

Concentration (Week 1 - Part 1)

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Welcome to our five week course that's an introduction to concentration practice. For many years, I have been teaching a five week introductory course in mindfulness meditation. Some of you have already taken that. It's something I've enjoyed doing a lot and seems like it's a valuable thing to offer. About two years ago, for the first time, I offered an introductory class on concentration to be a kind of parallel to the Mindfulness Introduction, a Basic Introduction to Concentration. Both these topics, mindfulness and concentration, are central to the teachings of the Buddha and to the practice the Buddha taught.

They're so central that they can be seen as the two wheels of a chariot, or two wheels of a bicycle, or sometimes the image of the two wings of a bird. You need to have both wings in order for the bird to fly. So you need to have both in order for the Dharma practice, the Buddhist spiritual life, to unfold. If you read the discourses of the Buddha, you see that he puts a tremendous emphasis on concentration, so much so that you get the impression that, for the Buddha, wisdom unfolds with the deepening of concentration. In one of the classic descriptions of the Buddhist spiritual path, or the classic kind of summaries of it, it is summarized into three areas, three categories. One is called ethics or integrity, the other is called concentration, *samādhi*, and then the third is wisdom.

So one third of this is *samādhi*, a huge part of it. In a sense, the ethics part, the integrity part, lays the foundation in virtue and a good heart. That makes it easier, makes it possible for us to go deep in the world of meditation, the ordinary practice. It turns out that in order to get really still, really concentrated, the heart has to be pure. Without a purity of heart, a pure intention, a good heart, it's very hard to get concentrated. If you have a lot to be remorseful for, if you have a lot of ill will or a lack of integrity in some way or other, it'll present a barrier for allowing the mind to become concentrated.

Partly because a concentrated mind is a pure mind, and so if the mind is impure, it can't become pure. It's that simple. The two don't go together, right? If you want to have white paint, you don't pour black into it. That doesn't work, right? So on the basis of ethics, integrity, then there's the cultivation of *samādhi*. For now, we'll call it concentration.

On that, that's a basis for wisdom, for seeing clearly, for understanding, for liberation. As the Buddha said, one who is concentrated can see clearly. I think of concentration as being like a tripod for a camera. If you're trying to take a picture of something, if you take a quick shot and your hand is wobbly, you can't get a clear picture. You need to put the camera on a tripod, and have that firm foundation, and then the picture can be quite clear because the camera is stable. For the mind to be stable enough to see clearly, there has to be that support, that tripod that gives stability to it.

Or the same thing with a telescope, right? You try to look at the moon through a telescope. It's not going to work if you're holding the telescope, but you put it on a tripod, then you have the stability that you can see clearly and directly what's up there in the skies. One of the functions of concentration is to provide enough stability in the mind so that we can see clearly. In that line of reasoning, you can understand why it's such an important partner to mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is the practice of seeing clearly, but it's hard to see clearly unless your mind is stable.

If you are agitated and distracted, or your mind is busy and racing around, it's actually very hard to see. So the mind has to have some stability in it. Concentration is a very important factor in Buddhist meditation, and it's a partner to mindfulness. Some teachers will teach only mindfulness, trusting that as a person does dedicated mindfulness practice, sufficient concentration follows in the wake of it. That is, naturally, concentration follows as you do mindfulness practice. Some teachers will teach concentration practice first with the idea that it's very hard to get sufficient concentration by doing mindfulness only.

But if you do concentration practice first, then you build up enough concentration to have that stability, to be able to use the mindfulness in an effective way. Both ways are fantastic ways. I think different ways work well for different people. Some people, it's better to start with concentration, then do mindfulness. Some people find they prefer mindfulness first, and then concentration. Some people will only do mindfulness, and occasionally some people only do concentration practice.

