

# 2012-09-30 Concentration And Insight

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mind, concentration, slow, insight, mindfulness, people, thought, clinging, arise, practice, meditation, life, cultivate, concepts, loving kindness, retreat, soften, breath, thoughts, kindness

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning, the theme of this retreat, usually have it it's kind of a theme for the two week retreat was concentration and insight. That's kind of the most basic themes in our practice. And for the beginning of the retreat, the emphasis in the morning instruction was concentration practice in the afternoon was on insight. And these two are partners in the practice that we do here in Buddhist practice working together. One of my favorite ways of kind of entry point for understanding, concentration and insight has to do with how the Chinese when they received Buddhism from India, they had to figure out what Chinese words to and characters in which to translate the Indian words. And so the Indian words for concentration and insight is no Samadhi and Vipassana. And the Chinese chose the character, the word for stopping for just translate concentration. And the word for seeing for insight makes some sense, but they have stopping for concentrations is a little bit maybe unusual. But that's a big part of the function of concentration is to help the mind slow down, maybe, maybe maybe to stop, certainly stop some of the normal activities that some of our minds are capable of being involved in. And so big. And what that allows is the mind slows down and stops, then it's possible to see more clearly. When things are going really fast. It's hard to tell what's going on. This is why they have replays in sports, and you slow it down and they watch carefully and so You know, a sense, we have this you know, we're cultivating there. I don't know if we're just gonna say the replay button, but apply, cultivating the ability to slow down and see much more clearly what actually goes on in our life as its unfolding. The analogy to a replay Butner is kind of interesting because mostly what you're doing is be playing anyway. And so and so this, you know, you slow down, you can kind of see it more carefully and understand what's happening. The So, you know, for many people, the beginning of retreat or meditation practice has a lot to do with being surprised by what you encounter when you slow down when you take a look. Sometimes we discover the tremendous momentum of the mind, the activity of the mind, the concerns of the mind and the heart, that maybe are not so obvious as we go about our daily life. And so there's a lot of kind of taking A long, hard look at oneself that happens when you sit and meditate. And sometimes it does feel hard, it's difficult to look and see what's there. It's sometimes just difficult to even look because the mind is spinning out so fast. So to slow down enough so we can really take an honest and clear look what's going on here is part of the function of meditation. Many people associate the value of meditation with the concentration side, calming down, relaxing, distressing. And that's certainly valuable. But in Buddhism, the function of slowing down concentration stabilize that stabilizing is not for its own sake, but rather for how it helps us to do the second part, which is the inside part to see clearly.

And the hope is that, you know, it doesn't remain a long, hard look at oneself, but rather becomes a long soft look at oneself. That somehow As we go along the way in which we look, the way in which we're present for ourselves begins to change. And this is one of the important secrets are no secrets. But keys of meditation practice is at some point, you want to be able to turn around 180 degrees. And notice what the mind is like, that's doing the looking, that's doing the watching people. Often we're so

focused on what we're looking at what we're concerned about what we're thinking about, that we don't really notice the quality of the mind that has its concerns the mind that's reaching out, trying to figure out, make its plans for the future or trying to figure out how to have a better past all these things the mind is trying to do. But to turn around and look at the how the how the mind is not what the mind is about. And so you might notice, there's a there's a maybe emotions that are there that are connected to how we are how we're paying attention. There's motivation have all kinds of you didn't know, striving, wanting to get resistance clinging desires being for being being against what you're aware of. And so as we slow down and take a long, soft look, we begin seeing how we are how we're looking how we're paying attention to how we're relating to our experience. And that helps us then to soften. And the mind the mind, the awareness begins to soften. And one of the characteristics of a concentrated mind is a mind that is soft and pliable. On the off, also, it's bright. There's kind of a luminosity in the mind as it softens, it opens. People who develop try to get concentrated by having a hard mind usually end up with a brittle mind. And it usually becomes kind of fragile, and sometimes it can actually be problems because they're pushing so much. But the hope is that as we insight develops, we take more responsibility for the quality of the mind how we are so it softens in Relax, doesn't soften. And so where we lose our vigilance, the vigilance that keeps us from wandering often thought less often. So that was easy and easier to see what's here. Then one of the functions of this stopping or slowing down of concentration is so that the activities of the mind begin to slow down. So we're not you know, going at top speed. And one of the since I've been teaching retreat, one of the often told stories at the end of retreats to warn people about going home is a story of the woman who left the retreat, gotten a car and was driving on the freeway, and then she noticed was the police behind her with the lights flashing. So she pulled over and officer walked up to her in a gruff way and said something like Lady, did you know how fast you're driving? And she's looked at him, oh, I don't know 70 75 and he said something like 40 miles an hour on the freeway. And so you know, sometimes when people are in retreat, things slow down a lot and so and people lose sometimes a little perspective. But the idea is to slow down so that our mind slows down so we're not, you know, racing in there. And as it slows down and maybe slower than how normally operates, amazing thing begins to happen. That we start seeing clearly how a thought feeling, perceptions, sensations and experience that we have arises and how sometimes how it passes away, how things are there things that are seemed constant when the mind is busy. Start being seeing it as not being constant solid things being a series of events that arise and pass.

