

## *Drowsiness*

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The commentary describes three stages of concentration: momentary, neighborhood, and fixed penetration. The way it explains these has to do with *kasina* practice, but the terms have been adopted for other types of concentration as well. And because these terms are not explained in the Canon, different ajaans have come up with different ways of describing them.

One common one is to say that momentary concentration is your ordinary, everyday concentration where you listen to someone speak and you can follow the meaning of that person's words. You can read a book and make sense out of what you're reading, as long as you stay with the topic. But your concentration keeps on relapsing and you have to keep on renewing it.

Neighborhood concentration is when you let go of your everyday concerns and you're beginning to settle in with the object of meditation, but it's not fully secure. There's a drifting quality.

It's only when you can reach fixed penetration that you're really one with the object, and that's when you're safe in your concentration: You're alert, energized, still: the type of concentration that's ready for discernment.

It's in that intermediate, neighborhood stage that drowsiness can set in. This is where sloth and torpor as a hindrance can come in as well, and because it's an inevitable stage of the concentration, you have to prepare so that you don't drift off. That is why the ajaans say that this is the stage of concentration where you're able to put up with a little bit of pain, but you fall for pleasure. In other words, you lose your topic of concentration because you focus instead on the pleasure that's beginning to arise, and you zone out.

This is why Ajaan Lee would have you start the meditation with long deep in-and-out breaths to energize yourself. And why the Buddha describes steps in the concentration where you do work, because working with your concentration is what's going to get you through this stage. Evaluating the breath, spreading the breath around: These are Ajaan Lee's techniques. The Buddha would have you spread your awareness throughout the whole body, and the effort of spreading

awareness and keeping it spread is one thing that can help keep you awake, keep you from drifting off.

So know that you have to go through this minefield before you settle down, and be prepared. Sometimes you find that staying with a breath is not enough to keep you awake, even if you're trying to keep your awareness filling the body. This is why the Buddha says that if you find yourself drifting off with a particular topic of concentration, don't make much of that topic. In other words, find something else: either change the way you breathe or change to another contemplation.

You can try imagining the bones in the body: Start with the tips of the fingers, all the bones in the first joints, then move up to the second joints and third joints, try to have a sense of the feeling where those bones are, and then relax that part of the body. Then work up through the hands, through the wrists, the arms, the shoulders, then start down at the toes, the feet, work up through the legs and up the spine.

Or you can think about death. Death could come at any time, and you don't want it to come when you're nodding off. There's work to be done.

Or you can think about the Buddha—anything that helps keep the mind focused on a Dhamma topic, that energizes you.

These are the things you do in preparation. There are also things you can do when you find yourself drifting off in spite of your first efforts. This is where you have to be firmly on the side of not drifting off and not falling asleep, because there's a part of the mind that will say, "These are the signs I'm tired, I need my rest," and you just go for it. So remind yourself: No one has slept their way to awakening.

The mind has its tricks. It's not always the case that drowsiness is a sign that you really do need rest, so you've got to test it. Sometimes it comes on because an important insight is about to come to the surface, and there's a part of the mind that doesn't want to deal with it, doesn't want to see it, and it'll divert your attention by making you drift off. So as signs of sleepiness or drowsiness come on, remember that you can't always trust them. Don't be too quick to side with them.

The Buddha recommends chanting if you can chant. If you can't chant out loud because you're sitting in a group like this, then if there's any chant that you've memorized, run it through in your mind. Rub your limbs. If you need to

get up and go and do some walking meditation, go up and look at the stars if it's nighttime, to refresh yourself. If it turns out that even while you're walking you're falling asleep, it's a sign that you do need rest. But you make up your mind that you'll lie down and rest but you'll get up as soon as you wake up again. You don't just bury yourself in sleep.

There are other techniques mentioned in the texts as well, and oftentimes it's good to come up with your own. There was a period when Ajaan Fuang was really sick and often I would stay up with him many hours of the night. He made a comment one time: When he was younger, he had really bad headaches, and they had gotten so bad that he needed to have monks stay with him when he woke up. They gave him compresses. But one night he happened to wake up, and all the monks who were there supposedly watching over him were asleep, and he found himself watching over them. The thought occurred to him: "Who's looking after whom here?"

He said that to me once, and I realized that was a message: If I was going to be looking after him, he didn't want me lying there when he needed someone at night. So there'd be nights when I sat up all night, just in case he needed me, or I'd make a vow: If I did lie down to rest, then if he needed me, I wanted to wake up five minutes before he died. And it worked.

But one of the lessons I learned about drowsiness came one time when I had a part of the day when I was responsible for looking after him. Other monks there had times for looking after him, too, but one by one the different monks found reasons for why they had to work on a construction project or on other projects around the monastery. So, I found myself taking on this monk's two hours and that monk's two hours, until I had the 2 a.m. to 8 p.m. shift. Just a few hours to rest and then it was 2 a.m. and I had to get up to look after him again. After several weeks of this, I was really sleep deprived, and getting up at 2 a.m. did not guarantee that I was really going to be awake during the hours until dawn. I'd be sitting there nodding off, but I discovered that, while working with the breath, if I tried to stay at one spot, I was sure to go to sleep. So I decided to move around: three breaths at the tip of the nose, three breaths at the base of the throat, three breaths the middle of the chest, down through all the spots that Ajann Lee mentions in "Method Two," and then back up again: three breaths, three breaths.

And simply the fact that I had to count the breaths in addition to focusing on the breath and having to move the focus of my attention was enough to wake me up.

So a large part of this is being on the side of wakefulness and not on the side of wanting to rest, and then trying to find the techniques that work ahead of time to prevent the sleepiness from coming on. And if it does come on while the mind is beginning to settle down, you do what you can to get the mind active. That's the important principle. Give the mind work to do, here in the body or with some other Dhamma topic, and experiment to see what works for you. The fact that you're actually discovering something on your own makes it all the more interesting. Because that's the real key to overcoming sleepiness: finding something that sparks your interest, something you can explore. Taking on sleepiness as an opponent instead of as your nightly friend gives you a lot to explore and a lot to discover.

This is the basic principle with all the hindrances, that you'll learn about them through resisting them, by trying to outwit them, by trying to get around them. In the course of learning about them in that way, you learn a lot about your own mind. You reaffirm the original principle for why you're meditating to begin with, which is that you do really want to master this, the type of concentration that can lead to discernment. After all, we're not here to drift off. We're here to get firmly established, and those are two very different things. Even though they're both quiet, they're quiet in radically different ways.