

## *What Makes Concentration Right*

*November 21, 2019*

As you focus on the breath, remember that there's right concentration and wrong concentration. There's a passage where the Buddha defines right concentration as "any singleness of mind, endowed with right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness"—in other words, the first seven factors of the path. It sounds like an awful lot. In the same sutta, though, he boils things down to the fact that every factor of the path, to be "right," has to have three qualities looking over it: right view, right effort, and right mindfulness.

So the fact that you're getting the mind focused on the breath is based on right view. Right view tells you that if you're going to find an end to suffering, you have to look at what the mind is doing. We tend to think that we're suffering from things outside, and there is that level of suffering. But the reason we're suffering from things outside, both good and bad, comes from the fact that the mind is not skilled in how it processes its information about the world.

Or if you use another analogy, it's as if the mind is cook, and it has both good ingredients and bad ingredients brought to the kitchen. But the cook is not very good. So no matter what comes into the kitchen, the food comes out bad. Sometimes good food comes out, but by and large, it's bad. So you've got to watch the cook, train the cook. That's what right view tells you as you try to get the mind into concentration.

Right mindfulness reminds you there are four themes you can focus on. And one of the elements that makes concentration right is what you're focusing on: either the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, or the mind in and of itself, or mental qualities in and of themselves. The "in and of themselves" is important there. You could focus on the body in the world—in other words, how your body looks to other people, how strong it is doing the jobs that need to be done—but that's not the right focus here. We want to focus on just the experience of having a body right here, right now.

It's the same with feelings. You can have feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and you tend to associate them with various things, but we're not going to look at what you're associating them with. We just look at the feelings in and of themselves. The same with the state of the mind: The mind could be thinking about various things, but you're looking at the mind as it's processing things, or looking at the mind as a process.

Those are the three big things: body, feelings, mind, in and of themselves.

And then right effort is the effort to shape these things skilfully. For example, with the breath: You're trying to breathe in a way that feels good, because you're trying to get the mind in this place in a way that it can stay here continually. If things feel weird in the breath, feel weird in the body, it's not going to want to stay. And the breath is

the element in the body that responds most immediately to your thoughts. You can think “long breathing,” “short breathing,” “fast,” “slow,” “deep,” “shallow,” “heavy,” “light,” and the breath will respond. When you find something that feels good, watch it for a while, because there are some kinds of breathing that will feel good for quite a long while, and others will feel good only for a short while. So keep changing when you find that it’s necessary. Don’t be doctrinaire about how everything has to be very quiet, very subtle.

Ajaan Fuang had a student one time who hadn’t been able to get in touch with him for several years. She came during the time when I was first there with him. We were sitting and meditating one night, and Ajaan Fuang’s style was to talk to people as they were meditating, because he could see what they were doing. He told her, “You’ve been focusing on nothing but subtle breathing for the past several years. This is not good.” So, notice what the body needs, and then breathe in a way that’s helpful. Sometimes paradoxically, as we were saying this afternoon, very subtle breathing can get you wired. So you have to look at things over the long term.

And that relates to feelings. Try to breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of rapture, feelings of pleasure—again, so that you can stay here for long periods of time, and you can also gain a sense of how you create your feelings. If you simply watch feelings coming and going, coming and going, you get a sense after a while that you have no role in their coming and going, which is wrong view. Actually, you’re fashioning these things out of your potentials provided by past kamma. So learn how to fashion them well.

The more conscious you are about the process of fashioning your feelings so that they’re consistently good, or as good as you can make them, you’re turning that factor of depending co-arising into the path. If you breathe in ways that are uncomfortable, or if you talk to yourself in ways that are unskillful, in other words, out of ignorance, you’re going to suffer. But if you do this with knowledge, it becomes part of the path to the end of suffering. So bring some knowledge to your breathing, bring some knowledge to the way you shape feelings.

The same, of course, goes for the mind. You want to be with the mind in a way that feels right, so if the mind has too much energy, what do you do to bring the energy down? If it has too little energy, what do you do to bring it up? Sometimes you bring it down by calm breathing, sometimes you bring it down by calm thinking, other times you bring it down by thinking in ways that engage the mind so much that it gets you tired. The same with energizing. Start thinking about things that give more energy to the mind that wake you up if you can.

So this is what right effort is all about: trying to create a place where you can watch the mind settling in with a sense of well-being. And ideally you want to get the mind, body, and feelings to interpenetrate totally. In other words, you want your awareness to fill the body, you want your breath to fill the body, you want a feeling of ease to fill

the body. Have all of them right here. That's when your concentration becomes just right.

And in that way, the mind really does become single. Sometimes that term, “singleness of mind,” *ekaggata*, is translated as “one-pointedness,” but the “agga” in there doesn't mean “point,” it means “gathering place.” The mind is gathered around the breath. All your thoughts, all your feelings, perceptions—everything is right here. We try to bring all these things together right here so that you can observe them, to see what it is in the present moment that leads to suffering or stress. And you can watch this either when you leave concentration and pick up other objects, other topics, and see there's going to be stress right away, or you can see it in the concentration itself as you go from one level to a deeper level. If you're really mindful and alert, you see these things. And that's what the concentration is for. To promote this kind of mindfulness and alertness.

So when we talk about wrong concentration, either it's thinking about things that are not body, feelings, mind, mind-states, mental qualities in and of themselves, or it's with these things but in an unbalanced way, without mindfulness, without alertness, without the quality of ardency. So if you're here and things are very quiet, and after a while, the breathe gets very blurry, the mind gets very murky—it's quiet but you're not quite sure about where you are—that's wrong concentration because it lacks right mindfulness.

Other times, when the concentration gets extremely strong, so strong to the point where you lose all sense of the body, lose all sense of time—you can be here for two hours and it feels like a couple seconds—that's the state of non-perception. And again, if you're in that state, you can't perceive anything. There's no discernment. There's no right view. So that's not right concentration either.

So what makes concentration right? One is focusing on the right topic, and then two, bringing things together in the right balance, with all the factors of the noble path working together. And particularly right mindfulness: You really want to be mindful, alert, and ardent as you do this. If you can't be alert to what you're doing, if you can't be mindful of the breath, then you may be still, but it's not right concentration. So make sure you stick with the right topics and bring the right qualities to them. That's going to take time. It is a skill. It requires that you be observant.

It's one of the reasons why the Buddha made that one of the prerequisites of people he would take on as students. As he said, “Bring me someone who's honest and observant, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma.” To learn the path, you can hear what the Buddha has to say, you can read what the ajaans have to say, but to follow the path you have to learn how to observe your own mind, watch your own body in and of itself. Watch your feelings in and of themselves, your mind in and of itself. And learn how to adjust things so they're all just right.

One of the reasons why this is called the middle path, or the middle way, is that you have to find the point of balance, and it's in find that balance that you really develop your discernment. There's the discernment that comes from reading books, the discernment that comes from thinking things through, but the discernment that comes from finding the point of "just right": That's the discernment that's going to make all the difference. So try to make sure your concentration is right, and make it even better than right. Make it just right. That's where all the elements of the path will come together.