

Seven Factors of Enlightenment - Concentration Part 5

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So perhaps we can have some of the recorders present their gist of the discussion. Yeah, go. So one person in our group is a pilot, and some years ago he had to land an airplane that was having engine failure in the mountains. And so the airplane didn't come out of this too well, but he did, and passed her. But one thing he said was that everything was in slow motion, and there seemed to be time to do everything that he needed to do.

And he says now he knows he can handle a crisis or be calm in a crisis. And one reason that was given for this being very satisfying and enjoyable is that when you're in such a situation, there isn't time to have any of your usual hindrances. If you have a really good crisis, there's no opportunity for neurosis. Thank you. So I just wrote down a bunch of words, and then I started underlining the ones that got repeated. And then they divide into two different categories.

There are things that are there and things that aren't there. So we decided that there was a feeling of non-separation, no sense of time, and no sense of self. And things that were there were trust, beauty, reverence, and harmony. Great. Thank you. I think we had some of those similar things.

But we recognize when we were in the experience, there was a real sense of joy, a sense of love. And we also recognize it seemed those experiences we had, we were free of other obligations. So it was a real moment that was free of that. And in it, there was a separation we recognized. There was no separation from the comfortable or the uncomfortable because we were free of other obligations and other things going on. There was just the moment was complete as it is, and we all felt when we walked away afterwards thinking about it, like as you said when you took a test, there was a real freshness and freeness about it because of these other things we think of what happened.

Great. Thank you. We talked about how the concentration itself, in essence, creates a barrier to all these other quote-unquote things that come in. And then someone noted that all these things that come in are really identical to the hindrances which we talk about here. But we talked about the loss of doubt occurs when you're in the moment and you're creating

something or you're absorbed in something. The doubts that linger in our daily lives kind of disappear.

We talked about how everything else kind of stops. You lose sense of time. It can be incredibly joyful and satisfying. It can also create a lot of energy. The activity itself or the concentration itself creates an energy. There was talk about how some of the activities related to being balanced, both physically and mentally, like ballet or skiing or some kind of physical thing where your body is very much involved in the activity.

We also talked about things like reading and being very absorbed in a book, where there's no physical activity, but the result is very similar for the individual at that time. We talked about how in these situations, doubt is in essence pushed aside, or fear is pushed aside, or again, perhaps the concentration itself creates almost like a barrier to these things coming in. Great. So we had, we seem to talk a lot about physical things. One of us, one of our members, talked about scuba diving and it's kind of being all enveloped by the water and aspect of it and being very present because it's very physical and present. Most of the things we talked about were very physical.

Making love, that was one thing. You're fully present and yet you're connected to this whole great chain of being almost in that species propagating itself. Playing a musical instrument. A lot of people talked about being in nature, backpacking, diving in a clear mountain lake and being the only one there and just being so present in that cool water. Just the joy of it. And then the other side of backpacking where you're making a 5,000 foot climb and how the only way to get through it is to just like one step at a time, you know, the next step, okay, the next step, like this.

You know, it's almost, you know, an exquisite torture in a way. And taking exams, too. That was awesome. Some of us have the same experiences, Gil. Great, thank you. We're behind you.

Well, a lot of the things you all said we talked about also. We talked, though, about you could actually resist starting the thing that you're going to be concentrated about, a new task, or taxes got mentioned, and yet in the actual doing sometimes there's a joy and a concentration that comes that you didn't expect. And then ironing, which is another, I would say, negative, but people have a positive response to. But we're also struck at the end that all these things were positives and yet when we sit to say we're going to get concentrated to meditate, we don't come with that energy that all these things seem to take and develop our energy and yet when we sit it's difficult. Thank you. Anyone anymore?

Here. Well let's see if I can be as in the zone here as one of my group members described being when she worked with the therapy client of maybe not knowing what she was going to say but being so feeling the connection with the other person was so intense and direct she was completely absorbed. We had examples of doing brain fitness games on computers, assembling toy airplanes as a child, and living out in the countryside and being completely absorbed in nature and becoming nature. And then we got off on a little bit of a philosophical discussion about the difference between observing nature and becoming nature and how those philosophical stances have big implications for how we treat the earth. That was about it. Great, thank you.

Over here to the side. I hope I can unify this here. We talked about how physical involvement can lead to a sense of direct engagement, which leads to focus, which of itself leads to calmness. Also that sometimes if you can choose something that you're interested in, that can be helpful because that brings you right into it. Or if it's something that it's obvious to you that you know what the task at hand is. If it's something that's right in front of you, it's like, well, this is what has to be done.

