

## *Concentration as a Skill*

*June 25, 2017*

When the Buddha was searching for a path to the deathless, the first piece of right view that he discovered was that concentration was the path and that it was something to be developed. This is a skill that we're working on here—how to get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being, focused on one topic. It can be the breath. It can be the body. It can be thoughts of goodwill. The important thing is that it allows you to have an expanded sense of concentration.

They use the word *ekaggata* to describe the state of concentration. Sometimes it's translated as one-pointedness, but the word *agga* in there, which is said to be "point," can also mean "gathering place." That seems to be the meaning here, actually. You're gathering all your mind around one topic, but it's not just in one point. The Buddha describes concentration as a full-body awareness. If you're contemplating the parts of the body, think of skin, because skin is all around the body. If you're contemplating the breath, think of the breath as not just the in-and-out breath, but more as the flow of energy throughout the body.

You want a concentration that has a large frame like this because that's the kind of frame you can carry into daily life. If your concentration is too one-pointed, then as soon as you shift the point, the concentration is lost. But with the whole body as a frame—what the Buddha calls *mahaggatam cittam*, the enlarged mind—things can come in, things can go out within the frame, but the frame is still there. You may start with one point, but then try to expand the range of your concentration so that your mindfulness is, in the Buddha's term, immersed in the body. You're fully aware as much as possible of everything that's going on all around inside the body.

As the Buddha said, this is going to start with some directed thought and evaluation, because you have to keep reminding yourself in the beginning to stay here. Evaluation is what evaluates how well the mind is settling in, what needs to be done to make this a better place to stay. The analogy the Buddha gives is of a bathman trying to work water through a pile of what in those days was soap powder. It was kind of like flour. You worked the water into that and then you got a soap dough that you used to bathe yourself with. Kind of like making bread nowadays: You work the water through the dough so that all the flour is moistened but there's no water dripping out.

In other words, you're working with the energies in the body and trying to get them smoothed out throughout the body, with a sense of ease throughout the

body. Sometimes that means working through patterns of tension or tightness in different parts of the body. Sometimes you have to work through your perceptions of what's going on in the body. There may be a pain in some part of the body, the mind pictures it to itself as a wall, and the breath will seem to stop there at the wall. Well, you've got to change that perception. The wall is porous. Pain is not a wall. The blood can still flow through. The breath can still flow through. When you hold that perception in mind, you find that a lot of the tension that builds up around the pain gets dissolved away.

So take some time to work through the energies in the body. When you breathe in, does it feel like the energy is going up or down? If it goes up, is it comfortable? Or is it getting stuck in the head? If it's getting stuck in the head, think of it going down through the throat down into the chest. But don't push it. Don't exert any pressure on it. Just think of things opening up. This is more the work of allowing, relaxing the tension. The different patterns of tension that create walls in the body get dissolved away. There's a greater sense of oneness throughout the body. It seems as if your awareness is filling the body. The breath is filling the body. It's as if they're one.

When things come together like this, you can drop all the evaluation and then focus on just maintaining the sense of what you've got here—the breath, the well-being, the sense of refreshment—keeping in mind that your focus and your intention are the causes. When the causes are focused properly, then the well-being, the refreshment, will come on their own.

We work on this because it's nourishing and also because it provides an ideal place for the mind to see what's going on. As you get more settled in the body, the movements of the body get quieter and quieter until it finally feels like the in-and-out breath stops. There's still a sense of energy suffusing the body, but the need to breathe grows less and less and less, and when the movement of the breath and the movement of the energies in the body calm down, that's when you can see the movements of the mind for themselves a lot more clearly.

This is why this is such a central part of the path, both because it provides you with the nourishment to stick with the path and also because it gets the mind in a position where it can see itself clearly. It has a more refined sense of what well-being is, and that allows you to see more clearly what stress and suffering are. You can see that they're movements of the mind that add stress to this state. If you were to latch on with them and go with them, they'd build up a sense of stress. You notice that now because you have something better to compare it with.

This was how the Buddha discovered the four noble truths, realizing that clinging is what's creating a burden for the mind. If his mind hadn't been in

concentration, he wouldn't have been able to see that, because when we cling to things usually we're not paying attention to the act of clinging. We're paying attention to the things we're clinging to, oblivious to the stress that we're creating for ourselves. But when you have this more refined clinging—and there is going to be some clinging in the state of concentration—it helps you to see the grosser ones more easily.

The question came up when we were in Paris: How do you practice concentration without clinging? And as I said, there's no way you don't do it without clinging. There's got to be some. After all, you're working on a skill, and the skill requires that you be dedicated to it. There has to be some sense of really wanting to do this, and then, once you've got it, you have to have a strong sense that it's worth protecting. The essence of any skill is, on the one hand, learning the techniques. On the other hand, it's learning the value of mastering those techniques. If you don't see the value, then the techniques get boring.

We had a visitor here the other day saying that she'd been reading and listening to my talks on breath meditation, and she liked the basic Dhamma but she didn't like this breath meditation. It sounded boring. The techniques of focusing on the body, working with the breath—they in and of themselves could be boring aside from the fact that they are so important in helping to alleviate stress and suffering for the mind. When you see the danger of a mind that's not trained compared with the benefits of having a mind that *is* trained, you're more willing to put up with the tedium of having to keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath, working with the breath energies again and again. This applies not only to the breath, but to whatever your meditation object is.

But have a strong sense that this really does make a difference, not only in providing a comfortable place to stay right now, but also in training the mind in qualities it's going to need in order to keep itself from creating unnecessary suffering for itself, unnecessary suffering for people around you. The breath may be something very ordinary, but working with it does a lot of extraordinary good for the mind. The mind in concentration may not be interesting, at least from the outside. There's not a lot of creative thinking going on once the mind finally does settle down. The creative thinking is in getting it to settle down.

Once you've got it settled down, the next step is just to stick with it and to be very protective of it, which at first may be tedious, but then you begin to realize you're seeing things in your mind you didn't see before, and this is when it gets fascinating. You see how the mind creates little worlds for itself. You see how the mind lies to itself sometimes. You understand your own mind a lot better. And the process of unlearning your unskillful habits is not tedious at all.

But as Ajaan Lee said, the discernment is not the big problem. Virtue is not the big problem. When you're working on the path, concentration is the one that's the big problem. He said it's like building a bridge across a river. The pilings on this bank and the pilings on that bank are not the problem, but the pilings right in the middle of the river take a lot of work. Concentration's right there in the middle, but the work that's put into coming back again, coming back again, trying to be as sensitive as possible to what you've got here, is more than repaid by the results you're going to get.