

Strengthening Concentration

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In English, when we talk about somebody being single-minded, the implication is that the person is very focused on one single purpose, or one single aim. It's a quality of the will. And that's a very relevant way of thinking about concentration. It's not only that you should have a single object on which you're focused at the moment, but your purpose should be single as well. You're going to stay right here and not let anything else distract you.

This means that concentration is a quality both of awareness and of the will. To strengthen it, you have to think about the qualities that strengthen your will. And it turns out that they're the same as the qualities that strengthen your mindfulness. The first quality is virtue: You observe the precepts as practice in making promises to yourself that you then try to keep. You promise yourself that you're not going to kill anything, not even a little insects. Not even termites. No stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. You set these principles up as promises and then try to keep to them.

You learn things about yourself in the process. One is that you learn the areas where you have difficulty. And two, you've got to learn how to negotiate with your conflicting intentions.

This is where the second quality comes in, which is having right view: realizing why this is important, why you want to be doing this.

All too often, we think of developing our willpower simply as kind of a brute force. But the force of willpower can last only for so long on its own. It needs help. The main way you can help it is through adjusting your understanding. For instance, with the precepts, you begin to see that life actually does get better, things get a lot easier, when you're holding to the precepts. Once you really perceive that you're making things easier for yourself, it changes the equation. The precepts are not such a battle. What you've done is that you've changed your perception, changed your understanding, in a way that enables you to strategize more effectively in overcoming resistance in the mind.

The same thing applies with concentration. The Buddha talks about times when you're trying to focus on the breath, and the mind says: "Oh, I'm not willing to settle down." He calls it having a fever in the body or a fever in the mind, an unwillingness to stay settled. He doesn't recommend just bulldozing through it. Instead, he says to switch over to something you find inspiring.

This is where an important adjunct to focusing on the breath, focusing on the body, is the set of standard recollections, because they help you get your views straightened out. And they help strengthen your motivation for why you're here.

Ajaan Lee talks about how important it is to develop a sense of *samvega* if you're going to get the mind really settled down. You can contemplate the parts of the body, and that's not necessarily just for the issue of lust. It's for whatever the form of your attachment to this physical lump here: pride, possessiveness, shame, whatever. If you really look into the body, what do you actually have there? All kinds of things you wouldn't want to associate with. If your stomach was sitting on a chair next to you at the dinner table, you wouldn't want to have a conversation. You'd be grossed out. Your lungs and all the other parts: They're not the kind of thing that you would like to socialize with, and yet so much of our life, so much of our energy is devoted to keeping the body healthy, keeping it comfortable—and those are just the reasonable things we do with the body. On top of that, there are other things. We get totally obsessed with its looks, totally obsessed with how we're going to keep it as young and attractive as possible.

When you can learn how to see the futility of the whole thing, you develop a sense of *samvega*, a sense of dismay. And it's very chastening. Sometimes that sense of being chastened is enough to bring the mind squarely into the present moment. You look at the various activities in life, and they begin to seem very futile. You begin to see the importance of getting the mind trained so that it doesn't have to depend on the body, doesn't have to depend on things outside for its happiness. You begin to see that the discovery of the

Dhamma, the discovery of something that really is deathless inside, is something of genuine worth. It's your only hope for any kind of genuine happiness.

Learn how to motivate yourself in this way, or in whatever way that works. After all, this is something that's really very individual. Sometimes you read the different ajaans talking about the kind of contemplation that brought their minds down to concentration, and it just seems to roll off your back. It's not that grabbing, not that compelling. You have to look into your own mind to see what is compelling in your case. How do you actually motivate yourself? Sometimes it's through contemplation of death. Sometimes it's when you think of something more positively inspiring, like the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha.

