

The Uses of Concentration

December 29, 2008

Ajaan Lee begins his breath meditation instructions by telling you to breathe in deeply, three times or seven times. Use the wind element in the body to clean things out a little bit. Then allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels just right. See where your sense of ease is right now: which parts of the body feel okay, not tense, not tight. This may involve a slight trick of perception. We tend to focus on the pains, the tight areas, the problems, and we miss the areas that are actually okay. It's like that book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, which teaches how to draw a face by focusing not on the eyes or the nose or the mouth, but on the space between the eyes and the mouth, or between the eyes and the nose. In other words, look at the shapes you ordinarily don't look at, and you find that the drawing comes out looking a lot more realistic.

It's the same with the breath. If you have a tendency to focus on the pains and the tensions, look instead at the space around them. And give that space some space. In other words, allow it to feel at ease all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. If you find yourself tensing up, say, at the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath, then don't breathe so long. Another common mistake in breath meditation is to try to clearly demarcate the distinction between the in-breath and the out-breath by adding a little bit of squeeze or tension to emphasize the line between the two. That line doesn't really help the breath at all.

So think of the in-breath and out-breath as blending into one another. The in-breath is the same element as the out-breath. Allow the sense of wellbeing to stay constant and continuous. Don't drop it or step on it. Don't squeeze it out as the breath goes out. Give it some space. And you'll find that as you're giving it some space, vagrant thoughts may come into the mind. If you were to focus on those thoughts, you'd have to squeeze off that sense of wellbeing. This means you've got to develop a new habit. Realize that the thoughts are not all that important, especially not now as you're meditating. You don't have to get involved with them. Let them go passing through.

As you do this, you're using the concentration for one of its four main purposes, which is to develop a sense of ease and wellbeing in the present moment. Of the four purposes, this is probably the lowest on the ladder, but it's nothing to sneeze at. We all need that sense of wellbeing, for otherwise we go through life hungry: hungry for sensual pleasures, hungry for approval, hungry to shore up a particular idea of ourselves. And as long as you're hungry, you can't really see things for what they are. Everything just becomes food or non-food, and you gobble the food right down; sometimes you gobble the non-food down as well. Whereas if you can allow the mind to enjoy a sense of wellbeing simply in the way you breathe, simply in the way you inhabit the body, you can look more objectively at what used to serve as food. You find that you don't need to feed on all the things you used to feed on. That gives you a measure of freedom right there. It allows you to start looking at the process of feeding more clearly.

At the same time, when you develop this sense of wellbeing, it's a lot easier to look at yourself, at your own motivations, your own intentions. We spend so much of our life suffering from the intentions of other people—or focusing on how much we suffer from the intentions of other people—that we neglect to look at our own intentions to see how much suffering they cause. A part of the mind resists this, a very strong part of the mind. We like to think that our intentions are good, that there's nothing wrong with our intentions. Yet a huge part of the practice requires seeing where our intentions are *not* skillful. The only way you're going to look at your own intentions with any degree of fairness or equanimity is by getting the mind to settle down and be still, to maintain a sense of wellbeing, just being right here.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I was struck early on by the sense that he didn't fully trust me. I thought I was a very trustworthy person, and felt a little offended. But in my dealings with him, it soon became obvious that I did have some intentions and ideas that were very strongly unskillful and I hadn't been willing to look at them. When there were problems, it always seemed that the problem was out there someplace: in him, in the situation, in the other people in the monastery. Only when I was able to gain some sense of wellbeing in the concentration could I turn around to look at myself and realize that the problem is here, in this need the mind feels to feed on certain ideas. It's like an animal. If it's not disturbed, it'll feed away with no problem. It'll seem perfectly tame, perfectly harmless. But if you start pulling its food away, it'll snap at you and snarl. Those are hard parts of the mind to look at. The best way to do that is to gain a sense of wellbeing that allows us to look at ourselves more objectively.

This is why practicing concentration for a sense of ease and wellbeing in the present moment is very important. A lot of people want to go straight to equanimity practice, just watching things arising and passing away. Yet you can watch things arise and pass away for the whole rest of your life, but if there's no sense of wellbeing in the practice, you're going to miss a lot of the arisings and the passings away. You're going to miss the really important ones because you guard them, you hold onto them without realizing what you're doing.

So this sense of ease and wellbeing is the first goalpost in our practice. It involves having a good mature attitude towards goals. We work toward the sense of wellbeing but at the same time we realize that the seeds for the wellbeing are already here. It's not that we have to sweat and strain and push them into being, or that our pushing and straining will cause them to burst out of nowhere. In fact, the pushing and straining will prevent them from developing. They're already here in a gentle, potential form. But we do have to be careful. We do have to watch, to be sensitive, and to show a great deal of restraint in respecting the little pockets in the mind, the pockets in the body, where there's already a sense of wellbeing that we tend to overlook.

To sense the potential for wellbeing that's already there, you have to look very carefully, with a lot of sensitivity. That's where the effort is directed: not in exerting pressure on anything, but in being as sensitive as you can to these pockets of wellbeing and allow them to grow.