It's not this other thing back here. It's obviously this thing right here. It can also be helpful if you have a time set aside for something. Or if you have like ritualized behavior in a sense where maybe you go for a nature walk on New Year's Day or something. You're setting that purpose and leaving yourself open to that kind of evenness of spirit. Also, involving the body can be very helpful.

Doing small hand work or gardening or dancing or sports or exercise. Again, to the focus and concentration of themselves lead to a really kind of a easeful state that's to be kind of treasured, which also leads to a suspension of fear and anxiety, or that that goes along with a sense of peace. Beautiful. Thank you. And everyone?

So, one of the interesting issues of hearing all that is how much was the good feelings, the good memories, the good experience part of all that, how much of it was dependent on the particular thing you were doing, or the meaning assigned to the particular thing, and how much became just from the full involvement itself. And a lot of you are shaking your heads. I think you probably... It depends. Sometimes it's both, sometimes one or the other. But I think it's quite remarkable that if there's some way that you can give yourself over completely to an activity, that with that then as a byproduct or part of that, that unification, that full involvement, we let go of a lot, as is pointed out.

We let go of a lot of the neurosis or fears or sense of separation or sense of time. A lot of

things we have to let go of. And we step into sometimes almost a different world. A different world with our body, a different sense of being in a body, and our mind changes. And also a different external world can feel very different in that way. And it can be done, you know, and that, you know, it can be done for some strange individuals with exams.

It can be done with, you know, if you're motivated enough to memorize the phone book. You know, if you're really absorbed in that process, you'll come out kind of, you know, high. You know, you'll get a lot of these benefits. That's why I told you to do that. No. What I have done, there was a time when I didn't feel like I was concentrated enough on a retreat.

I think it was a sesshin or something. And my mind was a little bit scattered or preoccupied or something. So I got two balls and juggled with one hand. And that kind of got me centered and focused and concentrated. That let me kind of let go of my preoccupations, concerns. It got me right there and much closer.

Then I could sit with that concentration then carried with me into the next sitting then I wouldn't sit. Yes. So I have a question that's happened to me in practice. It's not looking, it's not looking at anything that comes up as being wrong and that shouldn't be here when I'm in meditation practice. So there's a concentrated state in that even though maybe there's a time where the mind is, a lot of things are going, I'm just aware of that's happening. And that to me seems to be a very concentrated state.

Oh, I'm just noticing. I'm not beating up, saying it's good, bad, right, or wrong. I notice it. It seems to expand back out. I come to the breath, and there's times where it just comes right back quicker. But when I get up and I'm done, it can sometimes still have that same freshness, openness of heart and compassion of one that was just as deep, because I'm just in accepting of what's ever there.

There's no fighting or thinking that something shouldn't have been there than what isn't. And that's something that I think I'm recognizing for my own self in this practice. It's just so open for whatever shows up. So, I mean, so concentration, absorption involves a simplification of all the different mental activities we could be doing. I talk all about unification. And so it's extra to be in conflict.

It's extra to be judging, good or bad. And if the mind gets simpler and simpler and just there for some activity, those extra activities fall away. And so people describe that as much more of accepting, allowing things to be. And so that can be quite satisfying to have to realize you can be with life without being in conflict or without having conflict desires for or against

what's going on. Awareness can hold it all. And that can have lingering effects.

There can be a lingering physical almost effect that lasts for a while, where that calm or that openness, that relaxed state continues for a while afterwards. But it can also have a lingering effect in terms of understanding, the understanding we bring. Because it can give the mind the lesson that I don't have to always be in conflict with things. I don't have to always be judging. There's another way of being here. And that memory, that understanding then can nudge the mind towards being a bit more relaxed.

I don't have to go there. I don't have to always be judging or always be critical or always do something. And that memory can be very significant for some people, the memory of an alternative. So what about being in the concentrated state, but being conflicted? I mean, I've gotten into a concentrated state, but it's not the same as doing a concentration practice. It's just that I'm in that sort of state, and there's all kinds of conflict.

It can happen. One of the things that can happen is that there can be concentration. The mind has capacity to be concentrated and really focused on something. Sometimes concentration has this quality of really being able to lock in. Like you're in a groove and you're really kind of locked in to this thing. And you can develop that capacity.

Say you're developing it on the breath. After a while you're really concentrated, you're present. You can lock in on the breath for long periods of time. And then that capacity sometimes gets derailed or gets hijacked. And so suddenly your mind is focusing on something else that you don't want to be focusing on and you can't let go of it. And so one of the examples for this is writing the great American novel.