When things seem solid, it's hard to get at them, it's hard to understand them and look at them. When we see that they arise and you see them pass, then it's easier to see the conditions that bring them about, it's possible to see better what our relationship to it is. And it's possible to begin separating ourselves from it enough so that we are independent from it, we're not caught in the grip of the things that are going on. And that can be quite clear, sometimes with physical pain. physical pain can seem very solid, if we kind of relate to it through our concepts and ideas. When the mind slows down, and you're present for pain in a very simple, direct way, you can start seeing that the pain is not solid, but it arises in the past as it has, you know, maybe quite, you know, continuously, but it's not a solid block of things. Same thing with emotions. It can seem, in daily life that or you know, we're just in a particular mood or emotional state all the time. But it's actually rare to have an emotion be constant is often interrupted and other small ones come in. But it might be a background one, which is kind of seems more or less constant. But when your mind slows down, you can start seeing that things arise and they pass they're not so constant. When we see they arise and pass, we can question our relationship to them. So for example, with the arising and passing of thoughts, you have the if the mind is quiet enough to watch the birth of a thought, then usually then you can ask is, do I need to be involved in this thought? is this useful for me? And you can kind of feel and sense in that slower mind, the usefulness or the healthiness of being involved in this thought or not involved. And if it's slow enough, you can watch the arising and passing of a thought it tends to A lot easier than to let go of it and not be involved.

Because there's a gap. The mind is fast, and you seem to be continuously involved. So continuously, you don't even know you're involved, you don't see where you're involved, it's going to be hard to let go of it. But when the mind slows down, we have much more control or monitoring much more choice in relationship to what we think. So there's a whole slew of things, we begin understanding and seeing better when things slow down. And that's the function of the concentration, the function, the insight is then to use that slowing down to look more carefully. And then I'll say one more thing about this. And that is insight is not only about seeing what arises and passes, seeing the things of our life more carefully. But it's also seeing since its insight, what happens in between the arising and testing. So for you sample, something that can be quite, maybe challenging or perplexing to understand, especially if your mind is fast and you don't sense that you can see this is, is represented by the question. When you don't have thoughts, if you when you don't use thoughts to tell you who you are, who are you? What happens to you? Where are you? Where do you find yourself, if you're not going to tell yourself a thought? Most people have a thought or an image by which they represent themselves and understand themselves. So if thoughts are arising and passing, they start to slow down quite a bit. There might actually be short periods of time, when there's no thought at all. What happens to all the monumental life problems you have when you don't have a thought to tell you about them? You know, so in that space, what isn't that space? We're still alive. We're still there's a kind of an awareness there and presence there. But it's an awareness which is not way down or colored by our ideas, our concepts of what is who we are, who other people are, our history, our identity, many different things. And is there a role in our life for looking at that space where we're alive and aware, but we don't, it's not colored or, or filled with ideas and thoughts. And to begin to have that questioning and looking at that the contrast begins to pop the bubble of authority, that our our thoughts and thinking and concepts and ideas often have for us. And we started seeing as an other way, another possibility of how to live our life how to be not that we want to get rid of thoughts and concepts, but we don't have to put all our eggs in that basket and that everything has been negotiated through those Through those same thing with desires, or aversions, when you see that there's a gap, that they're not always there, there's another alternative for how to be.

