

Three Stages in the Practice

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There are two sides to the practice: the side of letting go and the side of developing. We hear a lot about the letting go and there are many things we do have to let go of. As you're sitting here focusing on the breath, lots of other things will come into the mind and you just have to say no, no, no, no, no. Try to have the discernment that the Buddha compares to a well-plastered fortress wall. The enemy tries to climb up the wall but can't because the plaster's so smooth. You don't want to leave any footholds or handholds for anything to come into the mind right now—which means that as soon as you see the mind latching onto something aside from the breath, you want to cut it off.

The Buddha also compares discernment to a knife. As soon as you see that something's catching a foothold, you try to cut it right through the toes. If you can let it go that quickly without much more ado, then fine. At other times, though, you actually have to look into it. Why is the mind attracted to that kind of thinking? What pleasure does it get out of it? What gratification? Then look at the drawbacks. As the Buddha said, if you were to sit there and think about that kind of thinking for a long period of time, where would it lead the mind? To a place you want to go or to someplace you'd rather not go?

Remember, your thoughts are not just little bubbles that appear, go pop above your head, and then disappear without trace. They lead to habits; they lead to actions; they have their consequences. That's one thing to contemplate: What are the consequences of this kind of thinking? Where is it going to lead? Sometimes a little tiny thought plants a little seed in the mind and then the seed begins to sprout and send out roots. Even though the mind may seem to have a nice well-plastered wall, the seed will find a crack, like those banyan seeds that find a crack, send out roots, and can take down buildings. Those little tiny seeds can destroy whatever skillful qualities you're trying to develop. So the ability to let go, to abandon, to cut away, is an important part of the meditation.

On the other side, there's the need for *establishing*, of giving rise to skillful qualities in the mind. In terms of right effort, there are actually three levels to developing skillful qualities. One is just giving rise to them. Like focusing on the breath: That's the beginning of concentration. Focusing on the body in and of itself: That's the beginning of mindfulness, the beginning of concentration. If you find that you've been away from the breath, just come back and re-establish your mindfulness. That's the beginning, the establishing, the giving-rise-to.

Then from the next second on, it's a matter of *developing*: in other words, maintaining and, in the Buddha's words, bringing to culmination. You've done one breath, so now you do two, now three, now four. Just keep at it. Five, six, seven. See how many breaths you can stay with in one continuous long tracking shot. We're not here to make a movie with lots of quick cuts and jumping around. We want to see what world record we can set for long-track meditation. How long you can stay with the breath without getting distracted?

Obviously, the maintaining and the letting go are going to have to work together. As soon as you see that anything has the slightest inclination to exert a pull on the mind, you've got to drop it. One way of working against that pull is to try to make the breath as interesting as possible. Notice when you breathe in: Where do you feel it? Where does the sensation of an in-breath start for you? It may start in a place that it doesn't start for somebody else. How do you know that your body needs an in-breath right now? How can you tell when you've been breathing out too long? As people get older they have a tendency—Ajaan Lee noticed it—to start breathing out too long. They're squeezing out their energy.

If you find that happening, try to shorten your out-breaths. Learn to become more and more sensitive to how you can read the needs of the body and compensate for any bad habits you may have picked up in the way you breathe.

The breath, when it's handled properly, is medicine. It can give you energy when you need energy; it can calm you down when you need calming down. It can help you deal with pain in different parts of the body, as when you learn to breathe around the pain or through the pain so you don't feel so threatened by the pain.

As you're doing this, your meditation becomes a matter of maintaining and developing together. The concentration deepens. It gets more firmly established and begins to show some of its rewards. There's a sense of ease. A sense of refreshment. Just the fact that you haven't been worrying about other things for five minutes is a good sign right there. That's a healthy thing for the mind. And often we overlook that.

That's what the Buddha calls the pleasure that comes from seclusion: simply that you're not going after unskillful thoughts; you keep the mind secluded from their influence. That brings a certain amount of ease to the mind.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about devas who are corrupted by play and corrupted in mind. They spend all their time gazing with lust and envy at one another. It wears them out physically and mentally, and so they fall. But you don't have to go to the deva realm to experience the impact of lust and envy. Even here on the human level, a lot of unskillful thinking does just that: It wears you out. So the simple fact that you're not thinking about anything sensual, not paying attention to anything sensual: That allows for a level of pleasure and energy that you should learn how to appreciate.

Then try to maintain it. Allow it to deepen. Allow it to seep into the different parts of your body. This is where rapture begins to appear as the sense of fullness, more and more apparent in the different parts of the body that are not being run over by the moving breath energy. They're allowed to maintain their fullness as you breathe in, as you breathe out.

This is what the Buddha calls the developing of the establishing of mindfulness. There are actually three stages as you establish mindfulness. One is just that: getting it established, giving yourself a frame of reference. And then, as the Buddha says, you develop it by learning how to understand the principle of cause and effect, how things are originated and how they pass away.

Notice, he says "origination" here. He doesn't say just "arising." The word is *samudaya*, origination. You're trying to see how causes act to originate effects. The only way you can know the connection of a cause to an effect is by experimenting. Try different ways of breathing, see how you can give rise to a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure, how you can get rid of any sense of strain or discomfort. As you do that, your concentration gets more and more established; your mindfulness gets more and more established. These two qualities go together.