People sometimes on retreat can start having these wonderful creative ideas and they just lock on. It's very hard to get off because you're locked on. It's also possible to lock on to your neurosis. Suddenly you have some fear or some preoccupation and you kind of really zero in. And on retreat, for example, we talk about yogi mind. And yogi mind is usually the kind of mind where the person is able to get pretty concentrated, somewhat concentrated, they're in a little bit of an altered state, and then they focus on something and they don't have really good perspective of what they're seeing.

And so sometimes things get exaggerated in importance. And partly because this concentration is focusing on something. So if you have conflicts, it's possible for the concentrated state to really zero in on that sense of conflict and make it bigger than it actually is. And so that's why sometimes it's useful not to be in a hurry to get concentrated, but to take your time and

work through the various complexities of our personality, various inner conflicts that exist, and settle them down before getting into a concentrated state. So sometimes that's useful. Sometimes it's useful to get concentrated.

And then from that concentrated state, sometimes rather than getting... That itself is a useful place to kind of work through our complexes. So to give you an example, maybe that describes us better. Say that we're talking about the mind being kind of like a vertical thing, and halfway through the vertical dimensions of the mind that we have a problem. Big problem in our life. Big problem with our personality or something.

And so as you go from the normal consciousness to the normal state of mind and you're kind of getting calmer, more relaxed and going down through the layers of the mind, you hit the place of conflict, difficulty. Some people recoil, some people attack, some people stay stuck for a long time. Some people can work through it and it dissolves and they go deeper. Sometimes what's useful is to ignore the difficulty and bypass it—spiritual bypass—and then get concentrated in very still and very deep and then from that deep place come up from underneath and look at that problem coming up from that place rather than coming down from above and it gives you a very different perspective in which to hold it and deal with it.

So for example, from normal consciousness down, maybe we're looking at it through the point of view of our self-image. And so it's a whole different thing. What does this mean about me and my life and my success and my job and all these things? From the bottom up, you're looking at it from the perspective of some deeper sense of peace, some deeper sense of unity, some deeper sense of trust in life and trust in the world, something else. And so when you reach that psychological difficulty, it's being held and seen in a very different way and so maybe it's easier to address it, you meet it with kindness. And so some people find it useful to address things directly first before they get concentrated and occasionally it's useful to go around the thing and get concentrated and then address it from the underside.

And when you do one or the other is an interesting question. One of my beliefs—have any empirical evidence for this—but one of my beliefs is that developing concentration through breathing, focusing on the breath, and feeling the breath kind of in your torso, in your body, expanding and contracting, is a wonderful safeguard for deeper concentration because you're more likely to develop an integrated being when you're focusing on the breath than if you're focusing on a lot of other objects of concentration. There's something—the breath is tied, connected to so much of our psychological, our emotional, our physical, our energetic body—that as you're kind of developing sensitivity to breath and working through some

of the issues of the breath that you're also working through everything else and becoming kind of more whole or more complete or healed or something. But it's certainly an issue, the issue you bring up, that it's possible. So the most important thing to tell you is that when you're in a concentrated state, don't believe everything you believe.

Yes? I've heard in our group and also from a few of the others that a highly concentrated state results in a different perception of time. And I know that within the Christian tradition, there's a sense that the spiritual things occur independent of time, and the secular things occur in time. Is there some similar thing within the Buddhist tradition? Yes. But I feel cautious about going there because I don't know what's being said in Christianity.

Well, it's almost as if time itself is an illusion that the really important things occur like in one cosmic moment and are not time-ordered, i.e., things don't come one after the other but all at one time. That's what I understand of that tradition. I don't know about that. But time is a construct. Our sense of time is a construct of the mind, and we know it's relative. That, you know, ten minutes can seem a really, really, really long time when you're kind of, you know, sometimes when you're three years, but you're three years old, sitting there and waiting for, I don't know.

And then, you know, you're sitting next to some really, you know, your ideal sex object. Whatever, you know, you're sitting there and time goes by really fast. Boy, it's the same amount of time, but one time it's boring and things go really slow, and another time it's really exciting and it goes fast. So it's a little bit relative. And so when the construct, the activity of the mind conceiving of time stops, then the experiences we have feel like they're outside of time. Now, we don't want to get too metaphysical about this because it's possible to say I experienced timelessness at three o'clock today.

Yes. Yes. One of the things that seems to me, certainly from some of the things that we talked about, is that there's a danger of addiction in the concentration, especially, I think, in meditation, but also in the things in the real world that bring that absorption. The absorption feels so good that there's a sense of getting lost in it and wanting more of that. Yes, there is a problem of addiction. Now, some activities that help us get really concentrated certainly release a lot of wonderful chemicals into our system, endorphins and serotonin and stuff.

