

## *A Concentration Checklist*

*March 21, 2021*

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha's giving meditation advice to Ven. Anuruddha. The story goes that the Buddha was in Kosambī, and the monks had fallen into two factions, arguing with each other. The Buddha tried to bring some harmony into the Sangha, but they basically said to him, "You just be the Buddha. We'll take care of this quarrel ourselves."

So he left the city, went out into the wilderness, and came across Ven. Anuruddha along with two other monks, who were living a very peaceful life. Even so, Anuruddha said to the Buddha that he would try to get his mind to stay centered, and he was actually having visions of light and forms, but then they would disappear. He wondered why.

The Buddha talked about how he himself, as he was practicing before his awakening, would have visions of light and forms, but then they would disappear. So he had analyzed what was going on in his mind, and came up with a long checklist of things that can go wrong in the meditation, that would make you lose your concentration.

Although some of them have to do specifically with that type of meditation—where you're seeing visions and seeing light—there are eight factors that deal with *any* kind of concentration, so they provide a good checklist for any kind of concentration. Whether you're focusing on the breath, focusing on a part of the body, focusing on the brahmaviharas, when you lose your focus, you can ask yourself why, and think of the eight different things that the Buddha mentioned.

Two of them correspond to the traditional list of five hindrances: There's *doubt*, and there's *sloth and torpor*. In the case of doubt, you're sitting with the breath and all of a sudden you wonder, "Is this really breath? These sensations I'm feeling in the body: Do they really correspond to the breath?" Once that question comes up, you lose your concentration.

You can remind yourself that the fact that you feel the body at all has to pass through the breath, so everything you feel in the body comes through the breath element, the wind element. Then you can divide things up. There are motions in the body that are breath motions, and there are motions that are the movement of the water element, like the blood through the vessels.

The distinction there is that when the blood going through the vessels pushes up against the vessel walls, you'll feel pressure. Whereas breath doesn't exert any pressure. It's an energy. Think of it flowing through the spaces between the atoms. So whenever there's a feeling of pressure in the body as you move the breath around, you can realize that you've been moving the water element around. Hold in mind the perception that breath can go anywhere, can permeate anything. See if holding that perception helps you overcome your doubt.

As for sloth and torpor, the way to deal with that, of course, is in line with the traditional list that the Buddha gives: Change your meditation object; rub your limbs; if you have any chants that you've memorized, run them over in your mind; or if you're out sitting alone in the orchard, you can start chanting out loud. The fact that you have to call on your memory may help wake you up. If that doesn't wake you up, get up and do walking meditation. Ajaan Chah would add, try doing walking meditation backwards.

If that doesn't wake you up, then it's a sign that you really do need some rest. So you lie down, but with the perception in mind that you're going to get up as soon as you wake up again.

The other factors in the list that are not in the hindrances have to do with maintaining the right emotional balance as you stay focused. One of the problems you may run into is *inattention*. In other words, you're paying attention to the breath and all of a sudden your mind slips off to something else. All you have to do is just reestablish attention at the breath. But then to maintain it, you may have to deal with other issues.

The Buddha mentions *boredom* as a possible problem: You're sitting here and nothing seems to be happening. You have to remind yourself that everything in the world is happening right now. In other words, all the processes by which the mind creates its experience out of the raw data of sensory input are all happening right here, right now. And the way the mind relates to any object is happening in the course of its relating to the breath.

So if you find yourself getting bored with the breath, you can either play around with the breath more, or you can start looking at how the mind relates to the breath. What is the perception it holds with regard to the breath? What is the conversation it's having with itself about the breath? In other words, think about the different aggregates that are playing a role right now. What's form, what's feeling doing right now? What's perception doing? What's fabrication doing? What's consciousness doing? How do these things work together to create a state of concentration? Can you see that? Look. Take an interest—and you'll realize there's nothing to get bored about.

All the processes by which the mind is creating suffering for itself are happening right here. And if you can't find something interesting in that, ask yourself what's wrong. What part of the mind doesn't want to look?

So basically, the way to overcome boredom is to ask questions based on what you know of the Dhamma: what you've learned about what happens as the mind deals with its sensory experience. Ask yourself, "Can I see that happening right now?"

Two other problems are mirror problems: *too much effort, too little effort*. Too much effort, the Buddha compares to holding a baby quail in your hand and basically strangling it—holding it so hard that it dies. Too little effort is like holding the baby quail in your hand so loosely that the baby quail flies away. Now, in some cases this can actually be related to the

amount of pressure you're putting on the breath: You can put too much pressure on the breath, too little pressure; too much pressure on your focus, too little pressure.

So look at the strength of your focus. If you find that getting the mind to settle down with the breath makes things feel tight and constricted in the body, okay, you're putting too much pressure on. Back off a bit. If you find the mind wandering in and out—coming into focus, going out of focus—put some more pressure on.

The final pair on the list has to do with things happening in the meditation, either that you *like a lot*, or you *don't like a lot*. The ones that you like a lot, the Buddha says, make you get excited, and you lose the concentration. In other words, the mind settles down and suddenly you realize, "Hey! The mind has settled down." The mind hasn't been talking to itself for a while, you realize, "Wow! The mind hasn't been talking." And that's the end of it.

This is where you have to take a very matter-of-fact attitude toward whatever comes up. You can't jump to the conclusion that it's really good yet. You have to watch it for a while to see what's really going on. In particular, you have to watch what the mind does in reaction. This point carries all the way through: Even when you reach the threshold to the noble attainments, if you hit the deathless but get excited about it, well, that's as far as you're going to get—you lose it. That doesn't mean that you haven't experienced it, it simply means that that's as far as that attainment is going to go right then and there.

So you want to develop the attitude that whatever happens, you're just going to watch it. This also applies to the other, and last, item on the list, which is *panic*. Something comes up, and you don't feel comfortable about it at all. You're afraid of it—and suddenly you're out of concentration. Well, try to go back to the state of mind you had just before, and watch—as long as you're alert to what the mind is doing, then you're okay.

There are some people who, when rapture comes, feel really threatened by it. In some cases, it's because they had near drowning experiences in the past, and rapture seems too much like drowning. Or there's a sense of losing control. But as long as you keep your focus with the breath and you're alert to what you're doing, you can simply watch what happens.

You can learn to talk to yourself: You're not drowning, you're surrounded by air, and what may seem like a loss of control is simply going into new territory. If you don't feel comfortable at all with the new territory, back up. Go back to where you were, and then, when you come out of meditation, you can talk it over with the teacher.

Both for the excitement and for the panic, think of Ajaan Mun's advice to Ajaan Maha Boowa: If something comes up and you're not sure about it, just stay with your sense of awareness, your alertness, knowing what's happening but without coming to any final decision about whether it's good or bad. Then, after a while it'll pass, and you will have maintained your center here. You will have maintained your concentration in the face of things that are new and unexpected.

Basically, what this checklist is getting at is that you want to keep your mind on an even keel. Alert, but not too excited. Calm, but not bored and sleepy. It's a balancing act. And as with anyone walking across a tightrope, you don't expect that you'll always be perfectly balanced and just float across the tightrope. There'll be a leaning to the left and a leaning to the right, but you learn how to correct.

This ability to perform self-correction is one of *the* most important skills in the path. It's like learning how to stand on one leg in yoga. There'll be a wobbling back and forth, back and forth, but you learn how to correct—and that's how you keep your balance.

It's the same with the concentration: There will be a leaning to the left, a leaning to the right; too much energy, too little energy. But when you know the different ways in which the mind can get out of balance, then you can bring it back in—and that's how you maintain your concentration over time.