There's a variety of ways of doing it. The advantage of focusing on mindfulness as a primary practice is that mindfulness is always relevant in all situations, whereas concentration is not always relevant. Some stability is there, but concentration—sometimes you can be too con-

centrated. I've been in situations, say, on retreat, or sometimes I've come back from retreat, and I'm a little bit, you know, my wife wishes I was a little bit faster. Anyway, sometimes when the mind is really concentrated, it can be hard to switch gears and engage, you know, get on the highway, one on one. Also, concentration practice doesn't contain in itself a lot of wisdom, not of clear seeing.

So some people will focus a lot on concentration, and when they leave the concentrated state, can end up being quite foolish. The old reactive patterns can still function. Sometimes if you focus only on concentration, since it tends to create a pure mind, or blissful feelings, or good feelings, sometimes people create a split between who they are when they are concentrated and who they are the rest of the time. There can be a tremendous duality between everyday mind, everyday life, and the concentrated state. People hold on to that concentrated, pure state, and won't have anything to do with the regular world because of such a big contrast between the two. I think those problems don't occur as readily when a person focuses primarily on mindfulness practice.

Most mindfulness is really applicable, useful in any situation. Whether your mind is agitated or your mind is serene, mindfulness is useful. But ideally, concentration and mindfulness are partners, and they work in tandem. So I think it'll be useful to spend these next few weeks looking at concentration as a support for mindfulness practice, looking at concentration, the different elements of concentration, how to cultivate it, how it develops, what happens when you get concentrated, so you can get a sense of that terrain, that world. What I'll do during these five weeks is: today is primarily introductory, introductory stuff about the topic. Next week I'll deal with more introductions, and then we'll get into more of the details of concentration.

The third week, we'll talk more about the obstacles to concentration, difficulties you have to take care of. The fourth week, we'll talk more about some of the deeper states of concentration that can arise and some of the ways those play out. The fifth week—I forget what I talk about the fifth week, but by the fifth week I'll know. I am trusting that those of you who are here want to develop your concentration, that this is not an academic interest. In order to develop your concentration, you have to practice. Without practicing, there's very little development.

The expectation, the requirement for doing this five week class—and there's a requirement—is that during these five weeks, you meditate forty-five minutes a day. Now, it doesn't have to be forty-five minutes at one time if your life doesn't allow for that. Sometimes it's actually better to divide it in half and meditate for twenty-two and a half minutes in the morning, and

twenty-two and a half minutes in the afternoon, or three periods of fifteen minutes. Sometimes taking shorter chunks is better than a long chunk when you're doing concentration, because what's important with concentration developing is the quality of your practice, not the quantity. If you can have fifteen minutes of fairly good quality, being focused and concentrated, and then the last half an hour or forty-five minutes your mind is drifting and going to sleep, that's not so useful. If you sit for fifteen minutes, get up, and then later in the day sit for another fifteen minutes and another fifteen minutes, you can do it in different ways.

But somehow or other, you should have forty-five minutes of meditation every day. The second requirement is to memorize a Buddhist text. If you did not take this class before, then I'd like you to memorize this *mettācitta* just passed out to you. Oh man, I know it's hard. I'll talk more about it. I got the same response last time, and some people say, "Well, I just can't memorize anything. It's really hard for me." I don't know anybody who did it who wasn't grateful and happy to do it. Memorize the text. It's a good, really good thing to do.

If you took the class before, we have another text for you to memorize, for two reasons. One is it's good to memorize something else, but also because this version is different. This version of the *mettā sutta* is different from the one you memorized last time, and it might be confusing to memorize a different version. So a man up here has a copy of the *Maṅgala Sutta*, a discourse on blessings, and so you can get that. It's about the same length, so comfortable. The reason for memorization is varied.

One reason is that memorization, the way you use your mind when you memorize, is similar to how you use your mind when you're concentrated. You have to be concentrated and focused to memorize something. You have to engage your mind in a way to hold something in your mind, to hold the words, the idea, the memory in your mind, and stay focused long enough to let it sink in and keep repeating it. It is a classic practice in Buddhism to memorize texts. It's an ancient, very important practice that seems almost lost here in the West, but it strengthens the mind. I've met many people and aged monks in Asia who, even to old age, were memorizing or repeating what they memorized to keep their minds sharp.