Then the you don't have to negotiate your life through desires and aversions, which is how some people do all the time. And what is the alternative? In the gap when there's no concepts and if you have no words to tell you what they are, how can you share it with your friends, and get credit for it? You know, or, you know, get wealthy and famous from it, you know, it doesn't do you any good in a certain kind of conventional way. But it provides some of the greatest peace that a person can experience to kind of begin sensing that opening and having that insight. Similar to this is also to begin to discern or have insight or seeing into the kind of like this Bass are kind of like the emptiness that's there when your mind doesn't cling. And this is in Buddhism is their ultimate function of concentration insight is to discover that which doesn't cling the mind that doesn't cling. Because clinging is the source and Buddhism is understood as a source of suffering. And so what is that mind? Like? What's that? What is it like that which doesn't claim? So, one of the interesting issues around non clinging is maybe you have an experience of non clinging Have you ever tried clinging to that people do mostly they cling to their idea of it their concept of you know, or what they experienced the joy or the peace to the experience and non clinging. But what happens when you cling to non clinging what happens to the non clinging it vanishes advantages right? So, how can you get it you know if you if you want to Have some it's so important, I mean, provides a great piece a wonderful piece. It's you know, uncomfortable. So you of course you want to have it. So you try to grab it. Where does it go? You know, it's kind of like grabbing at, I don't know what it's like grabbing it air, grabbing it a hologram, you know, you know or light the light beam, you try to grab the light beam, you know, through the dust in your living room. You know, it's not that you come up empty handed. And so it's there, but you can't touch it. And so it's kind of I like it. I like it. It's taking your right hand and trying to touch your right elbow. It doesn't quite work

and no, you have an elbow, but you can't touch it. And so the mind that doesn't cling this mind that's free. The mind has insight into freedom is kind of, not something you can directly see Not something you can directly touch, because as soon as you try to see it, try to touch it, you kind of lose it. So how do you see without seeing how do you touch without touching?

So part of the function of this slowing down and seeing is to learn to interest and relax into a piece or relax into this space or relax into the capacity not to be involved or caught in concepts, ideas, desires and aversions and such things and it's a beautiful process to be involved in. It's quite something to watch people on retreats especially slow down. It's kind of a little bit you know, it's kind of sometimes have to remind people how slow they've gotten because it happens so slowly. They like the woman in the car. Some people think that they're still normal, like, you know, and, and actually, you know, they've actually slowed down quite a bit and there's a much greater intimacy and sensitivity and empathy that happens and that slowing down, that it's hard to happen when the mind is speeding up. Okay. I did it. So now it's your turn to ask a question or make a comment or protest. Yes, if you could use the mic, please. Where's the mic? There's over there.

For me, when I can experience non clinging is when I've actively let go. So if something comes up, I try to experience it in the moment completely, and then let it go. And then that's when I can have that feeling of great. That's wonderful. So I think it's wonderful that you have that experience, you know that that's a reference point for you. And, and part of the function of insight of paying careful attention is when you have an experience of letting go, that's meaningful experience of non clinging, it's meaningful, we want to actually you know, you can't quite see it the normal way, perhaps sometimes, but you want to register it, you want to take it in, you want to let yourself the system, your body and mind your heart kind of sense and feel what that's like, appreciate it. Because in the recognition of appreciation, it makes it a bit easier to then have it as a reference and as a support. In the future. It makes a little bit easier to want to go there for the not necessarily in mind to want, but the whole system to kind of move in that direction. So it's a good thing. The other thing to say about your wonderful statement is that as the is there some modicum of slowing down that have some amount of slowing down that happens and as the insight gets stronger and stronger, it's possible to see at a certain experience, that in the wild, there's clinging, there can also be non clinging. That the inside the seeing itself, you can see clinging, that your mind is clinging, but the seeing itself doesn't cling at all. And that and that means you don't necessarily have to get rid of anything to be free. You just have to see it with great clarity. And that also is very satisfying. Back there. We started out by talking about concentration versus insight. For a person like myself who would like to improve the concentration, where I'm coming from the specific practices you recommend for that for improving concentration Yes. Some of it will just come to some degree when you meditate on a regular basis. So just meditating regularly helps that some people who want to develop a greater concentration in meditation specifically, one of the classic techniques for that is focusing on the breath. And so just staying on the breath, and making that though, basically the only subject for attention, the mind wanders away, you come back, if something else occurs, you just ignore it and come back and you stay on the breath, and relax into the experience of breath to enter into the world, their breath, be intimate with the breath. And just do that in a regular basis for a while. Some people find that that using breath for concentration practice is supported by counting the breath. And I did that for years because that's how I was taught in Zen. And so you know, one of the classic ways for that is to count from one to 10 each breath gets a count of 112. And if you lose count, which is pretty likely, then not make any comment judgments about that. Just start again at one. And if you get to 32, that also means you've kind of lost your mindfulness. And so then start again at one just start we started getting one. And I had I knew I was in priests, too, when he was practicing in Japan. He was taught to count his breath by his Zen master there, and he was told to count up to up to one and then start again. Yes.

