

Introduction to the Gradual Training. Bhante Jagara.

So, the first thing that I want to say is that I am very happy to be here, and I think you will also appreciate, you are already appreciating - I think that some of you have been sitting here for quite a while, so I think it's a very unique place, and also a very unique time in our life, just to be quiet with the nature, and not too much instruction, and just enjoying this time, and also to see how we can develop our understanding, how we can develop the meditation, all this has to do with the possibility to listen, and then to be with ourselves.

So we have methods, we have techniques, but the main deal is to come back and to see for ourselves what is talked about and also to what extent it is making sense to us. Also what we are thinking, what we are reflecting, to which extent it is practical, so all of these things, all of us we are doing that.

So I don't know to which extent you remember what was the description of this retreat. The title that we had written there was shifting gears.

Shifting gears, how and when to change meditation methods. Different methods can require different modes of paying attention. This course will show the proper place for these modes within a single structured system, namely, the Buddha's gradual training, which is in fact the most over-arching framework he gave for meditation practice. The talks will point out that the gradual training is actually a naturally occurring process in those who progress. It will detail why, in this stressful, high velocity world, the steps of this system need to be made explicit.

Yogis will learn to identify and train themselves in each step's particular mode of being mindful.

So, I think is pretty clear that what we are trying to convey is that we have steps of meditation, steps of mindfulness and then we need to be very clear at which level, or which type of meditation should I be practicing.

So this introduction, this structure that we are proposing now, actually came from a long discussion that I had with one of my friends. He has been a monk for more than four decades. I first met him in Sri Lanka, his name is U Vanasara (sp?), he doesn't want to be a teacher, but he is very good friend, and from time to time we meet each other and we just spend time discussing about the Dhamma. So since I was to be involved into teaching in the West, then we tried to figure out not something new, but how to present something more adapted to this world.

Like the way, often, or sometimes that meditation is introduced is just with this crash course of intensive practice. So, it is so intensive that there is sometimes a gap with the worldly life, with the life in the world and then the quality that we get in a retreat. So there is a gap with the normal life and then the retreat atmosphere. So which type of meditation we can put up. Or how in the Buddhist teaching, such a gap can be filled.

Because of course if we look at the history, and also the development of the world, we see that societies have been changing very fast. And if we compare with the way it was taught, this is coming from India, with the way it was taught nearly two millennia ago, in this society, and now how we are practicing, it could almost be impossible to adapt it. But the point is that we can use what we have from these teachings, and then to see, ok, which terms, or which explanations could actually be practical, and could actually be making sense in our situation. And also the gradual training is mostly about monastics. So we are very glad to have monastics within our retreat. But actually it is for all of us.

Like also, after we came to this type of scheme, like with the discussions I had with my friend, then recently I read a book on psychology, and then the study was in relation to the difficulties that normal people will have when they learn the Buddhist meditation, or after they have come into the retreat. So here I have a few points that may be relevant. But actually these points are going to be handled in our presentation.

So of course he makes the difference with the East and the West. So the culture there was not so much of a gap. So if you live in Asia you see that religion was part of daily life, whereas here, there is a little bit more of a difference of values. Of course the difference of daily life and the retreat, this is what he is pointing out. How to adjust these things, because very often there is a kind of chasm and this is not very pleasant. So the questions that he was having as a meditation practitioner was shall we focus on developing on concentration. So what type of focus, what type of orientation shall we do? Like only concentration or shall we just develop the concentration?

Also which object of mindfulness to attend. We have all types of objects for the meditation. So which types of objects shall we attend and when? So this was one of his questions. And another question for him was how and when to practice the four Brahmavihara. That means the practice of loving kindness, or compassion of sympathetic joy and equanimity. So when shall we practice these four sublime types of meditation.

Also one of his points here in relation to retreats in general is that doubts, they are not dealt with adequately. So if you have doubts, then we can discuss, and it is very important that if you don't understand what is being said, or what you are doing in your practice, that doubts should be clarified. And Shaila and I will do our best to give any kind of clarification.

Also one of the reproaches that he was giving, was that the teaching that he encountered was not systematic. That is what he came upon was just piecemeal type of information. You get one information and then you get another type of practice, so it's not so systematic. So here we are using a system, and that system has been preserved and also structured for a long long time.

So, the gradual training, it can be a monastic thing, but also it doesn't matter, the gradual training frame, the frame, is used simply as a structure, as a system, out of it can be extracted whatever value, evaluation, principle, model that one will like. It can also be related to any type of being in this world. The monastic set up is just there for a reference. So to get some ideas of how to practice. Or more adequately when to practice what. We can also glimpse at history and see how such a traditional structure came to be constructed and relied on as a model for more than 2000 years.

