

RIGHT CONCENTRATION: coming back to the moment

Thank you each for your presence and the sincerity of your practice. In our introductions, we shared about what do we are needing in support of your practice, what we are looking for from this circle.

OVERVIEW FOR THE SEMESTER

The theme for the fall is: How do we move from from reactivity to equanimity?

When we come to a practice, we are often pushed by the stress caused by our thoughts, feelings, circumstances and perceptions. Practice helps us find a little space around our reactions and not be so pushed and pulled by the desire to avoid or have things go a certain way.

A space begins to develop and grow inside that can watch the ups and downs with equanimity. In time, we find ourselves more and more centered here. This inner space is sometimes called the witness or observer.

It's important that you know the experience of the observer. How do we experience this? Some clues:
It's something that can see what's happening but is not part of that. Not itself an object, it is a level of awareness. It feels like an inner spaciousness. There's more room inside in which to see our reactions to life without responding from them on autopilot.

We will do this by looking at the third leg of the Eightfold path: Samadhi. Samadhi is the experience of being fully present, which is rather mystical. It is being fully alive in the moment.

It is a state of suchness, of flowing and presence as the moment unfolds that both feels miraculous and fresh, but is also inherent to who we are.

The dharma tells us it has three building blocks:

- right concentration
- right mindfulness
- right effort

The word "right" is not the best transition. It does not mean the opposite of wrong. It means skillful, wise, aligning with healing and connection.

RIGHT CONCENTRATION: coming back to the moment

STARTING LINE

Where do we start? We start with concentration.

We start with a practice that is both simplicity and is also profound in its effects: the practice of coming back into the present moment.

What do we mean by this exactly?

- Thich Nat Hanh defines it as both staying in the moment and as experiencing things directly so as to show up and truly experience life, not our ideas, stories, or images of it.
- Concentration might be defined as the ability to stabilize the mind and hold it steady in the present moment.
- Developing ability: This means a stability that can resist following the push-pull of pleasant and unpleasant feelings that want something different, that wants out of the moment.
- Insight: As we develop concentration, we can then appreciate the deeply patterned reaction of being caught by discomfort and wanting.
- Insight: Concentration steadies us to remain in the present object arising, so we can abide with it deeply and see its true nature.
- Fruit: It gifts us to live our lives, and have the deep energies of the sense experiences continuing to enter the open heart.

What's it like when we are experiencing right concentration?

peace
subtle contentment
flow
timelessness
aimlessness (not driven to a goal)
safe
simplicity
holding
just breathing, sensing

How do we experience the lack of concentration?

panic

RIGHT CONCENTRATION: coming back to the moment

doubt
impulsive
disjointed
all over the place
overwhelmed
contracted

FOUNDATION: PRACTICE IS FOR HAPPINESS

This brings us to an important foundation: We cultivate coming back to the moment, of concentration, for our own benefit, to be more deeply alive. This is not a “I should be better” kind of beating up of ourselves. It feels good. We find we are happier.

In meditation, lack of concentration is the one of the single things that holds a practice back when it is undeveloped. When your practice is ‘all over the place’, insight cannot develop beyond a certain point.

In life, we can also see the lack of concentration and its costs: when we space out and then feel lost... miss something important... or not sure what the conversation is about... miss our turn... only taste the first bite of dessert... feel overwhelmed and distracted.

The two are linked. What takes us out of the moment in practice is exactly what takes us out of the moment in life.

FOUNDATION: PRACTICE IS FOR LIFE

This brings us to a second important principle: Our practices are not separate from our lives. We don’t practice to be good meditators, or just to find a moment of relief from life. What happens in practice IS what is happening all day. We take the time to see it more clearly.

The benefits in practice then begin to infiltrate the day: we react a bit less, feel like there’s more room inside to make wise choices and responses, appreciate things more.

The development of concentration is a foundational practice. It is a cultivation that underlies the possibility of insight.

This is beginning vipassana practice, and the strength of it feeds everything that builds upon it. This is why its common to start a period of meditation with grounding in the breath or the body.

It’s worth spend some dedicated time working on concentration practice, like you might do at the beginning of a retreat..

RIGHT CONCENTRATION: coming back to the moment

If mindfulness can be compared to a light that goes on and illuminates one's surroundings, then concentration is akin to the light switch that turns it on.