And people get addicted to that. That's how they get a sense of well-being. Sometimes it's a way of avoiding all kinds of issues in their life by kind of pumping yourself up. So that can happen. And very occasionally in my career as a meditation teacher, I've encountered people who have done years and years of concentration practice. Usually it's people having

done Hindu practice, yoga practice.

And they've gotten really good at getting concentrated and avoiding themselves, avoiding all kinds of stuff. And you get a sense of a certain kind of addiction to those states, that experience and it's clearly kind of avoidance and sometimes if you ask those people they come at our retreats, we say well, it's very nice of you to do this practice but you're here at a Vipassanā retreat how about trying to be mindful of what's happening instead of concentrating and they'll come back in the next interview and say I had no idea they're like in shock it's kind of traumatic to realize what they've been avoiding and not dealing with there can be addictions now in meditation practice there are some people I've heard of a couple of people sometimes these people do concentration practice and it seems there's a kind of addiction quality to it but it's pretty rare in Buddhist circles it's pretty rare I've never encountered a Buddhist practitioner who really had a problem with being addicted to concentration states I've heard of one man who had trouble with, was addicted to concentration states doing loving kindness meditation but I haven't really encountered it myself there certainly can be strong attachments to it but if you're doing real meditation practice be mindful and concentration sooner or later you're going to encounter the shortcoming the difficulty of the attachment or the addiction because if there's attachment it's going to interfere with the natural evolution natural development, ongoing development of that concentration practice.

You're going to reach a limit. And the nature of developing concentration practice is that it's not a static thing. It's something that unfolds and develops over time if you keep doing it. And at some point you'll come up against that barrier where you feel, oh, this is a problem now that I have this attachment. And so at some point you'll say, the attachment is self-limiting. So generally it's self-correcting.

So if you're a little bit addicted, it'll work out somehow. Yes. Maybe the last one and then we'll take a short break before we do our last piece. I wanted to ask about the relationship between what we've been doing today and Jhāna and one little comment about Jhāna it seems to me that there could be an awful lot of striving about that, Om I am the first, Jhāna I am the second, Jhāna I am the third. And I'm wondering if that isn't a, kind of a trap. It is a trap.

And there is a lot of, there is a lot of striving around Jhāna, which is deep meditative absorption. There's also a lot of ego tied to it, a lot of identity issues and comparative thinking and, you know, and ideas of success and failure. You have this kind of clear markers of success when you do jhāna practice. Oh, I'm the first, I'm the second, I'm the third, you know. I know

that I'm doing the right thing. I know I'm successful.

I can show off. I get the jhāna badge. And so people are huffing and puffing. It's very important to get it. And so there's a lot of jhāna casualties. And it's a lot of unhealthy approaches that go with it.

And so that can be a problem. It can be a dead end, doing that. But hopefully, if the person has a strong foundation in mindfulness, they're monitoring all that. They're able to recognize it as it happens, as it's going on, and then correct for it, and let go of, and change, and work through it. Because deep states of concentration are very helpful for the unfolding of mindfulness practice. And so it's not required for mindfulness practice to go into some of these deeper jhānas, but it's very helpful and very supportive.

And it's a beautiful thing. So it's not for everyone. Not everyone, it's their path. But it's certainly something, it's not something to be avoided. But it certainly should be something to not enter with a lot of ego and striving. And does one need a teacher to monitor this?

So is it dangerous to do it on one's own? Or do you need a teacher to monitor or check if you're doing it? Generally, it's okay to do it on your own. It's a little bit hard, usually, to do it on one's own. For most people, it's something that you cultivate and develop on retreat. And usually, then, it's really good to have guidance on retreat and support for it.

If a person has a strong foundation in mindfulness so they really know how to track themselves and monitor themselves and see all the different ways in which the mind operates, in terms of beliefs and desires and fears and aversions, hindrances, ego, and a lot of things, then they tend to work through some of the problems as they arise. Though sometimes with strong concentration also there can be some unusual experiences that occur. And so sometimes it can be reassuring to talk to a teacher. There can be strong energetic experiences that happen. There can be unusual perceptions that happen and so if you're not checking in with a teacher who knows about it sometimes it can be confusing. So I was going to talk a little bit about that realm of deeper absorption after we take a break.

So why don't we take—it's 3 o'clock now, we end at 3:30—can we do it in 10 minutes? Stretch and breath and also some of you might want Diana Clark, who usually is here for these, she made another one of these handouts. If you want to do kind of...