So you can question, you can dismiss, and then also you can improve.

So, how to introduce this topic? My friend and I came to that conclusion, OK now the gradual training will be a good structure. So he told me, well at the beginning. Just tell them why they should practice the gradual training. So here my friend has written a few reasons why you should, or why we should practice the gradual training.

I will also explain a few points of my opinion to say why we should practice the gradual training, and also for yourself, you can try to figure out why, why this gradual training.

So that's why to have this task clearly understood will be very useful, because we can always go back to step one. And I must mention also, that one of the difficulties is actually that. And I found to be in that same problem and also I found so many people who came into the same difficulty. That means you go into intensive practice, and especially those who are encouraging very deep aspects of concentration and then you develop very strong concentration and then you go back to your home and you start to live in the city and then you start to walk around, or to talk to people and then you are completely lost.

is possible and then you don't have an anchor that tells you, it's not a problem at all, it just means that you shift gears. And shifting gears actually refers to a vehicle. So when we are on a very rough road we just go with the first speed, when the road is a little bit more comfortable, second gear. And then when we are on the highway we go on the fourth gear and then it's not a problem. But if you know only to use your car or vehicle with the fourth gear, then there will be a problem. So it's the same thing with intensive practice. Not only we need to use the full potential of our mind, or our human qualities, but also we need to know what to do, when, how to adjust, and then all the time the practice is going to be right.

So that's why we are starting from the first phase of guarding the senses. So you have to be very patient, and also you need to accept the fact that now you are here, and what does it mean to guard the senses. It can be very interesting, it can be very interesting.

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So if you have your meditation subject, for example, then you don't distract yourself with things that are just distracting, like magazines that are talking about this and about that, but things that are a big distraction in themselves.

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It is not a restraint of your activities, the sense restraint that we are dealing with is not in regard about the specific activities. But how to protect the mind when it is encountering sounds, or when it is encountering sense objects. So you are just aware of the quality of the mind when there is a sense impact.

So you have two types of restraint. That means one restraint it is like you go with the horse, the blinders, the horses are going like that so they are just keeping their mind on their track. So you have a type of restraint that is like this, you have your meditation subject and then you just go like that.

It can be good, it can be useful, but also we have to learn how to control the mind, how to govern the sense faculties when this is not there. So when the blinders are not there, that means that we cannot control the situation, really, where we are. So we are bombarded with the senses, the sound and then sight and then the touch and then the smell. And so all of these things are coming to us and then we cannot escape from that.

But what we can escape is the fact that they enter your mind and then you get lost into lust or hatred or delusion.

A simile to that would be like a goal keeper. You know some of the games like soccer or hockey, and so you have a goaler on both sides, and then the role of the goaler is just to be there and his job is to stop the ball or the puck from getting into the goal. So all the time he is just stopping the balls. And so with the six senses we are just there and we are just aware of the impact, but we don't allow unskilful mental states to proliferate inside ourself.

So we have to be very aware, just in general, not too specific. Just general awareness together with the sense contact, choicelessly, you don't chose to be together only with the eye, or only with the form, or only with the sound but just a general type of choiceless awareness.

But sometimes, also, you can do the practice with specific senses. So now you are looking. You are looking at something, or you are cleaning something, what is happening in the mind? How do you allow skilful or unskilful states of mind when you are looking at something or when you are listening to something.

For example, you are sitting here, and then you can just be aware of the sounds. So there is a sound, and you don't go too close to the object, but you are aware of the impact that sound has on your mind. And then you don't allow that impact to go further into unskilful states of mind.

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Like the idea is that we get inspiration from books, we get inspiration from listening to Dhamma, we get inspiration also from discussing the Dhamma. So this is very useful, this is very useful.

So, it's up to you. There is a library there. We all came here by our own choice, so for the schedule then it's also very free. You can come to meditate here, you can meditate in your room, if you find that you don't have enough of information and you like to read something to get more detail or different ideas, then it's really up to you.

But I would suggest that if you're reading something, try not to use the reading just for entertainment. Often we just pick a book because we are bored, and we think we can learn more, and then we are just losing our time.

So, if you have to read, then just be careful of why you are doing it. And you can also be aware of the impact of what is being read to your practice. So if you find it helpful, then it can be done to a certain extent. Because here we are not in an academic type of thing, but definitely reading or listening to something can be useful. And also there is the possibility for those who are interested to listen to the Dhamma talks of various teachers, it's really up to you.