What strengthens the mind? It's one of the ways to strengthen the mind. So you think you don't have much ability to concentrate. Everybody has an ability to concentrate like a muscle, and maybe you've never really worked the muscle, so now you've got to start working the muscle, and with time it'll get stronger for you. The other thing is that the effort to try to memorize, even if you don't succeed, is useful. I'll talk about this also, that the effort to try to get concentrated is useful even if you don't get concentrated.

What it requires of you, what you see about yourself, what you learn about yourself, what's ex-

exercised in your mind, is all for your benefit even if you don't succeed in getting concentrated. So it's very important not to get disappointed or discouraged. If you can't get concentrated, or can't memorize, you still need to try, and trying is beneficial. Another benefit of memorizing a text is, once you have it memorized, you can chant it or recite it or say it to yourself. It's a kind of technique for getting concentrated. If you really get absorbed or get involved, try to remember something from memory that's somewhat long, you can't think about a lot of other things.

You can't think about what's for dinner. You can't think about why your boss doesn't like you. You can't think about whether you should, you know, excel at something else. You can't think about things that depress you. You have to stay present for those things. That kind of simplifies the mind and clarifies the mind, focuses the mind.

At the end of that chant, probably you'll find the mind is more focused and concentrated. Many times in Asia, especially meditators, will often start a period of meditation by doing a chant, reciting something from memory, because it helps focus the mind. It brings that concentration factor into play. So if you memorize this *Metta Sutta*, then you have a resource that you can use. Another benefit of memorizing a text is that there are teachings in a text that, when you memorize them, go into the system in a deeper way than just reading it. When you just read it, it doesn't penetrate as deeply or get as rooted in there.

The mind has to negotiate or kind of work or be affected or really acknowledge what's being said in a way that's very different from just reading something and going on. A text that I've memorized—I'm always amazed at how certain lines or phrases will pop up at opportune times. I'm just going about my life, and there it is. Oh, yes, it reminds me or inspires me, or "Oh, that's what it means," or "That's how it applies here," or something, and it's there kind of in the subconscious and comes up when it's needed in a nice way. Now, the Buddhist word for concentration is *samādhi*. Sometimes we also find the word *samatha* that's related to that.

But *samādhi*—and probably the English word concentration is not a good translation for *samādhi*, partly because I think that the English word concentration has this idea for many people of kind of fixating the mind or focusing the mind down in a kind of one-pointed way, just kind of zeroing in like a laser on something. Being one-pointed is an important part of *samādhi*, but it's only one element of *samādhi*. If you take the etymology of the word *samādhi* and translate that into English, you get an interesting word: composure. The word *sam* means "with," and the *dhi* part of *samādhi* means "to stand" or "to pose." So *samādhi* means "to stand with" or "to compose." That English word "compose" has a much broader

feeling to it than concentration.

It's more of a state. You compose yourself in a situation. It's something we often do with our body. You compose yourself, your mother says. So you can say it means to stand straight or relax or be grounded here in your body. If you settle your body, you're kind of settling your whole being around something when you compose yourself.

So *samādhi* is something you do. It's a state of being, not a single factor of the mind. When you're cultivating *samādhi* in Buddhism—concentration—we're actually cultivating a different state of being than a normal state of being. It's a state where both the mind, the body, the heart is more supple, more relaxed, more unified, more focused, certainly. Some people will translate the idea of *samādhi* as "unification of mind" because it involves bringing together, composing together the fragmented aspects of the mind and the being. The normal state of mind for most people is a fragmented mind.

