There’s Work to Be Done

August 21, 2025

When the Buddha lists the factors for awakening, he lists calm and concentration as two separate things. They’re related, of course. When the mind has been calm, then it can get concentrated. The concentration of the two is the one that has the more power. It has focus, singleness of mind, everything gathers together right here. And that includes your inquisitive mind that wants to explore what’s going on right here. And Chandleri makes the point that in the first level of concentration you’ve got some discernment in the direct of thought and evaluation. As you try to figure out what kind of breathing feels good. And then you don’t just rest there. The feeling good, of course, can lead to calm. But then the calm, if it’s not accompanied by some power, begins to drift off into delusion concentration. Basically what happens is that you leave the breath as your focus and you focus on the pleasure. The pleasure is very vague. It’s kind of like being in a cloud. A nice soft cloud that’s very comfortable. It’s nice to rest. But there’s work that has to be done. Simply getting the mind calm doesn’t uproot your defilements. They just lie still for a while. This is where you need the concentration as well. And that means you have to stir yourself after the mind has been calm. You realize you’ve got work to do. And so you do work right here in the present moment. The ideal work is focusing on what’s going on in the body right now, what’s going on in the mind right now. Even when it’s still, there’s still little things happening. This is why it’s good to develop a really solid focus. Full body awareness. That’s what counteracts the tendency for the calm to just kind of close in on itself and hide away. Here you’re out exploring. As you breathe in, how do your arms feel? How do your fingers feel? How do the spaces between your fingers feel? About the torso. Where is your heart right now? How does that feel as you breathe in? How does it feel as you breathe out? What is it connected to in terms of the energy? Where is there pressure on different parts of the body? Which parts of the body are actually doing the breathing? Which muscles are engaged? Which ones are freeloaders? Am I giving some breath energy to the ones that are doing work? Or just rest them and force the freeloaders to take on some work? This is the lesson I learned when I had malaria. When you have malaria, the parasites are eating up your red blood cells, which means you’re not getting much oxygen. So the muscles that were doing the work of the breathing were getting very stiff, tight, tired, because they were shouldering all the burden. Sun Lee’s analysis of where the different places in the head you could focus on were useful. Think of the breath coming in right in the middle of the forehead. When you do that, there’s a sense in the body that different muscles are involved. The ones that were doing all the work got to have some rest, and other ones picked up the job. We don’t have to wait until you get malaria to understand this and work with it. Where are the muscles that seem tight through the breath? Those are the ones that are usually doing the work. How about thinking of the breath going right into them? They’re being nourished from all directions. In other words, stir yourself to do some expression. Because after all, how are you going to find out about the mind with this attitude that you have to explore? So you encourage this exploring attitude, first with the breath. You let the mind grow calm. As we’re feeding it energy, not as just a simple place for it to rest. It’s like hiring workers. You feed them because you know that the more energy they have, the more energy they have to do the work you need. But if they just sit there and eat and then sleep, that’s not what they’re here for. So in the same way, your meditation, remember, is a kamatana, which is probably for a place to work. You feed yourself to work well, and then you have the attitude that now’s the time to explore. Okay, I’m happy to explore. There are things to learn. You may think you’ve been through the body many, many times. It all seems to be the same every time. Well, it’s not. Didn’t happen. Organs change. I found in all my years of practicing, there are always new lessons to learn about what the breath can do. And of course, what the body can do that needs to be healed. And now you can use the breath to work with it. It requires constantly developing your ingenuity. So when there’s a blockage in some place, what do you do with it? Which ones do you breathe into? Which ones do you breathe around? Which ones do you ignore entirely? This is something you learn as you’re in this inquisitive attitude, this exploring attitude. Think about it. John Lee, of the various masters of the forest, he was the one who’s reputed to have the strongest concentration. He also had the most inquisitive mind. We don’t think of those as going together. We think an inquisitive person is thinking all the time. Whereas a person in concentration is very still. Most of the power of his inquisitive mind, he was able to master concentration. Because otherwise, concentration just becomes a hit-or-miss kind of thing. There are days when you can rest, and there are days when the mind doesn’t want to rest. What do you do on the days when it doesn’t want to rest? This is where you’re taking interest. And finding new places to focus, new ways of picturing the breath energy to yourself. That too is something that John Lee would do quite a lot. You read in Method Two, his ways of having the breath go down the spine, out the legs. But then you read in some of his later Dhamma talks, he talks about the breath that comes in in the soles of the feet, and goes up the legs, up the spine. So are those two breaths fighting each other? Not necessarily. It’s just one way of picturing it’s good for some conditions of the body, and other ways of picturing it is good for others. And you see the power of your mental pictures, your perceptions. You can think of it going up, it feels like it’s going up. You think of it going down, and it feels like it’s going down. Which is better for you right now? Develop your powers of judgment. Lumbudun makes the comment that once the mind gets still, you ask yourself questions like that. Compare things. Try this, try that. Okay, which is better? Then you try this, try that. What’s better there? The attitude you sometimes hear, which is that we shouldn’t be passing judgment on things. I don’t know where that comes from. The Buddha didn’t certainly teach that. The Forest of Johns didn’t teach that. Wisdom is entirely a matter of using your judgment. You do X, you get one result. You do Y, you get another result. The question is, which is better? And when you can see the difference and see which is better, that’s how your discernment develops. So be curious about what’s going on in your body right now. What’s going on in your toes? What’s going on in your feet? Your legs, your knees, your hips, up in the spine. How about the different muscles in your head? The muscles in your neck related to the muscles in your face. You’ve got a body sitting right here. Learn from it. When you learn from the body, then you develop the right attitude. Then you can apply that attitude to the mind. But if your attitude to the body is, “Let’s find a nice little quiet corner to lie down in, go to sleep.” Then we start thinking about the mind, but the mind wants to go to sleep too. Nothing develops that way. So rest the mind when it needs to be rested. But remember, the rest is for the sake of work. Think of the Buddha. Even after he gained awakening, he still had a little sleep. He still had a lot of work to do. And they talk about how he would lie down with a perception in mind that he was going to have to get up. Every time he laid down, except for one. When he finally laid down between the salt trees on his last night, he laid down and that was it. No perception of getting up. Because he completed all of his tasks. So until your tasks are all completed, remind yourself, every time the mind rests, it’s going to have to get up. Rest for the sake of getting up. And not for running away from the idea of getting up. And you’ll have the right attitude.

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