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Like wakefulness, I'll just give you a simile, wakefulness is like the watch man. So you have some places and then all the night they have to be guarded. So you have somebody who is going with the torch and his duty is 24 hours. So this is wakefulness.

So, of course you have to go to sleep, but the quality of the meditation will mean that that mindfulness will be carried all the time, so you a very wakeful.

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Q: Doing walking meditation and then I pulled the awareness back to the body, so it was almost like a sense of pulling it back in.

A: Yes, but what we tried to convey with the charts is that there is a distance, a difference of distance, with the object. That means we are not so close to the body, we are not so close to the senses, we are just relaxed. So we don't care so much, but we are very aware that the sense objects do not enter the mind through the sense doors.

So you don't need to say, no I don't want this and then I come back here and then I protect the body and then I am really close to the senses, this is not so important.

Q: What is the middle way?

A: The middle way is that you just back up and now you are aware, there is just a sense impact, and then I don't allow, so say you like chocolate or candies, and you see that, and you don't allow the greed and all kinds of fantasies to enter your mind when you are in contact with the various senses. That means that we have to be aware in general what is happening, on all the sense impacts, on all the sense stimuli, and also we have to be aware of the mind.

Not too close to the mind, but at least in general, to be able at least to differentiate when fantasies, and proliferation and all kinds of things will intrude into the mind and spoil the whole thing. So you are just guarding the goaler, you are just guarding the doors, and you don't allow unskillful mental states to get in. And then with the practice you see you just allow all types of thinking, because I allow these things to enter my mind.

Q: I guess what it is is that the eye is just so quick. Out of the corner of the eye you see something and it's like it's desirable and there's just a sense of even grabbing it.

A: Yes it is very quick, yes it is very quick. But now we don't need to go into all the details. Like now this is happening like this and then. No need to go into the details, no need to do too much analysis. We are just aware and then we are just careful so that the mind doesn't get polluted.

Q: But wouldn't you have some kind of anchor though? Otherwise you would just be here and there, here and there. . .

A: Like the anchors are the six senses, but you don't need to be really anchored in the body as such. It's just general. So you can have a general sense of the body with the five senses and then the mind also. But you don't need to be too close, or to come too much inside the body. You are just aware in general.

Because you have some meditations where you just pinpoint the object of mindfulness. Ok, so now the body, now I have to be here and then there, and then everything else will be a distraction. So already it is too specific, already you have become too close to the object. Whereas if we tell you just be aware of all of the senses in general then it is not a problem so much. You may not feel the force of looking very much in detail or very specific sense doors, it's just in general, and then you see the mind is not getting intruded.

Q: Well, how is that different from sati sampajanna?

A: Well, we will see tomorrow.

But also these steps, when you go to a step further, then the previous step is already included. So then we will see that with sati sampajanna, indriya samvara, guarding the senses will also be there. And then we will see like in the practice of tranquility meditation, clear mindfulness and clear comprehension will also be there, and then obviously guarding the senses will have to be mastered or very much acquainted and also with the practice of insight meditation.

So they all include each other when there is a progression. But the first steps don't need to include the further steps. So with guarding the senses is not yet within the field of concentration, is not yet within the field of samatha. But when you reach that, it will be included.

Q: With contact, vedanā arises, so there's no way I'm going to be able to ignore the vedanā. Is it OK just to stop right there and leave it at that?

A: Yes, yes exactly. But if you are looking very closely at contact and also how the feeling is arising out of the contact, already you are very close to the object.

So, of course, all of you are practitioners. So, I am talking about a practice for the beginners. So, try to make the difference with these steps. Try to make a difference in the sense that if you are practicing the vipassana, then you are very close, all the time you are with the contact, all the time you are right there at the sense door, but very close to the meeting of the sense object and then the sense base and then the consciousness, so the three are contact.

So being with the contact you are aware of the consciousness and also you are aware of the sense object and also you are aware of the sense base. And also with the contact you are aware of the feeling and also you are aware of the perceptions. So, what you are describing is too close observation of the phenomena.

So, if you are a good meditator, if you have practiced for a long time, then it's not a problem. As long as you know that now you may be so precise, you may be so sensitive to be at that level, already, but still your duty is just to be aware of the quality of the mind.

So you don't need to force. You don't need to say, ok, now I need to be aware of the contact and this is sensation and this is my perception and then this is akusala. No need to go too much into the detail. If you do it, fine. But the duty now is just to protect, to guard our mind.

Yes, just to back up.