The mind is going off in all kinds of directions, is a centrifugal force out of itself. It's thinking, going into the future, the past, thinking about this, thinking about that. The mind is not in the same place as the body. Are you thinking about the future a lot? Your mind's in the future, and your body's here. Are you thinking about the past a lot? Your mind's in the past, your body is here.

That fragments the body and the mind, and the different elements of the mind are fragmented. We're focusing on something, but our mind is on something else, or intending something else. Part of the function of concentration practice is to take all the different factors of body and mind and unify them, harmonize them, so they are all basically working for the same purpose, the unified intention. The term is sometimes translated as "one-pointedness," *ekaggatā*. It could be translated into English as having a single direction. So everything has a single direction. All the different elements of the mind are unified, involved in the same thing.

If your intention is to focus on the breath, your emotional life, your mental life, your cognitive life, your physical life—all are interested in doing the same thing, all are there with it. Mostly, when you first sit down to try to concentrate on the breath, you probably find that your mind has other ideas. It's not really with you. You have the intention to be there, but your mind still wants to think about what happened at work today, so it keeps going out, keeps going out. Or your body has other ideas. Your body is agitated or restless or sleepy or something, and the body is not there to support the intention.

So *samādhi* involves a unification of our being. As our being gets unified or harmonized, it

becomes more peaceful, more still, more relaxed. I would like to give you a few images for concentration, or *samādhī*. Perhaps some of you work well with images, and maybe this will evoke something within you. After I give these images, what I'd like us to do is to read the poem together, then repeat certain lines of it a few times, and then we'll do a meditation together.

One of the classic images for a concentrated mind is that of a candle flame. A candle flame in the wind flickers, but when there's no wind, the flame, in one sense, looks completely still. It just goes straight up. No flame can be completely still; however, inside the flame, it's really dynamic. There's this combination of stillness and dynamism at the same time. The mind that's concentrated, in a sense, becomes very still, but it's also very alive. It's called a heightened mind in Buddhism, *adhicitta*, a heightened mind.

It's like taking our life energy and not having it agitated, so it gets really still. But that stillness is dynamic. There's very rich, has a lot of potential, a lot of possibilities in it. Another image or story that really inspired me: when I was in Asia, I practiced at a very large monastery in Burma. At one point during vacation time, there were five thousand people meditating in this monastery. Every morning I'd have to go in a file of other men, monks, and laymen to the breakfast hall to have breakfast, and we'd have to walk by, slowly walk by this very large hall that was the women's meditation hall.

Because Burma's a warm country, the main sides of the building, which is one series of open doors—really big, wide open doors—so you can see directly right in. It's like an open pavilion, almost. There in this meditation hall were straight rows, row after row of women meditating, five hundred women. It was one of the great sights of my life to see these—it's like a powerhouse, this building. I loved going by and seeing them, and the women in Burma when they meditate, so different from the men, sit with great dignity. They sit up straight, sit there, custom and goodbye. To see this—when five hundred people meditate, sitting straight and still—there's a stillness or a power that emanates from that people that's phenomenal.

I'd walk by and inspect this kind of tiptoes field of concentration of all these women sitting there, so still, so upright. There's a story like this from the Discourses of the Buddha of a king who had a very bad conscience. He'd killed some people he shouldn't, like his father. The way the story is told, he probably could be having a bad night. He couldn't sleep. His minister tells him, "Oh, nearby in the woods, the Buddha is there. Why don't we go visit the Buddha?" Great idea. So he goes to the edge of the woods, leaves his bodyguards and soldiers behind, and I think he enters the woods alone, even without his minister. But he enters the wood.

When you go see the Buddha, you leave your swords and your weapons behind. So he went

into the woods, and he was told that there were five hundred—it's a classic number—but five hundred monks meditating in the woods with the Buddha, in the Bodhi Temple with the Buddha. It's night. It's a full moon night. He goes into the woods, and it's completely still, and there must be five hundred people in the woods. If five hundred people are noisy, you'd expect to hear things and noise and all that. The description says the king's hair stood on end. He got so afraid he thought it was an ambush. But then he saw in the distance a flame or a candle or light. He walked to that light, and there was the place where the Buddha was sitting at the base of a tree. All around the Buddha, in the woods around him, were these five hundred monastics sitting and meditating, again in the power of stillness.

