

Generating Power

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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Concentration practice involves work. We often think of it as a place for the mind to rest, and it is, but it's even more a place for the mind to recharge its batteries. That requires energy, requires effort, requires work. In Thailand the idiom for meditation is "to make an effort." And in meditating there very definitely are things we have to *do*. It's not just a letting go of the tension, a letting go of the stresses of daily life. There's also work to be done to keep mindfulness continuous, to keep your alertness continuous and all-around, to keep both mindfulness and alertness spinning around inside here like a generator. A generator sits in one place but it has to spin around to create electric power. If the generator simply sits still, it can't create anything. There has to be some activity for the electrons to run in a current.

The same is true with concentration. The two causes for gaining a sense of ease and wellbeing are directed thought and evaluation. Directed thought grows out of mindfulness; evaluation, out of alertness. You have to keep directing your thoughts to the breath, keep evaluating it, noticing when it's comfortable, noticing when it's not. And then there's singleness of preoccupation: You try to keep the mind at one with its object, make it *become* one with its object. All of this takes effort, and sometimes people will sit in meditation, put a lot of effort into it, and at the end of the period say, "Well, the meditation didn't get any results. It was just constant effort." However, it's a normal principle in practicing concentration that it requires effort before it can start giving results. The effort is never wasted.

Over time you begin to get a sense of how much effort is too much, how much is too little. When you get a sense of "just right," the results you want start appearing. At that point, the payoff comes as you're doing the work. You don't have to wait until the end of the year before your paycheck arrives. You receive installments all along the way. So as you're doing the meditation work, keep this point in mind: It *is* work, but as you get more precise at it, more subtle at it, the results you're looking for will start to appear.

Ajaan Lee talks about concentration work being basically three activities – directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation – with all three spinning around in one place. When you start being very precise in doing them, they start showing their results. In other words, you keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. If you notice that the mind is wandering off, you immediately get it back on track. Try to sense when the mind is preparing to go even before it actually goes. That way you can nip the distractions in the bud.

And try to be as alert as possible to how the breathing feels. Try to make it feel refreshing. This way the work becomes something you can easily keep on doing, because you feel refreshed in doing your work. Sitting here, it feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out. Ordinarily large areas of the body are starved for breathing energy, so give them a chance to drink it in, to bathe in it. Think of the energy going to the different parts of the body – “Who wants this breath? Who wants the next one?” – until you’ve got the whole body nourished. If it feels good, do it again. Next time around try to be even more perceptive as to what’s going on, what’s needed where.

As for singleness of preoccupation, make sure the mind doesn’t lose itself, doesn’t start wandering off in other directions, getting distracted. And watch out for the hindrances, because they drain your energy. Even though you may be generating a lot of power here, if the hindrances get in the way everything gets drained away. Like the solar electric system here at Wat Metta: When we were first setting up the batteries, we were careless and put them on a couple of boards on the ground. Well, sure enough, a rain storm came. One of the wires shorted, and by the next day the batteries were totally dead. Even though the solar panels were pumping out energy, the batteries were so dead you couldn’t revive them.

The same holds true in the meditation: If you keep coming back to the breath but then allow the mind to go wandering off in other directions, then all the power, all the recharging in your batteries, just gets drained away. So you’ve got to be careful not to go thinking about anything else while you’re here with the breathing. When thoughts about other things do come passing through, you don’t want to get involved in them. Just let them go, let them go. Part of the problem is that you get curious: “What’s this thought about? What’s that thought about? Maybe it’s something important, maybe it’s something entertaining.” Watch out for those attitudes, because that’s like opening the door for thieves to come into your house, or like scraping away the insulation on your wires before the rats do. So as soon as a thought that’s not related to the breath comes into the mind, just let it go.

And there are certain ways of thinking about the breath or the meditation that actually get in the way of the meditation, too, so you’ve got to watch out for them as well. The big troublemakers are restlessness and anxiety. Restlessness is wanting to push for results before the mind is really ready to give them, trying to figure out things beforehand, before you’ve actually done the concentration work. You’ve got to do the work first and let the results develop on their own.

Ajaan Lee gives the example of getting gold out of a rock. You can’t just go to the mountain and use a pick to extract the gold. You’ve got to take the rock and subject it to heat. The fire will take time, getting hot enough so that it can melt the gold, but when it reaches the melting point, the gold will all come out on its own. In other words, when your powers of concentration are strong enough, when they reach the point where they’re ready, then the work of discernment

gets a lot easier. Things separate out right before your very eyes without your having to do an awful lot of analysis. When the mind has been concentrated long enough and solidly enough, you just pose a question and things will appear very clearly, for you've created the environment in which they *can* appear clearly, in that the mind is solid and still.

