

Concentration: A Balancing Act

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Concentration is one of the five strengths. And of the strengths, it's the one most explicitly compared to food. It's food for your mind, food for the other factors the path. So how do you make it nourishing and strong? That depends both on what you bring to it and what you're doing as you try to get into concentration.

What you bring to it, of course, is conviction, that this is a good thing to do. And there are two ways in which that conviction plays out.

One is to give you a sense of samvega. You think about what happens if you don't have concentration, if you don't make your path as strong as possible. Ajaan Lee talks about the various contemplations you can engage in to develop a sense of samvega that'll help the mind to settle down. Developing samvega is basically a way of preparing the ground so that when you're focused on the breath, if anything else comes up, you will have seen through it. You will have developed the attitude that it's no place where you want to go back to.

This is one of the functions of the contemplation of the body. You go through the 32 parts and you realize how much of your life revolves around meeting the needs of the body, how much those needs run your life. And then what does the body do? It gets sick. There's one of the contemplations that goes through all the different diseases you could develop. Every part of the body has a disease that it could develop into. As Ajaan Funn says, the disease is already there, the potential is already there, just waiting to come out. Right here we have this nest of diseases, yet we're so attached to it.

You have to ask yourself: Isn't there something better? That's one way of giving rise to a sense of samvega. You can just look at the world around you. There seems to be periods of light and then periods of darkness, then periods of light and darkness. The light never establishes itself fully. After all, this is a mixed karma bag that we've got here in the human realm. You can try to find a better realm than this, go up to the heavens, and you can stay there for a while, but then you come back down. When you get up there, you tend to get complacent, you tend to get lazy, so you develop bad habits.

As I've said many times before, samsara is like a sick joke. You work really hard to work your way up, then as you get higher up to enjoy the rewards of your hard work, you start developing habits that will pull you back down again. There's got to be something better.

So that's one way of inducing the mind to really want to focus here: to say, "There's got to be a way out."

The other way is to give rise to a sense of joy. The Buddha talks about seeing your mind as it develops. You begin to see that as you've been practicing, unskillful habits have fallen away. You are making progress. You look around you: You're associating with people who are observing the precepts. It's a conducive environment. The people around you are trying to be good people. That realization gives rise to a sense of joy. From the sense of joy or gladness, the mind begins to calm down. As it calms down, it can get into concentration.

Both of those approaches—the samvega route and the joy route—are based on conviction that your actions really do make a difference. We can see that as we work on developing skillful actions, we do really become more skillful. That induces us to want to get the mind to settle down. So you focus on the breath. You try to get the mind in a state where it fills the body.

Concentration is sometimes defined as *cittass'ekaggata*: singleness of mind. That *ekaggata* is a term that has a lot of controversy around it—as does the term *samadhi*, which we translate as concentration. *Eka* means one. *Agga* is sometimes translated as point, which makes it sound like you're trying to get the mind to one point. But that doesn't fit in with the Buddha's descriptions of what he's trying to get you to do. He talks about a full-body awareness. The word *agga* can also mean gathering place. You have one gathering place for the mind. That does fit in with the images. So, gather your mind around the breath. All your thoughts, all your directed thoughts, your evaluation, your perceptions, your attention, your intentions: Bring them all right here. You might think of them as concentric circles all centered on one place.

Ajaan Lee does talk about focusing on one spot in the body first, on what he calls a resting spot of the breath. It can be just about the naval, at the tip of the sternum, the base of the throat, tip of the nose, the palette, the middle of the head—or wherever you feel that the breath, as you breathe in, seems to come from that spot. After all, the breath is not so much the air coming in and out of the lungs. The air on its own wouldn't be doing anything. It's because of the breath energy in the body that the air comes in and goes out.

So where does that energy seem to emanate from? Focus your attention there and then notice: As the energy spreads from that spot, does it spread evenly? Does it spread smoothly? Or is it squeezed here, contorted there? Can you iron out those irregularities?—so that the energy as it begins to flow through the body flows in a smooth way, a soothing way, but energizing at the same time. This is where you have to bring things into balance.

The Buddha's description of how you go from mindfulness to concentration is in the seven factors for awakening. You start with mindfulness, then you read your mind: Does the mind need gladdening? Or does it need concentrating? Does it need cheering up? Or does it need settling down? If it's too active, you go for the more calming factors: calm, concentration, and equanimity. If you get drowsy, and there is a tendency as things begin to calm down—you're focused on the breath, and it seems very natural to fall asleep—you've got to fight that tendency. That's when you develop the more active factors: analysis of qualities, persistence, and rapture.

Analysis of qualities means reading what's going on in the mind, trying to be as observant as possible. If you're feeling sleepy, you can ask yourself, "How do the manifestations of sleepiness play out in the body? Where do you feel them?" In other words, give yourself a question. In this way, you're taking the route that Ajaan Maha Boowa describes as discernment fostering concentration, where your inquisitive mind takes the lead. As the Buddha himself said, if you don't ask questions, you're not going to give rise to discernment. An unwillingness to ask questions, he said, is *the* big obstacle to discernment.

So ask some questions about what's going on: where your mind is, how it relates to the body, how it relates to the breath. Look into the perceptions you're using to visualize the breath to yourself. You can play with those perceptions; you can play with the breath. See what happens. That way, in exploring, you're here present with the body and the breath in a way that's not going to put you to sleep.

If your problem is the other side—the mind is too active—you can still ask questions, but you ask questions in a different way. Try to work the breath energy through the body. Make it as smooth as possible, as whole as possible. Then very consciously spread your awareness to fill the whole body, and then keep watch over it to make sure that the range of your awareness doesn't shrink. As it fills the body, try to make sure that it fills every little part of the body. Each toe. Each finger. The spaces between the fingers. The spaces between the toes. The different vertebrae in your back. Here again, you're giving the mind work to do, but it's calming.

As things feel really good inside, you can begin to settle down. But again you've got to monitor things carefully so that everything's just right, strong, still—not too active, not too relaxed. The people who complain about translating *samadhi* as "concentration" tend to favor the relaxed approach: You just relax yourself into concentration, develop a sense of ease, but don't try too hard. That approach is relaxing, it is easeful, but it's not strong. The strength of concentration is meant to give rise to discernment. And the type of concentration that's strong, leading to

discernment, has to have some questions inside it.

And it has to build on right effort. If everything's just easy and relaxed, then you'll develop an easy relaxed attitude toward your distractions. If they come in a little bit, "That's okay, I'll wander with them a little bit and then I'll come back." But that kind of concentration doesn't develop. The kind that develops is the concentration where you really are trying, and you learn how to try in the right way. So, yes, we are concentrating the mind. We are trying to keep tabs on it, to ride herd on it, so that its quality of being centered, still, and settled-in is really solid. The more solid it is, the more you're going to see. If it's just a relaxed state, things easily blur out. We are creating a full-body awareness here, but there's a sharpness to that awareness, too.

So it's a balancing act.

As I've said many times before, if we were just doing one thing and pursuing one extreme, it would be easy to figure out. Just do, do, do, do, do or relax, relax, relax. But neither extreme gives rise to much discernment. It's when you're trying to get things balanced: That's when you have to bring your discernment to bear. And as you bring your discernment to bear in the concentration, you're getting it ready to do further work, so that the concentration naturally develops into discernment,

This is why the ajaans often like to talk about how you can't draw a clear line between concentration and discernment. You can emphasize one at one point in your practice, and the other at another, but they both have to be there. So work on bringing things into balance. It's when the concentration is balanced that it becomes really strong.