Sometimes when you have a room full of people who are meditating, it's stiller than a room that is empty, without anybody there. Some of you have that sense. Sounds strange, doesn't it? So the king experienced that stillness and was spooked by it. Then he saw the Buddha, relaxed, and had a conversation. Another image for concentration is clarity, like clear air. If it's a bit smoggy, you can't see very far across the bay. You can't see the hills across the bay. But when the smog goes away, the wind blows it away or something, and you can see across the bay, you can see it's really clear. A mind that's concentrated has a certain degree of clarity to it, can see clearly, can see things clearly.

The ability to see clearly and having an atmosphere of clarity are synonymous. In order to see the East Bay hills, you have to be able to see them clearly; the air has to be clear. In order for the mind to see clearly, the mind has to be clear. So a mind that's concentrated is a mind that's clear or clean. I like a clean mind or a clean heart. Very conventionally, very simply, a concentrated mind is a mind that can remain focused on what it wants to focus on.

That's kind of the usual way we understand it. Some people have trouble with being focused. Some people have attention deficit problems. So we cultivate the ability to hold the mind someplace, to keep it there. But if you think it's only a matter of holding the mind still or focused, you probably won't develop *samādhi*, since *samādhi* is a whole state, a state of being. One translation I've seen for *samādhi* is "concentrative repose." It's a nice term, concentrated repose.

There's an ability to rest the attention on where you want the attention to be. It's not locking on, it's not grabbing hold, it's not straining, but it has a quality of resting, or of being soft, but keeping it there. In order to do that softly, if you do it out of an act of will, too much of a will, you have to eat it kind of tight. Sometimes there is a tug of war between the distracted forces of the mind. Something else wants your attention, you're thinking about something else, or there's a sound outside the mind wants to go to, and so then you're struggling with that tug

of war. You cannot push or repress or hold everything else at bay so you can stay focused. That's not the way of *samādhi*.

The way of *samādhi* is to repose, to rest, to lay the mind where you want it to be, and then rather than push away or fight or resist everything else, to gently let it go. Let everything else go. Concentration has a lot to do with our ability to let go. It has as much to do with letting go as it has with being able to hold the mind still on something. So we learn to let go. Letting go is meant to be softening, relaxing. You're not fighting something, you're just dissolving it, letting go.

You let go of our thoughts, let it go, let it go, let it go. Every moment you let go, you are weakening the forces of distraction, the forces within you that tend toward getting lost in thought. So you let go and let go. As the mind lets go and is resting, with time, the mind gets quite soft. One of the descriptions of the concentrated mind is that it's a mind which is soft, pliable, malleable, and workable. Those are great descriptions. Is your mind soft, pliable, malleable, and workable?

Do you think of your mind that way? Most minds are brittle, hard, stiff, unwieldy. The mind in Buddhism—am I talking too much? Not talking away. It's one of those risks of being a teacher. You can carry on these monologues without knowing if I am. For some of you, maybe I am. I apologize. I'll try to stop soon to be dual sitting. The mind is an activity. It's not a thing. Conventionally, you might think of the mind as being maybe synonymous with the brain, or as a thing. You're born with it, your mind that you have. But the mind is not a thing. It's not a substance. Maybe the brain is a substance, but the mind is an activity. It's a series of activities. It's something. Because it's an activity, the activity can change. The activity can soften in different ways.

