PETER’S 2016 YEAR-END RETREAT

I have committed myself to two week self-retreats for the last several years. This year’s retreat began December 18 and ended January 1. In our meditation community, it is customary (but not insisted upon) for those who have recently completed a significant retreat experience to have the opportunity to process it with those at the regular Wednesday night sangha meetings. The intention is to give folks a chance to talk about the experience with others who know what can happen on a retreat, as it is often the case that, upon returning from a retreat, those who are encountered really don’t understand or aren’t interested in the particulars. Much of what occurs on retreats is not well integrated right after a retreat, and the chance to “think out loud” about the experience helps to foster their ability to retain some of the insights and motivations more thoroughly. It is also possible that those who are at the meeting, or who listen to the recording online would also be inspired to go on a retreat themselves.

My retreat experience is not typical of most retreatants. I’ve been on literally dozens of retreats, lasting from a weekend to 3 months duration. I have, over the 33 years of practice, developed the ability to sit for long periods of time without being too uncomfortable. Most retreat sitting periods last 45 minutes to one hour, interspersed with periods of walking meditation lasting about the same amount of time. I have benefitted from that routine in the past, but for the last 10 years or so, I find it more productive to not practice formal walking meditation, and to sit for two hour intervals, alternating sitting on a cushion with sitting on a chair.

Here was the schedule for this retreat: I got up at 3:50 and start sitting at 4. I sat until 6, then ate breakfast, practicing mindful food prep, eating and cleaning up. I went for a mindful walk at a normal pace and began sitting again at 8, sitting on the cushion until 10, then a chair from 10 until Noon, at which time I ate lunch. I resumed sitting again at 1PM, until 3, in the chair from 3 to 5, took a break until 6, then sat alternating the cushion and chair in two hour increments until 10, this totaled 14 hours per day. There would be brief intervals between sits, to drink water and then pee; I have found that drinking a lot of water during the retreats reduces any stiffness or soreness considerably. This meant I slept for around 4 or 5 hours a night, usually sleeping lightly, with quite vivid dreams. Despite the lack of sleep, I didn’t feel tired during the day. I have established a routine for a number of retreats of leaving a cup of tea at my bedside when I go to bed; drinking that upon awakening allows me to become alert sooner during the first meditation period.

I have suffered from heartburn and acid reflux for a few years; about a week before the 2015 retreat, I decided the minimal discomfort of hunger was preferable to the burning pain after meals, particularly in bed at night. I didn’t eat anything after lunch; I discovered this works quite well and have altered my lifestyle accordingly-that is, I don’t eat a significant meal after lunch.

During the retreat I wore earplugs during the meditation periods to provide “seclusion from the senses” and promote the cultivation of samadhi (the ability to focus with stability on one object, in this case the sensation of breathing noticed at the nostrils), and passadhi, an inner quietness and calm presence of mind. I call this “samadhi/passadhi”, and it is the foundation for developing vipassana.

During the retreat, I read a book entitled “The Mind Illuminated: A Complete Meditation Guide” by Culadasa (Dr. John Yates), Matthew Immergut and Jeremy Graves. Culadasa is a retired neuroscientist and has been practicing mindfulness meditation for 40 years. The book is a useful explanation of the Anapanasati Sutta, (Mindfulness of Breathing Discourse) from a neurological and systems theory perspective. I’ve been very interested in this combination for many years, and am familiar with the Anapanasati Sutta and have a layman’s understanding of neuroscience. I found that reading this book in small segments during meals, and sometimes during a one hour break at 5 PM, to be supportive of my practice experience.

The book describes “ten stages and four milestones”:

Stage 1: Establishing a practice

Stage 2: Interrupted attention and overcoming mind-wandering

Stage 3: Extended attention and overcoming forgetting

*The goal of these stages is to develop and maintain continuous attention on breath awareness*

Stage 4: Continuous attention and overcoming gross distraction and strong dullness

Stage 5: Overcoming subtle dullness and increasing mindfulness

Stage 6: Subduing subtle distractions

*The goal of these stages is to attain sustained exclusive focus of attention*

Stage 7: Exclusive attention and unifying the mind

*The goal of this stage is to achieve an effortless and persistent stability of attention*

Stage 8: Mental pliancy and pacifying the senses

Stage 9: Mental and physical pliancy and calming the intensity of meditative joy

Stage 10: Tranquility and equanimity

*The goal of these stages is become adept at achieving a stable quality of attention that can be applied to understand at a very fundamental level the arising and passing away of momentary self-organizations,*

I don’t want to provide an in-depth analysis of these stages; what I will do is to talk about how I experienced some of them, and the implications they have for the growth of insight for me.

The authors describe a system of organization in the mind that I find useful. Buddhism talks of “six sense doors”: visual process, auditory process, smelling process, tasting process, the process of experiencing tactile sensations and the process of mental coordination and internal narrative. The authors add another “sense door”: the unconscious “binding moment” process, which facilitates the fluid blending of the diverse processes into conscious awareness.

They divide consciousness into two phenomena: attention and peripheral awareness. In the context of mindfulness of breathing meditation, attention is the primary focal point of practice; peripheral awareness is the other awarenesses that accompany that. For example, being primarily aware of breath sensations, there are environmental sounds, awareness of body positions, etc.

Gross distraction occurs when the focal attention keeps jumping from breath awareness to peripheral objects repeatedly, driven by craving. When the mind becomes primarily focused on the distraction rather than the breath sensations, clinging is operative. Maintaining a stable focus on the breath at this stage of practice isn’t clinging, because the neutral feeling associated with breath sensations doesn’t involve craving. This is what is commonly called “monkey mind”.

