in everything he did, was challenged in his life had a lot of crisis's and tragedies in his life. Things didn't work out for him very well. And he was in quite a bit of despair and didn't get much training much Education, his life, much support much mentorship kind of in somehow he ended up in the monastery as a last resort. Last stop. And so the abbot then asked them welcomed him into the monastery and he said to him Do you have any talents? You have any skills? I think I said no. I never was never developed myself. Anything. I was actually kind of lazy I mostly spent a lot of time playing. Go was just Chinese chess, a chess game, and that's what I did with my time. And the opposite okay. The so I know what you need. So in order to learn the monastic life and the path to liberation, you need

to get concentrated, you can do this a lot like and we're going to you're going to learn it you through your ability to play chess. And so he is he called into the room. The oldest monk in the monastery, someone who practiced for many years, lovely man and loving men very peaceful, settled man, kind person, very old. And, and he set them down on the opposite sides of the table with a chessboard between them. And then the abbot went and got a sword. And he put the sword down the table. And he said very seriously, he said, the two of you are to us. Whoever loses, I'm going to cut off your head. So it's like, you know, playing chess to the depth, right? So they started playing, and it was they were pretty well paired and matched, and it was going back and forth for a long time. And they, I mean, they talk about being concentrated. very focused, you know, there's those kinds of stakes you're pretty interested. So he was really focused then both players are really focused sweat was going down their face, and their really present. And at some point, it seemed like the old you know, the, the young man had the advantage. And it looked like you know, clearly he was, you know, only a few steps away from winning the game. And then he looked up at the old man. And he saw the his years of practice, his kindness, his love. He felt like, you know, he felt this great compassion for this person. And so then the young man began to miss play. So the loose and the avatar was watching when he saw what was going on. He reached over and he flipped over the chessboard, and he said, no winners and no losers. And, and then he turned to the young man and said, in order to succeed here in this monastery, you need two qualities. You need concentration and you need compassion. You need both.

So it's kind of a dramatic story. But the story to make this point about the mutuality, the mutual support of these two aspects of concentration and compassion, concentration and kindness. And the people who get in trouble by trying to be self consciously concentrated, usually don't have a lot of compassion don't don't bring to bear a lot of compassion and what they're doing. And sometimes they get very harsh about themselves, they feel very bitter about themselves. I'm you know, because I'm not, I'm not good enough. I can't do this and not proving myself but infinite compassion. So we don't have to be in a hurry. We don't have to be successful, be able to handle the difficulty getting concentrated all the challenges of it, and hold it in a in a very forgiving mind holding a very compassionate caring mind. permissive mind almost and Not be in a hurry not forcing ourselves into it. And it might be that before we can get concentrated, we need to spend a lot of time being very supportive of ourselves kind to ourselves allowing. And for some people that's the struggle is to learn how to have this kind of kind regard to soft regard. Some people find that this emphasis compassion, kindness, the soft kind of attitude, forgiving attitude towards self, begins sounding a bit like Hallmark meditation. And, and that's not what's meant and sometimes it can require a lot of discipline, to keep coming back and trying to overcome the harshness and the critical illness that some people carry with them, and to soften relax it. But what we're trying to do is to create a ethic with a compassion and it's kind of a family of emotions and attitudes return to create a atmosphere in the mind and the heart. context in the mind the heart, where we're not in conflict with ourselves, we're not fighting ourselves not hating ourselves or we're not caught up in things. It's very difficult to get concentrated. If the inner life is in conflict with the inner life is harsh, the inner life is afraid at the inner life is critical and angry. So sometimes a lot of time needs to be spent to kind of somehow find a way to re establish establish a kind of a healthy inner sense of atmosphere place. So the mind feels it's okay to get concentrated, you can do the work in a nice way. So I'll tell you another story that I'm fond of. A real one this time of have simple kind of, it's more like an analogy thing. But when my son was in kindergarten, they used they would once a week. Make things with beeswax. And there was a whole process in which the kids would use the beeswax. beeswax would be sitting on a shelf and be hard and cold because they had and the first thing they had to do is that they would hold the beeswax in their hand between between the two palms or two hands, and just hold it there. Well, the teacher told them a story. And they're the beeswax we get warm, being held in their hands until it's warm enough that it got soft enough that they can begin to shape it. And then they would shape it and stretch it and do the things they had to do. Until finally they would make it into something beautiful. Then they put it back up in the shelf for next week. So the same thing I think