As for anxiety, one of the standard definitions is concern about what other people think. "What's this person going to think? What's that person going to think? If what I know is right offends people, what am I going to do? Do I dare do it?" That kind of anxiety really gets in the way of your goodness. If you let yourself get led astray by those thoughts in your daily life, it's very hard not to get led astray while you're meditating. One of the things I really appreciated about Ajaan Fuang was that he really didn't care what other people thought. If he knew that what he was doing was right, then even if it was unpopular he went ahead with it, because he realized that there's no way you can control other peoples' attitudes toward you. If they want to think ill of you, well, that's their right. And, ultimately, where does popularity get you? Not very far. It certainly doesn't get you very far on the path.

I also noticed that Ajaan Fuang didn't trust people who were concerned about being popular. There was an interesting exchange once when he was going to appoint one of the merchants in town to be the monastery treasurer. The first question he asked the man was, "In your future life would you rather be popular or wealthy?" And the man said, "Wealthy. If you're wealthy you can buy popularity." So Ajaan Fuang appointed him treasurer. He liked the idea that the man was not all that concerned about being popular. If the treasurer was concerned about being popular you couldn't trust him. He might be afraid to do the right thing when push came to shove, and certain people wanted to get their hands on the monastery funds.

So it's important to keep this attitude in mind when you know that something is right: Don't worry about whether it's popular, don't let yourself be swayed by public opinion. Of course this means that you have to be very careful about what you see as right. In other words, you let yourself be swayed by advice from wise people, from people you respect. But as for people in general whose opinions don't have any real principles, you don't have to worry about what they think. No matter what they can do to you, they can't touch the most important part of you, which is your own inner integrity.

This is how the practice requires courage. Conviction in the principle of karma requires that you make a commitment not to hedge your bets. You're going to depend totally on the skillfulness of your own intentions to whatever extent you can develop that skillfulness. That's the principle to which you have to devote yourself.

As for other principles or lack of principles, let them go. Sometimes this feels a little scary. You're so used to hedging your bets so that at least you're popular, at least you've got connections, so that if the principle of karma doesn't work out

you've got something else to fall back on. But to be really committed to the principle of karma, to get the best results from it, you have to be committed.

And to be really committed requires repeated acts of commitment. This is why in the Forest tradition so much emphasis is placed on the virtue of courage. Not foolhardiness, but courage. It takes a certain amount of courage to keep the mind centered and still, because otherwise we're always trying to plan ahead, second guess things, anticipate things. But for the mind to have really strong powers of concentration you basically have to tell yourself, "I don't care. I'm going to focus on doing what needs to be done right now and I'm not going to try to provide for alternative things to fall back on." In other words, when the time comes to be focused and concentrated, that's all you do. Give yourself to it totally. Have a sense of conviction, a sense of confidence in the practice, and don't try to second guess things. When the concentration has developed to a proper level, it'll start showing its results on its own.

In terms of that simile I often use about the unripe mango: You don't keep yellow paint on hand just in case, to make the mango nice and yellow if watering the tree doesn't work out. If you're convinced that your mango is going to become yellow by pouring water and fertilizer on the roots of the tree, that's all you focus on. You don't worry about when it's going to get yellow. You realize that if you stick with the watering long enough, the mango will have to ripen. That's all you have to do.

When you have this kind of single-mindedness, then concentration gets more and more powerful. It really recharges you. It's not just a relaxation technique. It contains an element of commitment, an element of applied energy. At the same time, you're making sure that nothing is draining your battery away. That way you gain more and more strength from the concentration, so that when the time comes to leave the concentration – even though it involved some work – you feel refreshed, energized, charged. That's not simply because you've been able to let go of patterns of tension in the body. The different channels of breath energy in the body have also been able to reinforce one another. At the same time, the good qualities of the mind get reinforced and strengthened. They've been allowed to nourish one another, too.

This is how the work of concentration starts showing its results, with a sense of wellbeing, a sense of inner strength, a sense of being energized. After all, concentration is one of the five strengths. And if our discernment is going to have the strength it needs to penetrate all the veils of delusion we've put up in the mind, it's going to require good strong concentration, good committed concentration to do the work that leads to release.