

Staying, Moving, & Neither

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If you were to boil all the issues of concentration practice down to the most basic one, they'd come down to the question of when to stay in place and when to move. The next level up, when you're going to stay in place, is how do you do it? How do you get the mind to settle in? And when you move, how do you move in a way that doesn't obscure things? In other words, there are times when you simply want to stay with one object and get everything to settle down around that object, and other times when you want to question, look into something, allow some thoughts to come into the mind and see where they go, so that you can understand the processes of the mind.

The same principle applies to the body. When you're sitting in meditation, there are times when pain comes up. How do you know when it's time to stay with the pain and when it's time to move? Part of the answer lies in learning how to use the breath. When you're working with the breath here, it's like doing bodywork. There are basically two kinds of bodywork. The more aggressive style tries to straighten you out right now. It pulls you here, bends you there, forces the body into a better alignment. The other style is more indirect: just placing the body in a particular position where it will naturally release and relax into alignment, rather than being forced there.

When you're working with the breath, the second approach is your primary focus. You want your posture to be straight. You want the organs of your body not to be scrunched up against one another. But if you try too hard to straighten things out, you can actually damage yourself. Remember, we're working with breath *energy* here. As Ajaan Fuang used to say again and again, this is the key to our skill here. An crucial part of that skill lies in learning to distinguish the breath energy from the other properties of the body—and from the feelings it creates—and to work primarily with the breath.

Now, the breath is subtle. Sometimes we feel that we suck it into little sacks in the body and then squeeze it back out. Well, that's air. That's not the breath. The breath is the energy flow, and it doesn't have any clear edges. There's no clearly demarcated area where this is the breath, this is not the breath. Breath energy actually suffuses everything in the body and it can flow unimpeded, even through the solid parts. The liquid property is what gets impeded by the solid parts. But the breath can go anywhere.

So when the alignment of the body doesn't seem quite right, think of this totally unbounded energy, unbounded in the sense that it has no spatial boundaries. It can go anywhere, do anything. Allow that sense of unboundedness to realign things, so that you're not pushing and pulling, because sometimes the pushing and pulling can do damage. Simply open and allow, and once you're there with that kind of energy, it's a lot easier for the mind to settle down in a way that doesn't require a lot of effort, a lot of exertion.

This is one of the problems with reading the texts too much. We get a lot of preconceived ideas of what the mind should be doing, what phases it should be going through. Then we try to squeeze it into those phases. You can squeeze it in for a while, but after a while you run out of energy. And if you think of anything that's been squeezed into a confining place, you realize it can get all distorted, which is not what you want. You work on the causes and let the effects take care of themselves.

In terms of the concentration, the causes are three. You direct your thoughts to the breath; you evaluate the breath; and you try to stay with the breath as your single preoccupation. That's all you have to worry about. There are times when you'll find that your conception of the breath gets confused, as in the tendency to confuse the breath energy with the liquid energy in the body. When liquid runs up against obstacles, it can't go through. It gets squeezed in. It builds up pressure. But the breath doesn't have to be squeezed in. Yet when we

start breathing as if it were, that creates problems.

So, remember: It's totally free to go anywhere at all, all the time. The neat boundaries we place around it are artificial. Learn to erase them and see what happens. As for the pleasure or rapture you want, that will happen on its own. You can squeeze it, you can force it, but squeezed and forced pleasure is not going to last very long. It's like squeezing a piece of fruit to make it ripe. You know that ripe fruits are supposed to be soft, so you squeeze your piece of fruit, squeeze it and squeeze it until it's soft, but that doesn't ripen it. You just get mush. The right way is to leave the fruit on the tree, water the soil, make sure there are no insects eating your fruit, and give the tree some fertilizer. In other words, you focus your attention on the roots, and the fruits take care of themselves. And for the time being, you don't want to go anywhere else.

This is where the principle of staying comes in. We're creating a state of becoming here, a state of mind. As the Buddha said, that requires a desire, because desire is the basic seed around which everything else grows. The seed has to be located in a certain place. So we're locating things in the breath, locating things here in the body, here in the present moment. Our desire is to stay here. In doing so, we learn a lot about the process of becoming: how the mind creates these worlds by creating a world that has reference to the present, that's solidly still, and that enables us to see the other worlds as they begin to form. This allows us to see that we have the choice to go with them or not.

All too often the choice is almost automatic. A thought comes up and you jump right in and ride off without looking to see who's driving, where they're planning to go. And so one of the important skills in the meditation is learning how not to move along with the thoughts. A thought will shoot out, and you don't have to get involved. You stay right here with the breath. When you can make that separation, you see that the thoughts shoot out for a little ways and then just fall. Like the old legend of the hilltribe chieftain in northern Thailand back in the seventh century: He had fallen in love with the queen who had come up from the central plains to the city of Lamphun, where she established her kingdom. He sent his emissaries to propose marriage, so she asked them, "What does your chieftain look like?" They were scrawny little hill tribesmen and they said, "Well, he looks just like us." She wasn't interested. But then the chieftain proposed through his emissaries that he would stand on his mountain, which was 30–40 miles away, and throw three spears. If any of the spears landed in the city, she would be his wife. If they didn't, he'd abandon his request. She figured that there was no way he was going to get the spears that far, so she agreed.

