

## Concentration (Week 3 - Part 3)

**Gil Fronsdal**

**May 04, 2005**

**Keywords:** samādhi, parikamma samādhi, upacāra samādhi, jhāna, Mettā Sutta, five hindrances, mindfulness, absorption, loving-kindness, continuity

---

In order to develop the practice of concentration, learn to develop a capacity for concentration. It's in part developing a muscle, a strength. For example, if you can hang in there for two breaths, then you want to develop the strength to be able to hang in there for four breaths and to stretch how long you hang in there. The mind gets stronger as you do this. If you spend a lot of time memorizing things like memorizing the *Mettā Sutta*, you develop a certain strength of capacity to memorize; it becomes easier to memorize the more you do it. You're developing that muscle, in a sense.

Memorizing texts actually helps. Meditation practice helps with concentration, kind of like the same muscle you're using. There's a strengthening that happens, and that strength is something that you can carry with you into your daily life. It's like working out in the gym. You get stronger, and you can carry that strength into your daily life; you strengthen your mind. The other side of concentration is learning to soften and let go and relax.

There's a whole side of learning what to let go of, learning not to be caught by our preoccupations, and learning to soften. Both have to happen together. At different times, you might be learning more the strengthening part, other times the letting go part, the softening part. Both are needed. They happen simultaneously, and both are needed now to develop *samādhi* or concentration states. The Buddhist tradition distinguishes different kinds of concentration.

There are, perhaps, quantum leaps in concentration, and right now, four categories of concentration that I'll talk about. There is what's called preparatory concentration, and that's the kind of concentration you need when you're not able to get concentrated. It's the cultivation of concentration. It's the work of getting concentrated. It's the work of engaging and trying to get concentrated. So the mind wanders, you come back, you can focus again.

It's preparing yourself to get concentrated, preparing the mind, working the mind. It's called *parikamma samādhi* in Pāli. That's kind of like what happens when you sit down in a regular street consciousness. You've been going around your daily life, and you sit down, and the mind is a little bit, or quite a bit, distracted, wild, cut up, agitated. You have to apply yourself to that initial application of an agitated mind, distracted mind. That kind of concentration is called *parikamma*, preparatory concentration.

The next kind of concentration is called *upacāra samādhi*, which means neighborhood, vicinity, or access. It's access concentration. It's that concentration you need; it opens the door for the possibility of going a quantum leap into the next level of concentration. The word also has a meaning of neighborhood, or neighborhood of getting concentrated. This access concentration is a concentration when there's no longer any distractions that keep you from being concentrated. The hindrances to concentration are no longer operating for you, so nothing's hindering the ability to be focused.

You're kind of in a groove. It's possible to stay there. The mind might wander a little bit into thought, but it's like a rubber band attached to your thoughts, and you come right back. You can't go out, but the rubber band stretches, and it pulls you right back at you. Mostly you can stay there. It can be one-pointed focus.

It can often come with a sense of well-being, a bit of joy or delight, a sense of being in the groove. You're present, and there's not really anything that's going to pull you away. No distractions anymore, particularly no hindrances getting in the way. That is kind of a door then. Or say it this way: access concentration is a fork in the road for meditation practice, and there are two directions a person might choose to go. One is the person could go into doing the possible practice of mindfulness practice, because in order to do mindfulness practice really deeply, really thoroughly, you need to have the obstacles or the hindrances to concentration settled out.

They no longer grab the mind, holding on to the mind. When the mind has this clarity in the groove of being concentrated, then it can go into developing further mindfulness, more careful investigation of what your experience is. The other fork is not to do any investigation at all of our experience, but rather to develop full absorption, full concentration, one-pointed concentration on one object. This doesn't involve investigating or understanding anything. It just means plunging in or diving in or abandoning oneself into the object of focus, so that you really become absorbed in what you're focused on. Like being absorbed in a good book, you get absorbed in your breath.