Part of what we're doing in developing concentration practice is helping the mind become soft. So again, that's very important. You're not trying to be hard in developing concentration. In the short term, if you're hard or kind of willful, you can maybe get concentrated a little bit, enough to do certain things you have to do in daily life. But in order to develop *samādhi*, there has to be a softness. For there to be a softness, there has to be a lot of gentleness towards oneself, a lot of forgiveness, a lot of compassion, a lot of kindness towards oneself. If you are hard towards yourself—"Oh, I'm terrible. I'm a bad person. Oh, I'll never get concentrated. I'm not made up for this."—all the kind of negative judgments a person can do for themselves, all those represent hardening factors of the mind. We have to see, have to figure out some way or other to let those go, put those to rest long enough so deep in the meditation, you can enter into the soft world of *samādhi*.

Some people cannot develop concentration until they somehow come to terms with their psychology, with the way they relate to themselves, with their neurosis or something, or their self-criticism, the inner critic or whatever it might be. Somehow that has to come to terms, or with their conscience, or with their sense of guilt, or their fear, or their anger, or all these different things, so that the mind can start doing its softening, relaxing. Okay, so we've been now sitting for a little while. If you would like to stand for thirty seconds, just to stretch your legs, you're welcome to do that. About developing concentration: it's more important when you do concentration meditation that your body be comfortable than when you're doing mindfulness meditation. In mindfulness meditation, we tend to work with the physical discomforts that arise. In concentration practice, it's best not to have a lot of discomfort if you can help it.

If you have a lot of discomfort, there are practices for you. But if you can, you don't want to have a lot of physical discomfort when you're doing concentration practice. You don't want to be a couch potato or a slouch, either. You want to sit in a way that's upright and balanced, but you don't want to push yourself in a way that makes you uncomfortable because you don't want the physical pain to be a distraction. As some of you know from learning about mindfulness, in mindfulness practice and mindfulness meditation, there is no such thing as a distraction. You know that, right? You learn that, right? In concentration practice, there are such things as distractions.

In coming into concentration practice, you want to have a wise relationship with distractions and try to avoid having them. You want to try to meditate at a time when there's not going to be a lot of noise around, or a lot of kids screaming, or neighbors' leaf blowers going, or a lot of things that can be distracting for you. Though it's not important when you do mindfulness meditation, you want to protect yourself that way. But when you do concentration practice, you want to do some of that and try to create a quiet, calm, clean environment in which you can practice. In a moment, we're going to read out loud the *Metta Sutta* together. As you do this, we can do this as a practice of concentration.

As we read it, if you could immerse yourself in the activity of reading it out loud, turn yourself over completely as if this is the only thing that's important to do in the world, as if your life depended on it. This is like the only thing that's interesting or the most wonderful, fascinating thing you've ever read, and you just put yourself completely into it. If you can't do that because you have some kind of thinking or something that pulls you away—say, for example, you're reading and say, "This is brilliant. I should be telling my neighbors about this."—notice that tendency to leave your absorption in the text and then gently let go of that. Be willing to

To reach a state of peace, one skilled in the good should be capable and upright, straightforward and easy to speak to, gentle and not proud, contented, and easily supported, living lightly and with few duties, wise and with senses calmed, not arrogant, and without greed for supporters, and should not do the least thing that the wise would criticize. One should reflect: May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy. All living beings, whether weak or strong, tall, large, medium, or short, many or few, seen or unseen, near or distant, born or to be born: May they all be happy. Let no one deceive another or despise anyone anywhere. Let no one through anger or aversion wish for others to suffer. As when a mother would risk her own life to protect her child, her only child, so toward all beings should one cultivate a heart with loving kindness for the whole world. Should one cultivate a boundless heart above, below, and all around, without obstruction, without hate, and without ill will, standing or walking, sitting or lying down, whenever one is awake, may one stay with this recollection. This is called the divine abiding. Abide here and now. One who is virtuous, endowed with vision, not taken by views, and having overcome all greed for sensual pleasure will not be born again.

So in the middle of the text there's a line that goes, "May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart." Let's repeat that together for two times until I ring the bell. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all beings be at peace. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. So then sitting upright in a meditative posture.