Regarding

slowing down and being able to make the choice between getting involved in the thought and not getting involved, is there is that a choice of actually keeping them

And observing it or

is it to just let go of the thought entirely, it can be both. So the advantage of a train mind that is slow, you know, calm and can see clearly and knows about the knows what it's like to let go has developed the muscle of letting go, you have much more choice of what to do. So it could be that some sometimes it's just useful to let go, No thank you, I don't need to do that it's sometimes it's useful to spend time observing the thoughts and the complex associated with it. Because there might be something important there to understand. We don't encourage you to do some meditation, but there are times in life where you're useful to think. And so you won't have the ability to stay focused and I'm glad for whatever concentration I have that some there are times where I decide I'm going to I need to reflect on this issue in my life. And so I hold the focus on that for a while. And, you know, don't get distracted from it. And that's I think it's very helpful for me There are other times where I realized that I couldn't let go of thoughts and concerns but they keep reappearing. And if they keep reappearing, it's usually indication that there's something important besides a thought that's going on as well. And so then I've said what I can do is just observe and watch and let the thought continue not let go of it and understand better what's going on both in terms of the content and the beliefs and also in terms of the emotional fuel which is driving the thinking. So with a train mind you have greater range of choice of what to do. And so you can, you know, with with that range, you can, depending what's useful at a given time, you can then choose said answer your question. Okay. Over here, please.

So I recently had an opportunity to attend the daily life practice with Andrea great and which was wonderful. And also a mindfulness based birth prep class. Wonderful. And what something that I got out of both of those classes is that I have a desire to learn more about loving kindness. Wonderful. And I was wondering if you could recommend somewhere or perhaps the podcasts at AMC to go to,

to learn more in practice,

Okay, great, wonderful. In terms of the, the topic of the talk, loving kindness practice is classically considered a concentration practice. So some people instead of doing breath, meditation will use loving kindness as a way of developing concentration. And part of the advantage of that is that you get to develop loving kindness at the same time. So it's kind of nice to you know, dual functions. And loving kindness is a great practice and it's a great practice for a mother to have parents to have and it's a great thing to do. So to cultivate loving kindness, there's a classic book in our tradition by Sharon Salzberg called loving kindness, the revolutionary art of happiness. And, and we might have a copy in the library you can borrow the we do have a number of links to lots of podcasts on if you go I think if you just search for loving kindness or met or metta. I've done some series on that topic. And so you can look at this series right kind of good instructions as you go through. And then some of the series might actually have handouts that go with it. Andrea Fella has taught day long retreats here on loving kindness. I suspect they've been recorded some of them she does it like once a year. And so those are places to go. And then I could mention since you bring it up, it's not good not gonna teach you anything about loving kindness, but it's maybe a kind of curiosity thing. Last Monday here that Monday night, we had a Dharma talk with PowerPoint slide, which is unusual. And, and the topic of the of the talk was loving kindness comes to the west. And it was I had all these slides showing how this practice of loving



kindness has entered into the west from Buddhism into our Western society, American society and, and from basketball players to Christian colleges to philanthropic funds. And so there's a whole series, you know, all kinds of places. And so, if you're interested in the history of loving kindness in this country, that may be interesting. Yes,

I find that I have difficulty going from meditative state

Where I come from here

to going home to my two year old

I have trouble hanging on are finding peace in the middle of

don't hang on the chaos don't hang on.

Let it go.