How much concentration do we need? In practice, we concentrate the mind so that the mind becomes stable enough to be able to stay with the flow of objects arising. If you were trying to wipe the dirt off an object and see the surface clearly, you would need to hold it in place in order to do that. Concentration is that holding.

There are two ways we will look at developing it: directly and indirectly. We strengthen it directly with practice, like developing a muscle in the body. We strengthen it indirectly by looking at the forces that distract us and take us out of the present.

This is not unlike something that was popular years ago called “drawing on the right side of the brain”. The idea was that you can define something by drawing everything around it that is NOT it, as well as drawing it directly.

WORKING WITH IT

We don't realize how much we move away from the now until we begin practice. Quickly we see a big obstacle that has been there all along, but under the radar.

It hits us between the eyes. Wow. No wonder time seems to fly. We are so rarely here, seems like we don't have enough time, we drive home not seeing the glory of the early fall because we are thinking about work or planning. We miss the beauty pouring in through the sense doors because we are caught up in some commentary in our minds.

Here's the critical question: Why is it we are always moving away? What keeps pulling us out of the moment? Must be a terribly strong force.

You may find silence in your mind when this question is first asked. Or struggle to find a coherent answer. I don't know... might be the most accurate answer.

This force has been coming from the unconscious, which is why it seems out of control and coming from nowhere. How often we feel sideswiped by some sudden emotion or reaction!

RIGHT CONCENTRATION: coming back to the moment

We are only conscious of a tiny percentage of what goes on in the mind and nervous system. This is not the enemy. The mind prioritizes what it thinks is most vital for survival. If we were aware of everything, it would take an hour to get our shoes tied in the morning.

But we don't realize all this is happening..... until we come to a moment to moment practice of this kind. Insight is opening what's been behind the curtain and seeing it.

An analogy to how much unconscious forces are in charge of our lives is an iceberg.

Only 10% is above the water line, where it can be seen. the danger (ask anyone from the Titanic), is that 90% is underwater, and much vaster than the above water part, and can hit you while the part you can see seems still to be far away.

By becoming aware of this escaping from the moment tendency, we move it above the waterline of the iceberg, so to speak, where we can begin to see and explore it.

So the practice, and the development of the observer: as we notice how often we stray from the moment, and come back, we start to explore and see this force. We make it conscious. The benefit of this is freedom.

Find this force, see it clearly, and you are pretty much on third base. That's our aim.

HOMEWORK

1) Practice: Coming back to the moment.

Start with the breath. Expand to the body: what you are sensing, hearing, smelling, tasting. Notice the felt sense of the heart center. Now open to processes of mind: thinking, planning, that inner voice talking. Notice which of these things you can both sense and stay in the moment with, and which ones take you out of your current direct experience.

When you notice you have shifted out of the moment, come back. Take a breath, ride the breath's actual experience back to the moment. This is the

RIGHT CONCENTRATION: coming back to the moment

flexible concentration of insight practice, not fixed on one thing and excluding everything else, but noticing in turn each focus of attention.

Be curious about what comes up. Notice the parts of you that don't want to be present. Don't fight or try to push them away. Notice them with curiosity and kindness. The point is not so much being perfect in your concentration as coming back and seeing more deeply what forces want to move away from the moment.

You'll start to see the forces of aversion: fear, avoidance, and so on. It's simple, but not easy. Your reactive tendencies are also going to sit with you.

Important attitudes to bring to this work:

2) **Do this with kindness.** Not being in the moment is not a failing, a weakness of character or sincerity. It's that you cannot avoid hitting something you cannot see, like the boat and the iceberg.

2) **This will take some courage.** It's hard to face the places where we feel broken and inadequate. Give yourself a pat on the back for even trying.

3) **Do this with curiosity.** What is this about? Befriend it, coax it out of its hiding place. As if you were studying a rare bird. What are its habits? What does it feed on?

4) **Do this with gratitude.** It is this hidden force, which involves fear, aversion, shame, and so on, that has been making you jump at its whims, and is at the bottom of suffering. Seeing it is an opportunity to find freedom from it. Like a paper dragon, when you actually see it, you begin to realize that what you are is stronger than any denying force.

As you do this, it becomes clear that suffering, the small self is nothing other than the movement away from experience.

Last semester, we did a Big Mind work that is sometimes called "Kissing the Toad". It is closing the distance between awareness and our experience. When this moving away process ends, we find the end of conflict and suffering.

Reading: Read p. 105-112 in the TNH book on Right Concentration for another viewpoint. Discuss next class.