

A Safe Place

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Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how he was stuck on concentration for many years. He had the wrong view that if he tended to his concentration steadily enough, the quiet of the concentration would turn into the quiet of nibbāna. The interesting thing is that he was with Ajaan Mun all that time, and Ajaan Mun let him stay stuck on concentration for quite a while. It's good to think about why.

Perhaps he saw that Ajaan Maha Boowa was going to have to do some radical work with his discernment, and that kind of radical work requires really strong concentration—partly because you need a lot of stillness to see subtle things in the mind, and partly that you need a safe space: a place where you feel at home, at ease. You feel confident, so that when disturbing thoughts come up in the mind you're not shaken. Because a lot of defilements can be pretty disturbing.

Sometimes your greed, your aversion, your delusion can take very strange forms; forms you wouldn't like anyone to see. You get to the point where you don't want to see them yourself. So little messages get sent around in the mind, and you turn a blind eye to them.

You're like a teacher in a classroom where the kids are sending notes to one another, and the teacher for some reason doesn't want to know. So the notes get sent back and forth. Little perceptions, little bits and snatches of thoughts—enough to keep those defilements alive, but not enough to let them to come up to the surface. They're there in the background, and they create a sense of dis-ease.

This is where free-floating anxiety comes from. There's a disconnect in the mind. It's not that the anxiety has no focus. It has a focus, but you don't want to look at it. And because things like this are so uncomfortable, this is why psychotherapists have to create a safe atmosphere in their offices, so that whatever comes up, whatever is talked about, the patient doesn't feel threatened.

In a way, you're doing analysis on yourself when you start looking into these things. You become the kind of teacher who wants to see the notes as they're passed back and forth. But you have to put yourself in a position where you're not shaken by any possible message that might be on those notes.

This is why we work on concentration, especially why we work on the breath. When there's anxiety, the defilements have appropriated the breath energy in the body, and you've got to reclaim it so that you can be in the position of strength and not feel threatened.

So as long as your concentration is alert and mindful, don't be afraid of getting stuck on it. You're going to need this safe space. All too often, you hear people say, "If you get stuck on concentration, you're never going to get anywhere."

It's bizarre that for years and years when people would talk about concentration, say, especially at Vispasanna retreats, the very first thing they would talk about was how dangerous it was—forgetting, of course, that it's part of the path. And right concentration is not dangerous. The dangers are in the wrong concentration: concentration without alertness, without discernment, without mindfulness, concentration with wrong view. These kinds of concentration can knock you off course, but it doesn't take much to know what's on course and what's off-course.

Getting involved in visions is off-course. Allowing yourself to go into delusion concentration, that's also off-course: That's when things get comfortable, and you begin to drift. The mind has no clear focal point. It feels very pleasant, very still, but there's no discernment, there's no alertness: That's off-course. That's the kind of dangerous concentration where the danger is simply that you're wasting a lot of time.

The concentration that's not a waste of time is concentration when you're very alert. You notice what the mind is doing, how the mind is settling in with the breath. At that point, you don't need any more conversation in the mind about the breath. You can just be with the sensation of the breathing. Go into the sensation of the breathing and allow things to be very still.

Some people complain that everything gets so still that they can't follow the breath any more. Well, think of breath energy filling the body, and it's still. There is such a thing as still energy. As long as you're clearly aware of that still energy through the body, you're fine. Then, as you come out of concentration, try to notice where the mind goes.

It's like letting the kids out of school: Where do they go running to first? Sometimes something interesting will pop up, something unexpected will pop up, as the mind is freed from its focal point with the breath. It's something you may want to look into further. Why does the mind go *there*?

This is one of the ways in which concentration can lead to insight. Another is when you've

been sitting in meditation for a while, and you know that it's going to end shortly, and you turn down the burner on your concentration—let's put it that way: The focal point, the concentration is not quite so intense, and it's still there, it's still very still, but it's not so all-consuming that thoughts won't be able to come in.

When a thought does come in, sometimes it will have an allure; it'll have a hook. You want to ask yourself, "Why? What's there? What of any substance is there?" That old analysis of looking for the allure and the drawbacks—this is how you do it.

In ways it's like that old campaign they had in the People's Republic back in the 50's. It was called, "Let a thousand flowers bloom." All of a sudden the government announced that there would be freedom of speech. A few people spoke out, and everybody else watched to see what happened. Nothing happened. So more people spoke out, then more people spoke out. Meanwhile, the government was taking notes. When it had figured out that enough people had spoken out, criticizing this or that policy, it finally swooped down and got them all.

In the same way, you want to give a little space for your defilements to speak a little bit so you can know what they have to say. Once you hear what they have to say, then you can do something about them.

Now, there may come times when something comes up, it really is disturbing, and you don't feel ready for it yet. Well, don't push yourself. Go back to the concentration. Have a very matter-of-fact attitude toward it: Okay, there is that particular thought in the mind, that particular attitude, and it's going to require a lot of parsing out. You can't take it on, yet, but at least you begin to know what it is.

It's better than having it lurking in the background. When it lurks in the dark, you have no idea how big it is. But when you begin to see it, you see that it's not quite as big as you thought it was. It has a specific shape and begins to have a specific agenda that you can understand. Then you know that someday you'll be able to talk to it.

In this way, you're doing therapy on yourself, and with the concentration you're providing the safe space. However long it takes to create that space is time well spent.

Think of Ajaan Maha Boowa who was stuck on concentration for many years—I think it was six years all together. It may sound like a long time, but once it was done, he had a space in the mind where he could deal with whatever came up. And that's what you want.

In our rush for insights, we have to make sure first that we have a safe space in which to deal with them when they come up, because one of the aspects of the Buddha's path is that it's a safe

path.

If you make sure that your views are right, and everything all the way down the line, your resolves are right, and your concentration is right, your mindfulness is right—you're safe. It's when you wander off the path that you get into trouble. Think of the Buddha's image of the people who take their cart off the main road and go into the forest: The axle breaks, everything falls apart, and there they are: stuck. Whereas if they'd stayed on the main road, they would have been able to get to their destination.