sometimes we meditate that sometimes we sit down to meditate and we're hard and brittle. And if you try to shape the beeswax with poor soft, it only breaks and if you if you try to get concentrated before you're soft, you're only break I've known people meditators who have been so gung ho and getting concentrated, that literally, I mean, I know it's literally is the right word, but they describe something in their brain in their mind breaking, because they push too much, so much trying so hard. And, and in ways that you know, we're not so good for them psychologically for some time. So he's kind of pushing too hard if something breaks, but rather what you want to do is you want to kind of create the kind of the warmth in your own mind and your heart and find a way to begin it's a slow process, not necessarily easy to hold yourself like in the palms of your hands metaphorically to let something relax and to soften.

And only when something relaxing softens, can you begin doing the training of concentration, the work of concentration that then begins creating the mind into something beautiful, and that's one of the one of the things that happens with concentration is the more concentrated you get this right concentration that is meditation, leave To the mind, the heart, the inner life, in a sense, subjectively starts feeling more and more beautiful. Some of the most beautiful inner states of mind that you are inner states of being that you can experience are states of being that come from being concentrated. And it's quite a transformative thing for a person to experience, this tremendous sense of inner beauty and well being that can come with concentration, because it puts a lot of other things in context. It kind of the value of other things that doesn't provide us that level of well being. So one of the things that's required so there's so one other thing that I found really helpful for developing concentration and meditation is to realize that I have to make my effort, I have to do something. I have to focus on the object of concentration, I think like go to come back. I have to kind of be relaxed, soft But I've learned is not to take responsibility for the concentration. When I take responsibility for getting concentrated, it's up to me, I'm the one who's gonna get myself concentrated. I generally tie myself in knots. And maybe that's a peculiar shortcoming of me. Maybe none of you have that. But I suspect it's common for a lot of people. And I find it's best for me now to take responsibility. I have to do my effort. I can't just kind of sit back and, you know, Daydream, but I have to do my best efforts. But, but I don't. It's not like I don't expect to get concentrated or I don't try to get concentrated or I don't think it's up to me. I just do I just do the work the meditation, and then at some point, there starts to be an inner shift. That feels a little bit kind of like, I'm not doing this. It's a gift. And so for me, when I get concentrated, I have the added benefit of the experience that it feels like a gift. And it's quite lovely to feel this bit like this beautiful thing. has been gifted to me, because gifted because that's the feeling I have. Because I didn't make it. I create the conditions that allow it to happen. But I don't make it. So, in this regard, I'm fond of the movie from long ago called the Field of Dreams. And kind of the refrain was build it and he will come. So we build something. And then the concentration comes, that's more the spirit in which I like to get concentrated. So we build relaxation. Last week, I talked about the importance of ethics, we begin to hold ourselves with warmth. So something can relax. We kind of find try to find yourself can be as composed as we can experience. We have enough understanding and reflection, we realize that thinking about there and then it's not what we're doing and constantly when we're developing meditation, we're trying to be here and now. And then we're trying also to begin composing ourselves or concentrating ourselves on a particular object of concentration. subject of concentration. And, and there's a, it's important to understand what that you know that, you know, if you had concentrate you have something that you're gathering yourself around, unifying around. And so there's a number of there's a big range of things that can be that have that function. One of the classic functions for concentration is or focuses of concentration is breathing, to focus on the breath, keep coming back and being with the breath, when we're focusing on the breath as a concentration object. Very common practice is to count the breath. So every time you I count every time I exhale, I get one count, one, xx sale to up to 10. If you lose count, the idea is just don't worry, don't consider don't be concerned about just beginning at one. And if you get to 10 you get the benefit beginning and have one and she just keep doing that. And there's something about keeping track of One to 10 that requires you to be a little

more focused, then if you're not counting at all, and so it tends to keep people more engaged. Some people like to count both the end inhalation exhalation. The way that I've known people to do it is mostly they count one for the inhalation one for the exhalation two to three, three that way, because if they don't count both the inhalation exhalation then the one you don't count. That's the place where the minds going to start thinking about something. So you want to keep the mind engaged. So this is counting.