This stage of absorption then has, again, different stages or different quantum steps as you

go deeper and deeper, higher or more concentrated. These are what's called the *jhānas* or the absorptions. There are eight of them, and we'll talk about them next week. So there are three basic phases: the preparatory phase, the access phase, when you have arrived at the door of being able to do something with your mind, and then either getting absorbed or going into greater mindfulness practice. The initial stage is the preparatory stage. A lot of that has to do with working with the obstacles to concentration.

There are a lot of obstacles to getting concentrated, which some of you have probably gotten a hint of already. It's pretty unusual for a person to be able to sit down and just get concentrated and absorbed. Occasionally you meet people who, for whatever reason, are like the Barry Bonds of meditation, and they just seem to have some kind of inner capacity. Most people do not have an easy time getting concentrated, so most of you, I think, hopefully will take that as an encouragement rather than discouragement. Your difficulties in getting concentrated are completely normal. Most people have a difficult time getting concentrated, and it's possible to develop your capacity for concentration.

It takes time, it takes effort, it takes knowledge, experience, and wisdom to do it. But you have to do it. It'll come. Most of the people who are good meditators, most of the great realized practitioners of the past, were like you and they had trouble with their concentration. Whatever trouble you are having, it's normal. If you ever watch a baby learn to walk, most babies have trouble with that.

Very few just get up and are ready to go for a hike. They take one or two steps, and they fall down, and then they try again, and they take another couple, and they fall down. There's a lot of falling down. They wobble, and they trip, and it's a mess. For some reason, that's probably necessary. Very few of these toddlers get discouraged.

They just hang in there, and they keep doing it, and keep doing it, and eventually they are walking. For people who've never tried to cultivate their minds, their minds are like babies. Learning to develop concentration takes a lot of faltering, a lot of falling down, a lot of obstacles, a lot of difficulties that arise. Please don't get discouraged by that. You have to keep trying and keep working at it, and things will come along. Things will gather together and support your ability to get concentrated.

What this means is that obstacles, hindrances, difficulties to concentration are normal, and anybody who wants to develop concentration has to learn how to work with the difficulties that might arise. This whole preparatory stage of meditation has a lot to do with learning how to be wise and skillful with the obstacles to concentration and the difficulties that arise. In saying this, I want to emphasize that in order to develop the ability to get concentrated,

you have to have a lot of experiences with the obstacles to concentration so you can become wise about them. That means you're not going to get concentrated really fast. You sit down and try to get concentrated and engage in the practice, and the mind will get stronger day by day. But you have to have a sense of welcoming or feeling of appropriateness in learning to understand and explore and work with the very factors that make it difficult to get concentrated.

There are many things that might happen. One of the things is your thoughts. You're thinking, and so you have to develop a certain kind of wisdom around thoughts through your own experience. You can certainly hear what teachers have to say or read books about it, but a lot of it is really looking at your own thinking mind, working with it, understanding it, and negotiating how it is. Whenever possible, the best policy is not to be bothered by your thoughts. Being bothered by your thoughts is one of the great hindrances to getting concentrated.

You're not going to get concentrated if you're bothered by your thoughts. Easier said than done, right? It's really easy to be a teacher; you say things, but then the practitioner has to deal with it. So, don't be bothered by your thoughts. As a meditator, sometimes you are bothered by them, and then you just agitate yourself some more. If there's thinking in the background, don't worry about it.

Keep the breath in the foreground. As long as you keep the breath in the foreground, don't worry so much about what's in the background; it will settle down by itself eventually. Or if the thinking is in the foreground and really prevents you from getting concentrated, don't get agitated or judgmental about that. Just accept that this is what you have to work with. Lots of the things I teach in the mindfulness class about working with your thoughts apply here. You need to learn to understand the emotional ground that the thoughts arise out of.