So he chanted his magical charms and threw his first spear, and it almost got into the city. This was when the queen became concerned. So she created a hat for him out of her clothing. She put her own charm on it and then sent it to him. And he thought, "Ah, this is a sign she has changed her mind." So he put the hat on. As he got ready to throw the next spear, he tried to do his magical chants, but they had no power. The spear just went up in the air and came right down. Didn't go anywhere at all.

Most of our thoughts are like that. They have magical power because we give them the power that allows them to go miles and miles. We jump right in and we keep them going. So one of the skills we're learning here is to deprive them of their magical power, to see that they're simply constructs. If you don't jump in with them, if you're not maintaining them, they don't go very far.

So the big issues in concentration are how to get the mind into position and how to keep it there, at the same time allowing it to see. This is important, because there are types of concentration where you just blank out. You're still, but you're not learning anything. The whole point of this is to put you in a position where the mind is still and clear and can see things within its depths, like fish in a pool of clear water. Whatever is going to move, you can see it, but you're not moving along with it, unless you see that it is a necessary thought, something you've really got to think through. "Okay," you say, "we're going to move with this, we're going to go with it. And when we've finished our work with it, we'll come back here."

So it's not that we shut the mind down totally and leave it there. As the Buddha said, when you gain full control over your thoughts, it means you can think when you want to think and not think when you don't. You've got the choice—instead of just willy-nilly riding along with whatever comes by. You're in a position

where you can see which things are worth thinking, and how a lot of things are not.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us learn how to question our assumptions, because our assumptions are what pull us into a lot of thoughts. This is also why he teaches so much about questioning. One of the main lessons he teaches is that some questions are simply not worth answering, because the dichotomies they set up are false, either because the issue itself is just a non-issue, or because there are more alternatives than just the two.

So when the Buddha talks about gaining insight through investigation, this is part of it: learning the process of questioning. When you set up a question, how are you predetermining the answer? When you can see that, you learn how to step outside of the questions. There is that famous exchange that Ajaan Chah had when a woman in England asked him—according to one version of the story—about what happens to people who go to nirvana. Do they still exist? Do they not exist? Nobody had ever been able to answer this question to her satisfaction. He replied that neither alternative applied and he gave the image of the candle to explain why. When the candle is burning, you can talk about the flame: what shape it has, what color it has. When it's not burning, you can't talk about its shape or color anymore. And it's the same with the person who has attained nirvana. You can't talk about whether they exist or not, because they're no longer burning. Then he asked her if that answer satisfied her, and she said, No. She wasn't satisfied with his answer. He said, "In that case, I'm not satisfied with your question." Which in one way is startling, because usually the person who asks the question is the one who has the power to say, "This answer satisfies me, this one doesn't." This is how the mind traps itself. It sets up questions, sets up dichotomies and makes them authoritative, and it ends up demanding answers that keep it trapped.

So one of the skills you want to develop as a meditator is how not to fall into that trap. You have to question the question, to learn which questions are worth riding with and which ones are not, because questions have a huge shaping influence on the rest of your thoughts. In other words, you get to decide which questions—and which motivations for setting up the question—are satisfactory, and which are not.

Ultimately, it turns out that this dichotomy between moving and staying still is a false dichotomy, too. There comes a point when the mind is fully trained in learning how to stay still and it realizes that the one issue remaining is its attachment to staying still. But you don't want to run off moving either. So you're trapped, as long as you see that those are the only alternatives. As long as you see things in terms of mind states with a location—like your state of becoming, centered around that particular desire, that particular intention—then all of your choices come down to whether you're going to stay with this intention or move to another one.

But when the mind is still enough and sharp enough, it comes to see that there is another alternative. This is why the Buddha said, in the dimension where suffering ends, there is no coming, there is no going, and no staying in place. When that deva asked him how he crossed the stream, he said he crossed by neither moving forward nor staying in place. He left it at that and didn't explain it because he wanted the deva to realize that there was more to the mind than what the deva had presupposed. He wanted to subdue her pride. But for us as we're meditating, we find that this is one of the serious questions hovering over the practice as we get closer and closer to gaining real insight: What are the alternatives aside from moving and staying in place?

Ajaan Lee once said we have a tendency to see the big issues as the big abstractions, all the technical vocabulary, as high-level Dhamma, whereas the simple business of learning how to keep the mind still is low-level Dhamma. But that, he said, is wrong. We've got it all backwards. Looking at the basics again and again and again: That's where the real high-level work gets done.

So learn how to get really good at staying in place, getting the mind unified, settled in, so that you can begin to understand the subtle differences between moving and staying in place—the various ways in which the mind moves, the various ways it can stay in place.

That will enable you ultimately to see what that other alternative is. That's a lot of the practice right there.