It also gives the thinking mind something to do, so that it's not going to be thinking about something else, which can be helpful. And so I've done a lot of breath counting. That's what I was taught in my early years of Buddhist practice was the counter breath. And I found it very beneficial for me to kind of help cultivate, develop my ability to be a concentrated another focus of concentration is loving kindness, practice. In our tradition, at least, that's kind of one of the primary besides the breath, primary object of concentration is to do this loving kindness meditation, where you generally in our tradition, we're using phrases that we're focusing on and, and so that's a whole practice in itself. And there are some other things that people use as objects. But that's thing as I said, the most common ones.

One of the hindrances to developing concentration is boredom. And I think a lot of people have to go through that period of time of being bored. Because there's a shift from the things we're usually interested in to focusing on something that we're not innately are interested in. Like, are you focusing on the breath You know, for most people that breath isn't as interested as and isn't as interesting as TV or food or sex or money or status or, you know, recreational opportunities. And a lot of things can be more interesting. And so to switch to something that's, you know, not so inherently interesting as to breath. Sometimes there's a boredom arises. And boredom, then can be uncomfortable, and can be a strong motivator to stop what you're doing and go back to what you're more interested in. And so sometimes you have to deal with boredom. One of the aspects of boredom is that boredom is sometimes considered to be a subtle form of aversion. And if you think of it that way, maybe you're more likely willing to work through it. And, but with all objects of concentration, once you start getting focused, when the distracted mind settles down, relaxes and you start getting focused and absorbed, gathered together. It starts getting very interesting. And the interest gets so strong that it's sometimes described in English as having zest a kind of a kind of joy and delight arises. And generally that zest or that joy or that enthusiasm or that be I can be with concentration becoming strong, becomes much stronger, then it can reading your interesting novel or doing your hobby, it can get actually sometimes quite intense, very satisfying. And it becomes more and more interesting, not because the breath becomes interesting more and more in a sense, but rather because of the subjective experience, the inner experience of well being that's clearly connected to being focused in the breath becomes feel so good. And so, you know, it's a very compelling probably there's a lot of wonderful chemicals being released in your body, serotonin and oxytocin, all kinds of things that get released that help support this wonderful feeling softness. warmth and tingling and lightness that can happen as we get concentrated. So the last thing I'll say, it's nine o'clock is to say that the focus in when we're doing concentration practice is on the subjective and your experience that comes with the practice. The focus, when we do mindfulness practice by itself without too much interest in concentration is not so much the subjective experience, but rather, it's seeing clearly what is happening. It's more in a sense, it's more the objective experience. Even though it's your own experience subjectively in a sense, you're more focusing on seeing what's there. Whereas in mindfulness, you're more focused on feeling how you feel. And so as we develop concentration practice, the subjective experiences begin to change in a way that that is evoked by the concentration and then learning how to read that and understand those subjective changes. One of the things that then helps support further concentration. So next week or two weeks from now, I'll talk about how to read and do this biofeedback kind of system by feedback loop. With your own subjective experiences, you don't have to read it and understand it as a way that supports getting

more settled, calmer, more relaxed, more focused in the concentration practice, and then some of the inner practices that can work to help support you go further and further into this inner realm. So I hope that that was understandable and I hope you stayed interested enough, concentrated enough, if not, Dharma talks can also be seen as a place to cultivate your concentration. The mind wanders away, you come back. Thank you.