Once you've got that sense of wellbeing, then the Buddha says you can use your concentration for three other purposes. One is to gain what he calls knowledge and vision. That's where you develop a sense of light in the body. And that light can become the basis for the different psychic powers, or what

they call the higher knowledges. These develop for some people and not for others. If they happen to you, you have to learn how to handle them in a mature way. If they don't happen, it doesn't matter, for they're not necessary for purifying the mind.

The next purpose of concentration is to develop mindfulness, which the Buddha defines as the ability to keep things in mind; and alertness, which he defines as being able to see thoughts as they arise, as they stay, as they pass away; perceptions as they arise, stay, pass away; feelings as they arise, stay and pass away. In other words, you use the state of concentration as a basis for watching events in the mind without getting involved in the story lines or thought worlds you could create out of them. You keep in mind your desire to see them as processes.

Now, notice: The Buddha doesn't say that this is insight. It's mindfulness and alertness, just simply tuning in to what's actually happening and keeping in mind how to handle it skillfully. The insight that gives rise to the end of the defilements is something else. It's the last use of concentration, as a foundation for the ending of the *asavas*, the mind's fermentations or effluents. That goes deeper. You don't simply watch things arise and pass away. You see *how* they arise and pass away in dependence on shaky conditions. You gain a larger and larger sense of how little value there is in their arising and their passing away. You come to realize how in the past you've created all sorts of dramas, all sorts of identities, all sorts of worlds out of these things. And they're nothing but very fleeting events. As the Buddha says, you learn how to see them as empty, ephemeral, not-self; you learn to see them as stress.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about seeing whatever arises, as stress arising. Whatever passes away, as stress passing away. That's not just being alert to things as they happen, but it's also gaining a sense of their value. They're just stress, that's all. The analogy in the Canon is of a blind person who has been given an oily stained rag. He's been told that it's a nice white piece of cloth. So he treasures it, folds it up neatly, carries it with him wherever he goes. Then after some time his relatives finally find a doctor who can cure him of his blindness. The first thing he looks at is the cloth, and he realizes he was misled. What he thought was a nice white piece of cloth is actually a soiled rag. All the issues and affairs worlds and identities, dreams and dramas we build in our lives are made out of oily rags. It's an insight that we don't like to see. But again, it's a lot easier to see this once the mind has had a sense of wellbeing through the practice of concentration so that it's not addicted to chewing on rags.

Or like that Far Side cartoon with cows feeding in a pasture: One of the cows suddenly jerks her head back, spits out her mouthful of grass, and says, in shock and surprise, "Wait a minute! This is grass! We've been eating grass!" That's what we've been eating all our lives: grass. This is an insight that goes deeper than just watching things arise and pass away. It's seeing the worthlessness of making them arise. For remember, we're not just passive observers of their arising. We're participants in fixing our food. As long as we see the food as desirable, we'll have the energy, the passion, to keep on producing. Only when we see that the food isn't worth it, when we lose our taste for it, will we lose our passion to produce it.

For as the Buddha says, once we see things arising and passing away, we have to look for their allure—why are we attracted to them?—and also for their

drawbacks: What cost do they entail? The purpose here is to see that their drawbacks are much greater than the allure. We like the dramas. We like the worlds. We have reasons for liking them. But they all fall apart. There's no real substance to them, nothing of any real value, and yet they cause a lot of stress. That insight goes deeper. You see all the suffering that comes from holding onto these things. That's when you truly understand, as the Buddha says, that such is the origination—say of form or feeling, any of the aggregates—and such is their passing away. This is what the aggregates are all about: nothing but grass.

This may sound depressing, but it's actually liberating. It's like the passage we chanted just now: "The world is swept away. It does not endure." And there are a lot of teachings in the Dhamma that are unpleasant-sounding but are actually important medicine, just as some of the most effective medicines are bitter. The Buddha teaches these things not to put a wet blanket on people's lives, on their pleasure, on their happiness, but to put the mind in a position where it really can look at these things square on, so it will find freedom on the other side. The Buddha's teachings never end with a negative. They go *through* the negative to something positive that lies beyond: for example, as mindfulness of death leads ultimately to the deathless.

So the truths we're learning are hard to learn. They're not just about things outside, but also about what's going on in our minds. There's something not quite right about the way we feed, the way we feel we need to feed. The problem isn't with things out there. It's with our intentions, our reasons for feeding. We have to learn how to become skeptical of our own intentions. And the only way to manage that without feeling disoriented, depressed, or discouraged, is to have the sense of wellbeing that comes from concentration, so that you let go not out of discouragement or of sour grapes. You let go because you've found a better alternative.

Each time you learn how to let go in the right way, things get better and better inside, because the whole point of all these teachings is to find ultimate freedom inside. And although the path leading there involves some harsh lessons in looking at our own ignorance, our own craving and clinging, our own unskillful intentions, it also involves developing skillful intentions: realizing that we do have the potential for skillfulness as well, and learning to use that potential wisely, developing a sense of ease and wellbeing that enables us to do this work in a more balanced and productive way.