If thoughts are really bothering your meditation, there's probably some mood or emotional ground that's giving rise to the thoughts you're having. If you're planning a lot, there's probably a ground of worry. There are all kinds of things that can be, so if you can tune into the emotional ground, then it's easier to settle the thinking pattern, work with it, and resolve that. Sometimes there's energetic tension in the body connected to thinking, and sometimes you want to look and see where the tension is, and then relax the tension, soften, and give yourself a message. There might be tension in the jaw, or in the forehead, or in the brain, or in the skull, or in the shoulders—many different places that might manifest. Sometimes you need to relax that, soften that.

Maybe as you breathe out, just relax that kind of thinking energy that's there; you can't let go of thoughts forever. But if the thinking energy is wound up, you'll just keep pumping out

thoughts. So what is it that needs to be settled and relaxed? One of the ways of relaxing is to use the breath as a relaxation technique. Every time you breathe out, relax. If you do too much of it, you fall asleep.

A useful skill around thoughts is sometimes to say No to them. Sometimes thoughts are like little kids, and they need limits. Little kids really like limits, and so they might hate you for thirty seconds for setting limits, but they actually feel a lot happier because they know the boundaries. They find their place in the world. Sometimes our minds are like little babies and little kids, and you say, No, we're not going to think about that. That can be very effective—very solid, No, not now. Sometimes it's soft, not now.

Some people use the image of shelving thoughts. Notice what you're thinking about, and say, Well, I notice what I'm thinking about, I'm going to shelve it. The image is taking their hand up and putting those thoughts up on a shelf. Later I'll think about it. That's enough to let the mind put it aside for now, and then you can keep going. Occasionally, if there's a lot of thinking going on and you can't stop your thinking, sometimes what you can do is give up in the sense that you say, Okay, I'm just thinking. I can't do anything about my thinking. I can't stop my thinking. My thinking is not going to stop now, so I can't let go of it, so I can stay focused on the breath. If you go along with thinking, start thinking about useful things. Start thinking about your breath. What's that breath like? Just create a whole thought world around your breath. If you have to think anyway, might as well think about the breath or think things that are useful, healthy. Think about wholesome things or skillful things. You can think about nice things if you can. If you can't stop thinking, maybe you could choose what you think about, and you can at least think about something pleasant. Chances are, if you think about something nice for a while, or if you think about the breath, whatever's been agitating you will settle down and relax the mind. That's a help. That's a useful thing to do.

Another thing, occasionally, that can be useful to do—and you have to have a lot of wisdom for knowing when this is appropriate—is to say that the ancient texts say clench your teeth and just bear down. I don't know if you have to necessarily clench your teeth, but sometimes you just get really tight, really solid, and direct it, and say, I'm just going to stay with the breath, not going to leave my object of focus, really hold on tight. If you are in a big storm, on a boat, and the boat's being swayed back and forth, and the big waves are breaking over the boat and the wind is pushing you around, you hold on tight, don't you? You hold on really tight. That's appropriate. Occasionally in meditation, that's appropriate. It's only very occasionally. Sometimes you can get in trouble doing that kind of approach. So a lot of this has to do with the whole understanding of the world of thinking.

Part of it is having wisdom about thoughts, understanding that it's not useful to spend time in meditation thinking. As one teacher has said, nothing whatsoever is worth thinking about while you meditate. To really be convinced that thinking about the very things you can think about is not really useful, not well spent time during the period you're meditating. To really be convinced about that, so you're willing then to put it aside. Later, no, not now. If you're not really convinced that's so, why would you want to let go of your thinking? Your psyche is going to keep going there. So have the wisdom to know this is not useful now. And have the wisdom to understand it is useful to develop concentration. There's a lot of benefit that comes from it. That takes a lot of time, maybe, to get a handle on the world of thinking. That's one of the things we need to do as we develop our capacity to get concentrated.

