

Delusion Concentration

November 19, 2010

When you meditate, there are two problems on two sides that you have to watch out for: pain and distraction on one side, and pleasure and stillness on the other. Now, you're going to meet with these things inevitably. What you have to watch out for, though, is how you approach them, how you deal with them.

If the pain and distraction get you irritated, you've lost the battle. You have to be very patient and very insistent. Each time the mind wanders away from the breath, you bring it right back. As for pains in different parts of the body, there may not be pains as you start out, but you know they're going to develop in the course of the hour, so you get ready for them. As soon as the breath gets comfortable, think of it spreading down the back, spreading down the legs, wherever the pains may tend to congregate. You open up the breath channels leading to those spots and leading away from them. Keep your main attention with the comfortable parts of the breath, the areas where the breath feels good.

This, of course, leads to the problem on the other side. When you're with the comfortable parts, you have to be very careful not to just wallow around in the pleasure. This is especially tempting after a tiring day. It's like coming home to a big feather bed. You just want to jump right in and get swallowed up into the feather bed.

You notice this especially in the forest monasteries in Thailand where they have long evening sittings that go on for a couple of hours. The primary thought in people's minds is: How can I get through these hours as pleasantly as possible? And the mind finds a little place—it's called delusion concentration—where there's a sense of ease, and the mind's not doing any work at all. It's just very, very still. You go to hide out there, but you don't really know where you are. You come out, and there's that little question: "Was I awake, or was I asleep, or what *was* that?" What happened was there was a sense of pleasure, and you dropped the breath and just went for the pleasure. You didn't want to do any work at all.

So the middle course here is to stick with the breath. Remember that the pleasure is created by the flow of the breath, the stillness of the mind, working together. And both of these conditions depend on the focus of your mind on the breath, alert and mindful. You don't want to drop your alertness; you don't want to drop your mindfulness, because that's what happens in delusion concentration. You're not very alert and you really forget what you're doing and so you slip into the pleasure.

So you always want to have that thought in the back of your mind: We're staying with the breath. And you're alert to both what the breath is doing and to what the mind is doing. As for the pleasure, it'll take care of the body on its own. Whatever rest or healing comes from this sense of ease and pleasure is not going to be increased by wallowing in it. Just let it spread, let it move through the body. It'll take care of things on its own. Your job is to stay as mindful and alert as possible, focused on the breath. It sounds like work, and it *is* a kind of work, but it's work in pleasure, work in stillness, an effort that you put into pleasure, an effort that you put into the stillness. It's good work.

So you keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, and then you evaluate how things are going. You drop the evaluation only when everything is really, really refined, and you can stay centered and still without losing your focus or your alertness. That's when you can simply become one with the breath. The breath, the pleasure, and your awareness all seem to become one entity. And as long as you can maintain your alertness and mindfulness while you do that, you're fine.

The problem is that people like to go right there without taking the mindfulness and alertness along. They just drift off. The image I think of is of a mosquito that's hit a little blood vessel in your skin. If you've ever watched a mosquito and allowed it to bite you and see what happens, you'll notice that it sticks his little nose in there, and it finds a little bit of blood, and it just sucks and sucks and sucks, and finally it gets so big that it looks like it's going to burst. It doesn't burst, but it's so blissed out that it's feet seem to lose touch with your skin. It's just hanging there by the nose. Sometimes you try to brush it away, and at that point it won't go—it's so blissed out from all that blood.

That's what happens in delusion concentration: You hit that nice little source of ease, you just stick yourself in it, and then you let go of everything else, including the mindfulness, including the alertness. It feels good, but you don't really gain anything from it. It is restful to some extent, but not nearly as energizing as if you were focused on the breath, staying mindful and alert.

Because we're not here just to bliss out. We're here to learn how to *use* the bliss. This is part of our path. And whenever pains come up, we want to learn how to use those, too. This is what's so radically different about the Buddha's teaching. Some people during his time were into self-torture. They had pain as their goal, they wanted to have as much pain as possible, the more pain the better, to burn away their defilements or cleanse away their defilements. That's what they thought. But then, of course, by far the vast majority of the people were headed in the other direction and just wanted to wallow in as much pleasure as possible—

like those little rats with implants in their brains. The scientists find the pleasure center in the rats' brains, they stick a wire in there and connect it to a little strip of metal on the outside of the skull. The rat can put the little metal strip up against a little bar and get a slight electric shock, which stimulates its pleasure center. And that's all the rats will do. They put the strip against the bar to get a steady stimulus to their pleasure center and just stay there. They'll stop eating; they'll stop doing everything else. They end up dying because they're so addicted to the pleasure.

That's the way most people are. If we could have our pleasure center stimulated, that would be it. That's all most people would want. And like the rats, we would die because of our pleasure—or at the very least, our goodness would die. The possibility of finding a well-being, a sense of true happiness that's deeper than that would die away.

What the Buddha wants us to do is to learn how to use whatever pains there are in the body as a way of developing mindfulness and alertness, and to use the pleasure that comes from a still mind as our food along the path, as our means for prying ourselves away from sensual pleasures, sensual desires—putting the mind in a position where it can look deeper inside to see where it's still holding on, where it's creating even the slightest bit of stress or dis-ease for itself.

So don't look at the pain as an enemy, and don't look at the pleasure as your true friend. You have to remember that you're going to use these things. They're tools, they're a means to an end. And you need to be careful how you use those tools. And even though it's work, this is good work, as you think about the breath, and evaluate it,

Ajaan Lee compares it to sifting flour. As you sift the flour, it gets finer and finer and finer, higher and higher in quality. In the same way, as you evaluate the breath with more and more sensitivity, the sense of ease and energy in the body gets more and more refined, more and more refined, more still. But at the same time, if you're on top of everything, the mind doesn't drift off. It stays alert. Even when the in-and-out breath stops and the sense of the shape of the body begins to disappear, you're right here. You're alert, and you know you're alert. The body seems like a mist, and you can focus in on the space between those little droplets of mist. And as long as you know what you're doing, you're fine.

But all this is a means to an end. And you can never let go of what keeps the concentration right, which is your mindfulness, your alertness, and the discernment that you bring as you evaluate things. Those are the things you have to hold on to all the way down through the path, that keep you from wandering off to either side.

So be very careful about what you let go of and what you hold onto, because it makes the difference between staying on the path or wandering off into the weeds and the jungle, wasting a lot of time.