There are a whole host of other ways of developing strategies for motivating yourself. I've been reading recently about how famous writers motivated themselves to write. Anthony Trollope, for example, made a vow to himself that he would write x number of words every day. And he wouldn't leave his writing room until he had finished that amount. That meant, of course, that on some days he was writing garbage. But at least he was churning out a certain amount, and he got it so that, after a while, it wasn't garbage. Raymond Chandler had a different approach. He would give himself four hours every day to write. And if he wasn't writing, he wouldn't do anything else. He would just sit there doing nothing. And pretty soon the boredom would bring up something. He had found that if he allowed himself to read, or putter around during the four hours, then nothing would come. But if the choice was simply nothing or writing, pretty soon he was writing.

So different people have different techniques, different approaches for getting themselves going. And a large part of learning how to understand yourself, and how to deal with your defilements, lies in figuring out what approach works for you, what strategies get you more motivated to practice. You might try Trollope's approach, and just put in the hours on the cushion or the meditation track every day without demanding that they have to be good hours all the time. Or you can apply Chandler's approach and put yourself in an empty room with nothing else to do but meditate, to see if the boredom gets you back on the cushion. As the Buddha said, one of the measures of your wisdom and discernment is how you talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do but you know get bad results, and how you talk yourself into doing things you don't like to do but you know do give good results. That's one of the main measures of your wisdom.

We tend to think of wisdom as something that comes at the very end of the practice: those short, pointed statements that come one per page, with wide margins, in books about wisdom. But to really develop wisdom, you have to develop a pragmatic approach to how you're going to get things to work in the mind and how you're going to get yourself motivated. This is why so many of the Thai ajaans were people of few words, but their words were sharp and pointed. They had honed things down to what works. What ways of thinking work? What ways of motivating themselves work? You go right for the jugular immediately, then you get down to work. That's an important part of wisdom and discernment. And it's something we all have to develop: learning the nuts and bolts of how to psyche ourselves out, to see which way of thinking, which application of right view, is going to really hit the mind so that it's motivated to practice.

This is an extremely important part of the practice. We can learn about the steps and all the different techniques in dealing with the breath, getting the mind to settle down with the breath, making the breath comfortable—and that's one of the important strategies right there: how you conceive of the breath, thinking of the breath as energy throughout the body. That's one set of skills and strategies that help you to associate sitting in meditation with a sense of well-being, a sense of refreshment. And you have that to tap into when mind gets antsy and wants a quick fix of pleasure.

But there are lots of other issues that are going on in the mind as well, in terms of your motivation, of why you're here, why you're doing this. It's good to think about these issues, to be clear about them. Wisdom doesn't come from simply turning off the thinking in the mind and trying to observe, observe, observe, without any comment at all. That teaches you some lessons, but a lot of lessons never get learned that way. Insight practice is also a matter of exploration, experimentation, trying to figure things out. Why is it that greed,

aversion, and delusion can still have power over the mind even when you've learned so much about their drawbacks? What's still their gratification? What can you do to wean yourself off that? Can you teach yourself new ways of feeding?

This is up to your own ingenuity. But that's how you strengthen your concentration. You come to stillness of mind by learning how to think about how important stillness of mind is and how much you want it. Without that sense of motivation, the single-mindedness of your concentration doesn't stay single for long.

So if you find that your concentration is weak, first look carefully at the actual topic you're focused on: You can adjust the breath, work with the breath. If that's not working, then look at the two factors that strengthen your mindfulness and willpower. One, look at your precepts and ask yourself: What's wrong with your precepts? What can you do to stick with them more effectively? And then, two, look at your motivation: Why are you doing this? How do you deal with the different committee members in the mind that are pulling you away?

As you experiment with these different approaches, you'll find the ones that work, so that your single-mindedness really stays single. It really does develop power. Without the strength of the concentration, your discernment won't be strong enough to deal with the defilements. The two of them have to work together: Your discernment strengthens your concentration; your concentration strengthens your discernment. Upasika Kee's image is of washing your hands. Your left hand has to wash your right, and your right hand washes your left. That's how they both get clean.