The other thing that might happen is that your psyche, your mind, is agitated for particular reasons, and until you take care of those reasons, the mind is not going to get settled. If you keep pushing, trying to get concentrated, without taking care of some of the reasons for being distracted or agitated, it's not going to work. You might need to do a kind of moral inventory; you might have to look at some things in your life that you've got unresolved issues with, and maybe you need to go and resolve some of them. One example of this is my friend, John Travis. He was meditating in India in the sixties, and he was on long retreats, very dedicated to the practice. At some point he was having trouble with his meditation practice. I think he was having some thoughts about his father. He went to Ram Dass, who was in India at that time, and explained what was going on. Ram Dass said, Oh, enough of this meditation. You need to go back to Kentucky and visit your father. Just don't stay too long. So John Travis went, cut his hair, got a suit made, went to Kentucky, saw his father, entered his father's world, and had a kind of resolution about his relationship to his father. Once that was resolved, he was able to go back to India and continue on his practice.

Some people who meditate think meditation is a spot to solve all our problems. Sometimes meditation shows us that we have to take care of things in other areas of our life in order to get concentrated. It's not so uncommon for meditators to have memories of earlier times in life come up. Sometimes those memories have to do with transgressions or pain caused to other people. People realize, Oh, I need to apologize, because it's still sitting deeply lodged in my heart. This unresolved issue is the fact that I lied or stole, and the heart is simply not going to open up or relax or do what it needs to do in order to get concentrated until somehow you make amends to heal the relationship. It can be kind of funny; you call up someone after thirty years and say, You know, it's Gil, and I want to apologize for what I said. I lied to you or something, and they say, Who? Or sometimes people don't want to talk to you; they're

so angry with you. That's their issue if they don't want to talk to you. But the fact that you made the effort may be all you need to do to settle your heart. A kind of cleansing of your moral life is sometimes a necessary thing to do, or in your interpersonal life, resolving things. Sometimes that's what becomes clear. Some meditators will go to therapy when they come to a certain area of their life where they just can't get concentrated. So that's an obstacle that might happen.

Other obstacles might be how we live our lives. If our lives are really stressful, then we might think it'll be good to get concentrated and calm through meditation. But actually, there's a very close relationship between being able to get concentrated and living a life that's supportive of concentration. Some people might have to look at how they're living their lives and maybe try to figure out some way to change their lives to make it more supportive of developing the kind of health that can come from a concentrated mind. You might need to sleep more, watch less television, go to fewer horror movies, maybe find different work. Occasionally, certain professions are so driven by the way we engage in them—so ambitious, so toxic—that maybe that environment is simply not compatible with beginning to open up and relax and soften and get concentrated. Some people need to, in order to settle some obstacles to concentration, really look at their wider life and take care of that, settle that, live a less stressful life, live a more ethical life.

Some people need to exercise. If the body is not in some kind of decent shape, it's very hard to get concentrated in a deep way. The body needs to be in good operating order. It doesn't have to be a Schwarzenegger kind of shape, but it needs to be in good shape. Actually, getting too much exercise can be detrimental for developing a strong concentration practice, but you need to have the body in good shape. Looking at the rest of life is sometimes helpful. Sometimes there are psychological issues of how we relate to ourselves and how we see ourselves. It's not really a relationship to other people, but a relationship to ourselves that's the obstacle. Sometimes they can be settled through meditation practice and dealt with that way, but sometimes they can't, and sometimes you need to do something else. It could be a variety of things that somehow you deal with the psychological issues of your life. For example, if there is a lot of self-hate, or lack of self-esteem, or a lot of fear, maybe that has to be dealt with outside of meditation. Sometimes fear, if we draw it up to the surface of consciousness and the mind settles to some degree, some people are surprised at how much fear there can be and how pervasive it is in our psyche. Sometimes meditation can help, and you can work through it with meditation, and sometimes you need to do some kind of work, therapy, or something else to work with some of these psychological issues so that the mind

can get concentrated.

