

Focus Right Here

September 12, 2011

Focus your attention right here. The mind will be creating other “heres” to carry you away from right here. But you don’t have to go with them. Ajaan Lee’s image is of a post at the edge of the sea. The sea rises, but the post doesn’t rise with the sea. The sea ebbs away, but the post doesn’t go out with it. It stays right there. Try to establish your attention as consistently as you can. Keep it still.

In Thailand, when they translate “concentration” into Thai, they translate it as being firmly intent. In other words, the mind is not simply still and quiet. There’s also a very strong intention to stay that way, to maintain this stillness.

And for the time being, put aside what you’ve read about concentration. Don’t let it get in the way of actually being right here. You’re here to focus on the breath, not on thoughts of jhana or absorption. In fact, even the words of this talk: Don’t let them get in the way of your focusing on the breath, watching the breath as it comes in, as it goes out, being intent to stay right here with the breath. The talk is here to encourage you. It’s not meant to distract you.

Of course, to stay right here you need motivation. You have to understand that this is a good thing to do. And there’s so much out there that will pull you away and tell you that it’s not. In the world outside they say that lots of other things are much more worthwhile and interesting in life. Even modern books on Dhamma say that you don’t want to get stuck on concentration, that you’d much rather go straight onto insight because that’s where the real action is.

In fact, it’s pretty perverse. In so many books on concentration, on page one they define it, on page two they tell you that it’s dangerous, before they even explain anything else about it. Which, of course, was not the Buddha’s approach. He was always encouraging people to get the mind concentrated. Jhana, right concentration, he said, was the heart of the path. When he told the monks to go meditate, he’d say: “Go do jhana.” This is the “doing” of the path.

And, as Ajaan Lee points out, it’s one of the more difficult parts of the path to do. It requires the most work and the most intention. This may be one of the reasons why people like to find some way around it. In Ajaan Lee’s image, the three main divisions of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—are like the posts for a bridge over a river. Virtue is the post on this side of the river, discernment is on the other side of the river, while the concentration post is right in the middle of the river, where the current is strongest, so it requires the most

work to get it in place. Be willing to give as much energy as you can, realizing that this is really what's going to make all the difference.

You can read as much as you'd like about discernment, inconstancy, stress, not-self, emptiness, whatever, but it's not really going to have a hold on the mind until the mind settles down firmly and can be still. However much the mind likes to read about those things, its feeding habits are still low. Ajaan Chah's image of Westerners is one of those comments that's right in your face. He said that Westerners are like vultures: They fly very high but they eat very low. We like to think about abstract concepts, but when we're looking for pleasure, where do we go? Straight for lust, all the gross sensual pleasures.

We've got to train the mind to raise its standard of taste. That's one of the functions of concentration: to give us a better standard of pleasure, a pleasure that comes not from sensuality but from form, i.e., the body as you feel it from within. This pleasure doesn't require that the world outside be a certain way. All it requires is that you pay attention to what you've already got here—which means that there's a lot less unskillful activity involved in accessing this pleasure and maintaining it. It doesn't require that you take anything from the world, and it doesn't obscure your vision in the same way that sensual pleasures do.

So being in concentration is actually a lot safer than not being in concentration. When you're not in concentration, you go back to your old fascination with sensuality. And it's because of sensuality that people kill and steal and lie and engage in all sorts of unskillful behavior. But nobody's ever killed over jhana, nobody's ever stolen anything. In fact, being in jhana makes you a lot less likely to kill and steal, because you've got something really, really good here that doesn't have to depend on anybody else.

So learn to cultivate this pleasure, this sense of well-being inside. Look after it. Care for it. It's so important that the Buddha, when he talked about having respect for the threefold training, stepped back again and said: Have respect for concentration. It's part of the threefold training, but it's the part that tends to get overlooked, so he emphasized it again. Realize that you've got something precious here. It may not seem like much in the beginning, but if you care for it, it grows.

And learn how not to be impatient. It's a matter of having the right balance: knowing how to encourage your concentration without pushing it so hard that you kill it. Think of the Buddha's image of the foolish, inexperienced cow. She's got grass and water in her meadow on the hillside, and she looks over to another hillside where she sees another meadow with grass and water, and she wonders: "What's the grass and water over there like?" So she heads down the hill to go up the other hill. But because she's foolish and inexperienced, she doesn't know how

to go up or down hills properly and she gets stuck down in the ravine. That way, she loses both meadows. So learn how to content yourself with what you've got and allow it to develop. Look after it, and it'll grow on its own. You've got grass here, you've got water here, you've got everything you need. If you tend to the spot wherever you're focused—you find it congenial, the breath feels good, the mind feels at home—tend to it and it'll grow.

And as you tend to it, you're going to learn a lot about the mind. It's not the case that you drop concentration to go to discernment. You learn about the mind, you gain discernment, by tending to your concentration, noticing its ups and downs. When it gets better, what did you just do when it got better? When it gets worse, what did you just do when it got worse? When it looks like it's going to lose it's a balance and fall over, how do you get it back into balance?

As you look after concentration this way, you learn a lot about form, i.e., the form of the body, the feelings that arise as you focus on the breath, the perceptions that either keep you with the breath or pull you away, the thought fabrications that, again, either help you investigate the breath or help you lose the breath, and your awareness of all these things: your consciousness. You learn about the five aggregates in a hands-on way by maintaining your concentration.

So as you learn how to maintain it in lots of different situations, you learn lots of useful things about the mind. You learn about the aggregates, you learn about which ones are skillful and which ones are not. You learn how to develop skillful fabrications and abandon unskillful ones. And it's in this way that concentration leads to discernment. It both builds on discernment and creates the conditions for more discernment. After all, if you didn't have some understanding of the mind, you wouldn't be able to get it to settle down. Once it settles down, you can see things even more clearly.

So try to develop this combination of concentration and discernment, and everything you want to know will appear right here.