Strong dullness is when the tranquility of the mind is too active, out of sync with the alerting functions of the mind. This is associated with the parasympathetic system in the body, which is similarly activated when we are going to sleep. Conversely, when the alerting function of the sympathetic system is too active and out of sync with the tranquility function, the mind is agitated and restless. The optimal operating system involves a balanced dynamic interaction between the sympathetic and parasympathetic.

Skillful practice of mindfulness of breathing involves a more continual, “up close” focus of attention on the breath sensation, where it is most noticeable, typically around the rim of the nostrils, just inside the nostrils or on the upper lip. This strengthens the functions of vitakka (aiming attention at the sensations) and vicara (sustaining attention on the sensations), and this naturally “amplifies” or “magnifies” the sensations in awareness. Sometimes the focal point of the sensations will shift, and that’s okay; the goal is to increase the power of vitakka and vicara so that a stable, vivid, experience of the breath sensations will develop. This matures later in the practice as “dhamma vicaya”, the investigation of mental phenomena, and this skill is crucial in the practice of vipassana.

As the practice develops further, typically during the third or fourth day of a retreat, it is possible to maintain attention primarily on the breath sensations; other peripheral awareness phenomena are “off to the side” and minimally intrusive of exclusive attention on the breath sensations. During this last retreat, I was able to notice different levels of clarity and vividness in attending to the breath sensations. The authors of the book mentioned earlier describe “subtle dullness”, a quality of consciousness that is like what happens when the mirror in the bathroom fogs up—the vividness of breath sensations isn’t clear. Intentionally increasing curiosity about the sensations clears that up; this requires a relaxed but persistent diligence and also further develops dhamma vicaya. During this phase, it is possible to notice thoughts and urgencies/craving to be noticeable, but the quality of breath awareness is sufficient to keep them at the level of “subtle distraction”. One of the potential detours on the path of awakening when subtle dullness and subtle distraction aren’t handled skillfully is a pleasant, appealing calmness, a “pseudosamadhi”. It’s like being in a trance, and it can be hard to recognize that this is a hindrance to further development of vipassana practice. With practice of ongoing monitoring of the levels of focal attention and peripheral awareness, this bypass can be avoided, and the depth of mindfulness practice will increase.

As the practice deepens during retreat experience, it is useful to develop the ability to alternate between a sharp focal point of attention and a broader stable focal point that includes the breath as well as peripheral phenomena of awareness. This is analogous to the way a magnifying glass works, as illustrated here:

**BROAD FOCAL AREA**

**SHARP FOCAL POINT**

The arrows are energy from the sun, and the rays are coordinated to a stable focus whether at the sharp point of the broad cone of the energy. Concentrating the mind’s energy is analogous, that is, when the mind is trained to a stable, non-distracted flow of energy, one can either tighten the focus or broaden it; in either case, the attention doesn’t “wobble”.

This is an optimal tactic for practicing vipassana, as the opportunity is available to focus tightly on a phenomena emerging in awareness to apply dhamma vicaya, and there is also the “space” of a broader, stable focus to diminish vulnerability to craving and clinging, as the broader focus also provides calmness, which is why I call this level of stability samadhi/passadhi; samadhi is stable, unified focus and passadhi is tranquil non-reactivity.

With sufficient practice, the effort to maintain this process decreases so that it becomes somewhat automatic, in that there isn’t such a struggle with distractedness and the mind’s energy level is balanced, alert but calm. This releases a lot of energy that is normally bound up with reactivity to the five hindrances. This energy can manifest as rocking, swaying, tremors, chills, thrills up and down the spine, flashes of light (with eyes closed), and spontaneous jerking or twitching. This is the onset of what is called piti, an experience of exhilaration. Along with this can come bursts of creative insights and quite vivid experiences of color and sound in the environment, even when not actively meditating. This is just the body/mind’s release of the bound up energy, and the best tactic is to stay with the breath as the sharp focal point, and allow the piti phenomena be part of peripheral awareness.

Mental processes become very disciplined and respond to intentions more capably. This can advance the practice of vipassana, provided the focus remains on mindful investigation of the transitory arising and passing of mental phenomena.

One of the insights I experienced on this recent retreat is how relentlessly the mind experiences dukkha in life experience. During the retreat, I began to notice some subtle and not so subtle “protests” in the mind, from very minor discomforts or inconveniences to internally energetic upheavals. Because of the samadhi/passadhi process, I could investigate them as they emerged in awareness, sometimes as slight “disturbances in the force”, and sometimes as they escalated into more persistent experiences. I might feel frustrated or at least inconvenienced and notice that these events seemed to be how the mind “rides” on a current of dissatisfaction or insufficiency or wanting, and this energy finds justification in whatever is going on that seems plausible. Some of the objections in the mind’s process, when carefully investigated, are clearly understood as not sensible, but provided a vehicle of fabricated justification.

After the retreat ended, this ongoing awareness continues, although not as vivid in awareness or as frequently noted mindfully. It reveals to me the existential insecurity that it is the human condition, that due to the constant changes, internally and externally, of the world of my immediate experience is impermanent essentially, and what I experience individually is just my little slice of the bigger pie of dukkha we’re all immersed in—the First Noble Truth.

Even though the repeated confirmation of my dissatisfaction is here, I’m more mindful that it is a transient, impermanent phenomenon and I’m less prone to take it personally. I think it was Chogyam Trungpa who warned us “When you get serious about your spiritual growth, it’s one insult after another!” The tactic in this circumstance is to practice using the breath awareness and other embodied sensations to create an emotionally detached “witnessing of suffering” process to realize the process of awakening, noting and letting go of the protests and desires that come and go, hopefully avoiding identifying with them as self-defining.