Classically, in Buddhism, there are lists of hindrances to concentration, and the most classic list is called the five hindrances. The five hindrances are probably the most common talk given on meditation retreats we teach. Every retreat gets a talk about the five hindrances, and that's because they're so common. They're so common that it's best not to take them as being personal failings. They're just what the mind does, and we have to learn how to work with it. The mind tends to be very driven by desire, driven by feelings of ill will or aversion, and gets caught up with restlessness and anxiety, gets caught up in sloth and torpor, resistance, lethargy, and gets caught up in the world of doubt. These are very important mental factors that every good meditator needs to start getting a handle on.

The deeper the meditation goes, the deeper the concentration goes up to the point of access concentration. The reason why the Buddhist tradition lists the five hindrances as being one of the fundamental hindrances to concentration is that even when a lot of other things are settled and the mind starts to get concentrated and calm and relaxed, these are very tricky. The mind can still go off into wanting things to be nicer or more comfortable, or holding on to comfort in a way that prevents concentration, or involve very subtle movements of ill will, or subtle modes of aversion to what's going on, or very subtle movements of doubt. Good meditators need to understand the world of what's called the five hindrances and learn how to work with them. We can work with them through mindfulness. Sometimes when we do concentration practice, we need to switch and let go of the concentration practice and do mindfulness for a while, explore these things, and settle them. Sometimes things get settled by just ignoring them and just staying with the concentration object, and having the wisdom not to get caught by them as they arise. Sometimes we need to do things like developing antidotes to the hindrances.

For example, if you're lost in a phenomenal bout of lust—it might happen to people—you can do this in a playful, creative way rather than a puritanical way. You might imagine your object of lust and then look at them and their body in unusual angles. The tradition talks about snot, bile, spittle, feces, and urine. Most people find certain aspects of the human anatomy to be unappetizing. If you do this in a playful, creative way, it can help you with your bouts of lust. If there's a lot of ill will, maybe it's useful to cultivate loving-kindness, to do some loving-kindness practice, and bring more friendliness and goodwill into the picture, to soften the heart and relax. Sometimes the antidotes can settle something out, relax something. With sloth and torpor, sometimes the antidote, classically, is light. It can be physical—you can turn on a light and have light coming into your eyelids, or sit in front of a bright window, but



have some way to bring energy back into the system. You can be creative with the antidotes. Doubt is a very powerful one, and faith is the antidote to doubt, confidence is. Try to arouse something that brings faith and confidence. Sometimes doing a reading before you sit can help with that. Read some inspiring passage that can be useful sometimes. Or sometimes you do mindfulness and explore the area of doubt—what's really going on there?

I think it's best, when working with the obstacles to concentration, to feel like you have permission to be creative, maybe even playful around working with these. If you have the idea that this is a terrible burden and unfortunate that this should be happening, and it's a drag, it's embarrassing that these things are happening, or it's a sign of personal failure, or you have to overcome them as quickly as possible because there's a marathon race going on—those kinds of attitudes are not so useful. But maybe feeling, Oh, what's creative about this? What can I learn from this? What's the opportunity in exploring this? How can I be playful with this? That may make a much nicer attitude to have about meditation. It's a lot easier then to develop concentration if you have that kind of lighter attitude to what's going on.

Why look at that? I just criticized myself again. Isn't that amazing? I wonder, how can I work with this self-criticism? Sometimes, I'll give you an example of a creative approach to meditation. Sometimes I've imagined thoughts as being like a ping pong ball, and awareness is like the paddle knocking it away, or a pinball. I liked pinball a lot as a kid, so you can imagine that the mind is like a pinball machine. I don't know if that's wise exactly, but it was creative, fun, and playful. It's certainly better than some of the alternative ways people relate to their minds. If you have that lighter spirit about what you're doing, it's a lot easier than some grim idea of what you're doing.