Let it go and hope that some of the benefits of meditating and being here will somehow carry over without you trying. And there's lots of stories of children who have told their meditating parents. parent, you need to come meditate now or so just you know made you wait. Or then also I actually recently someone told me the story of Was it that the child was really encouraging the mothers do come here or come to one day sitting or do something and my mother felt like she couldn't that you couldn't leave it you know, the responsibility and everybody else in the family and the child kept kept saying you should go You should go. And finally, maybe she said why mother said Why are the child said You, you, you're so much better person when you come back. So but holding on is hard. And I used to when I when I had two year old at home, I used to stop the car about two minutes from my house and sit there and just prepare

and and you know, I also the other thing, I don't know if you want to device but the other thing I learned is that sometimes it's really hard with young kids at home, and so you want to make sure that you're you have support, you know, you're not always in the middle of it. Yes.

I have a question about the practice of mindfulness and metta. And I was mostly focused on metta for have been and metta for quite a while. And then I think, Oh, I think I'm losing my mindfulness had so when back to mindfulness, and but I also I have a very ruminative mind at times, you know, when the mind just kind of latches on what's actually happening today. My mind was so ruminative that I could, I could not do mindfulness. And so I got up and that Okay, so Maybe walking might be the approach to this and just kind of grunting through the feet. And then as I was walking the kind of the meta started to come in so I it almost seemed like in our ruminative mind it, the, the phrases give it something to hold on to, right as a way to to deal with and, you know something kind of settled in I don't know what it was in the end. But that was one of the kind of refreshing things about the meta that it gives my mind something in it seems to sometimes work. At the same time. You know, I still want to there's a part of me that thinks or I'm not as mindful anymore because I'm doing meta.

Could Happen and maybe we all have to have difficulty It's a good thing. I mean, it's a wonderful thing that you have the meta. So as I said earlier, meta is a concentration practice. So it's possible to get quite concentrated, doing very concentrated, and so concentrated and absorbed in that practice, that there isn't much in the mindful mind and mind that has really pretty for insight is independent of what's being seen has some independence rather than being absorbed and, and so it can happen that you get

too concentrated for the purpose of mindfulness. I tend not to see I don't encourage people to not get that absorbed and concentrated. But if what you want is if you've learned that you it's more useful for you to cultivate more mindfulness and support your daily life, then you want to maybe get slowed down enough with a meta, but don't go too far. And when you get to reach a certain plateau, certain level of calm then you can switch to do Mindfulness and the mindfulness might be much more effective, kind of have more or less than benefit for you. So you have a choice, you know, you've got, you know, you decide what that level of calm is where you want to switch to mindfulness. The other thing you can do is just let yourself get as concentrated as possible, not worry about being mindful in your meditation. But then switch to mindfulness as you come out of the meditation when you start your life and try to try to start your life kind of slowly. So the mindfulness cookie, you have a chance to kind of reintegrate or bring in mindfulness to it

it's just uncertain certain times you know, it does in the rumination doesn't happen all the time. But you know, in the today, in sort of like what do I do when my mind is, has possessed me right? It's sort of like something some stressor happens their mind is a really is sort of like whoa is very hard to detach from this, it's even hard for me to observe it is hard for me to be, you know, really feel like I can withstand it in my body. And then I thought, Well, okay, maybe it's time for something else.

Maybe you agree or you, it's very, I think it's very important in meditation, to, to stay, stay close to the ability to have the ability, cultivate the ability to always pull yourself out of whatever is happening. So to you know, open your eyes to, you know, stop, do not feel like you're ever stuck in whatever is going on, whether it's a concentration state, or whether it's emotional state, or whatever they have, you know, to, and to actually cultivate that ability to come out. Some people find that helpful, because otherwise they feel trapped and stuck by all the kinds of things that can happen. And you know, but actually, it's a very, very important human strength capacity, to be able to kind of change our emotions, they get pulled, pull out from what's going on. So maybe that's a useful lesson for you to have. And once you have that developed, then maybe it's easier for you to have confidence you can go in deep deep and not get stuck there because you've cultivated ability to get out. Some people find that a little bit for people who have strong meditation, some people find it a little unsatisfying, because in some ways is more satisfying to go deep than it is to go a little bit and then pull out. But developing that as a is useful to do. The other thing that I recommend is you come and talk to me or another teacher, and in greater detail what this experience is like when you say you get stuck in there with us. Because, you know, it could a variety of things it actually could be and maybe some other time, too for me to find out. Explore it with you. That might be different advice for you. Okay, so stop and look what could be more difficult, more difficult. Look at them. Look at the easier stuff and look and the great thing to do to periodically stop and look more carefully. So may all of us stop, look and develop a soft and kind mind. Thank you