Sometimes you hear that mindfulness and concentration are two totally antithetical qualities: that mindfulness is a broad, open, acceptance of things, whereas concentration is a narrow focus, exclusive of all else. If that were the case, you couldn't practice mindfulness and concentration together. But that's not how the Buddha described mindfulness and concentration. The two qualities go together. Mindfulness gets fully purified only in the fourth jhana. And the establishings of mindfulness are the themes of concentration. So they're meant to go together. They're both meant to be settled and broad. All of the analogies the Buddha uses for concentration—water being kneaded through a ball of dough; a cool fount of water welling up into a lake, filling the lake with cool water; lotuses growing in water, saturated with water from their roots to their tips; a person sitting with a white cloth covering his entire body—all of these analogies indicate a large, expansive state of mind. It fills the body but it's settled and secure.

That kind of concentration, in fact, tends to be more firm than the concentration that's focused on a single point because if you're on a single point, then as soon as you move even slightly from that point, your concentration's gone. But if the theme of your concentration is this full-body awareness, then things can come and go within that range of awareness and they don't knock you off your foundation.

So right now we're in the developing stage. In terms of mindfulness, we're learning the principle of cause and effect: how one thing gives rise to something else and how, when the cause passes away, the effect passes away as well. In terms of concentration, we're learning mastery over the concentration, deepening it as we go through more and more refined states of concentration—when the pleasure's not just the pleasure of not thinking about unskillful things or being secluded from them, but actually the pleasure of being more and more focused, confident, and assured about what we're doing. The mind gains greater focus, steadier focus. And so on through the different levels of concentration.

But in dealing with skillful qualities, it's not just a matter of giving rise to them and then maintaining and developing them. There comes a point where they're fully developed and you have to let them go as well. In terms of the practice of mindfulness, there's the point where you can simply take note of the fact you've got the body here, you've got feelings here, or whatever your frame of reference is at that point. And that's it. You're not doing anything else at that stage because you've developed everything to its culmination.

In terms of concentration, the Buddha describes this as fully mastering concentration the same way an archer would master archery. You can fire rapid shots in quick succession, pierce great masses, and shoot great distances. In the same way, you learn how to develop your concentration and how to settle into it, gain the pleasure and the sense of nourishment it can provide. You learn how to develop it in all situations so that it's not just a matter of sitting here with your eyes closed. You can have a sense of being centered as you walk, as you talk with other people, as you deal with other chores throughout the day.

Ultimately, you learn how to develop dispassion for your concentration by seeing that it, too, is made out of the aggregates, and those aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. There are subtle vacillations in the pleasure, subtle vacillations in the sense of clarity of your concentration, and you realize that those variations show the element of inconstancy and stress. Then you ask yourself: Is this what you really want in life—a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing that's still subject to conditions? No matter how nourishing it may be, it's still not the ultimate.

At that point you turn the mind to how good it would be to find a happiness that's deathless. And then you stay right there. Just aware of what's there. This is the third stage of the practice: *non-fashioning*. You're no longer developing anything and your only task at that point is, with whatever comes up, just let it go, let it go. Even the concentration and the activities of mindfulness get let go of as well.

There was a deva who once asked the Buddha, "How did you get across the river?" And the Buddha replied, "By neither pushing forward nor by staying in place." Paradox. There's no intention to stay where you are, and no intention to move to anything anywhere else. A third alternative appears. That's the final level in how you deal with skillful qualities. You'll find this out as you get there. But until you get there, the Buddha allows you to leave it as a paradox—because for the most part we're in much too great a hurry to get there without having done the work.

The work is in the maintaining and the developing. Whatever gets in the way, you let it go, but the skillful qualities are things you want to deepen and develop until you come to the point where you don't have to work at them anymore. You've completed the duty with that particular quality, you've developed it as far as it can go.

It's only then that the really cool stuff comes. Which is not to say that there's not some fairly cool stuff along the way. Having a sense of refreshment that you can tap into whenever you need it: That's not to be sneezed at. But it is something you have to work at and develop. It's not just a matter of watching things come and watching things go: "That's okay, there goes concentration, I'm not attached to it." We haven't given it any opportunity to show its potential. The Buddha *wants* you to get attached to it, to devote yourself to developing it. How else are you going to get free? If you're not attached to concentration, all the little suckers of the mind, like the suckers on an octopus's legs, will stretch out and hold onto all kinds of other things. Concentration is what allows you to develop a foundation, a safe place to attach your suckers and from which you can look at all your other attachments and cut them loose, cut them loose.

The pleasures that you used to get out of sensuality: You begin to see their drawbacks, and the realization of the drawbacks is not threatening or disorienting because you've got a better place to keep the mind. As Ajaan Lee once said, you can't make the mind zero until you've made it one. You've got to make it one in the concentration: firmly established in mindfulness, very clear about what's going on, not shaken by anything that arises or passes away—so that when things do arise and pass away, you can see right through them. You've developed that layer of plaster on the wall so that nothing can get a toehold anymore.

The whole point of this is to get you really attached to one thing and then, when you let go of that final attachment, there's no other place the mind can latch onto. The Buddha is intentionally trying to get you cornered here in concentration, so that when you finally do let go of that, the mind's not going to fall back to its old ways. The corner's going to open up into freedom.

So the grunt work of meditation, just letting go of distractions and bringing the mind back and trying to stick with it: This is important work we're doing here. It's good to know that ultimately there will come a point where you don't have to keep on working—but you also have to realize that you're not going to get there without doing the grunt work.

When they talk about the path and the goal being the same, the most fruitful way of understanding that is to realize that you're not sitting here in a car going down the path and looking ahead to see when the goal's going to show up. You'll see the goal by looking carefully at the path you're following, where you are right now, each step along the way. So pay all your attention right here, to what you have to be doing right here. That's where all the important and valuable things will appear.