One of the obstacles to concentration is not enjoying what you're doing. Meditation is not always pleasant, but hopefully you have some sense that this is a satisfying thing to do, or a good thing to do, or a beautiful thing to do, a phenomenally valuable thing to do, a dignified thing to do. The Buddhist tradition talks about nobility. It's a really noble thing to do, to engage in this kind of practice of concentration and mindfulness meditation, and to feel some inspiration about it. This is really a valuable, wonderful thing to do. There's some satisfaction from that, some joy from that, some delight in it, some inspiration from it that can help.

Meditation is seldom a linear process in developing concentrated states. Concentration and deep meditation are not linear processes, and often we focus in the sense that I'm getting calmer, things are going nicer, it's a good meditation, it's only getting better, right? It doesn't work that way. Sometimes it goes in spirals, or it goes up and down. You can expect there to be times of deepening concentration, and then times when it can be really hard, then deep-

ening and hard again. Part of the reason, as I talked about earlier, is that as you're purifying the mind, concentration practice is a purification process. You begin dislodging things that have been embedded in your heart for a long time. That dislodging process can bring up things which are difficult to deal with for a while. It's not uncommon for people to say, What happened? I've gone so far backwards. I'm so agitated now, really going backwards. It's just that they're dealing with more difficult stuff, and so they have to work through that before they can get settled again and concentrate.

Probably the most useful advice around working with obstacles and difficulties in getting concentrated is to have a tremendous respect for continuity. Just hang in there and keep doing it, practicing and practicing, maintaining meditation day in, day out, practicing your practice. Don't measure the success of your meditation on a daily basis, a weekly basis, or even a monthly basis. Just hang in there, doing it day after day after day. The rhythm, the continuity, the momentum that gets built up is very, very helpful. There might be obstacles you're working with for a long time, but the fact that you're just hanging in there and making that effort, you're concentrated every day. There's a kind of concentration just to show up every day, a certain kind of commitment, just following through. Continuity is one of the great secret supports to developing concentration.

I'll end with this analogy. If you want to make fire by rubbing sticks together, you rub for a while and start getting a warm stick, and then think, I'll take a break. When you come back after a while, you try it again, then go and have some tea. You come back and start again, but you never get to build up enough heat to create a spark. What you have to do is have continuity, stay there long enough till a spark happens. With meditation practice, you have to have the continuity where you build momentum. That happens on many different levels. For people who sit every day, sitting every day, day in, day out, starts creating a certain kind of momentum. It might take a while, but eventually something begins getting warm enough by doing that. Continuity is very, very important. A lot of things will get organized, a lot of things will settle, a lot of things will reorganize themselves around your continuous practice. Psychically, in your mind, a lot of obstacles will work themselves out. It's really phenomenal to me how much the psyche will work itself out, even itself out, smooth itself out, as a person does a regular meditation practice. You don't have to get involved and negotiate everything; just the continuity and regularity is enough, so that at some point the hindrances fall away.

The hindrances don't fall away permanently, but at some point they're no longer getting in the way. At that point, when the hindrances are not there and the mind is able to maintain one-pointed focus in the present, then a person has attained what's called access concentra-

tion. Different Buddhist traditions or teachers have different definitions or ways of characterizing access concentration, but the primary one that everyone shares is that the hindrances are no longer there. There's nothing really in the way of getting concentrated anymore. The person is there, you're here. It can feel very nice and wonderful because we're no longer fragmented, no longer in conflict with ourselves. The mind is no longer racing off in different directions. There's a kind of healing that happens when everything is here and you're able to be present and focused and concentrated. That is the doorway to going into states of absorption, which are what we'll talk about next week. So thank you very much.

I'd like to say that if you don't know about it, our center here has a website called AudioDhamma.org. There's a link to it from our regular website. A lot of the talks given here, the audio is there. You can listen to them on your computer. If you miss one of the concentration classes, I don't know how quickly this is making it up there, but the last concentration class I taught two or three years ago is up there. So if you miss the second or the third or the fourth week, it's kind of similar to what happens in different weeks. You could listen to it there, or get a little different take on it from last time I did it. Thank you very much.