

Three Levels of Concentration

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

April 14, 2005

Ajaan Suwat used to say that settling into concentration is like falling asleep – except that you don't go to sleep. And that's where it gets tricky. In other words, how do you bring the mind to stillness and yet stay awake?

It basically happens in three stages. You start with your ordinary, everyday level of concentration. It's called "momentary concentration": the kind that allows you to listen to things, to memorize things, to read a book and remember what you've read so that it all makes sense. That kind of concentration is something we all have, and it lasts for a moment, or it lasts for a series of moments. You might find yourself slipping off and coming back, slipping off, coming back, but at least there's enough continuity so that you can remember.

That's the kind of concentration you start out with when you focus on the breath, or focus on *buddho*, or whatever your meditation object is. You find the mind slipping off but you bring it back. It slips off and you bring it back. There's kind of a rhythm to it, like music: You play a musical phrase, and then you pause; another phrase, and then a pause. But there's enough continuity so that the phrases form a larger whole. The same holds true when you start trying to stay with the breath. You may stay with a couple breaths and wander off, say, maybe between the in-breath and the out-breath, or the out-breath and the in-breath, and then start up again. This is normal. The important point is that you keep coming back, coming back, coming back.

As you work with this kind of concentration, you begin to realize why there are pauses. This level of concentration can't withstand displeasure, boredom, or pain – anything negative or unpleasant. Even the slightest little bit of displeasure and it gets knocked off. The mind loses its focus because of that. This is why the way to move on from this stage of concentration to the next one is to learn how to work precisely with the sense discomfort. You don't have to start with major pains, just the slight discomfort you may sense in the breath. Maybe it's a little too long, too short, too shallow, too deep – whatever. You learn to adjust it, you learn to work with it. That gives you confidence. You don't have to be afraid of these things. A little bit of discomfort comes up and you can deal with it. This allows your concentration to get more continuous.

This brings you to the next level, which is called "threshold," "access," or "neighborhood" concentration. It's in the neighborhood of getting really settled down, but it's not quite there yet. This is where the mind grows fairly peaceful, but at this stage it can easily lose its focus. As I said, with momentary concentration, the problem is that it can't withstand displeasure. Well, the

problem with access concentration is that it can't withstand pleasure. It loses focus when it runs into real pleasure. This is the way the mind normally is. It's so used to falling asleep when things get relaxed that it just lets go. People who tend to have visions will have visions in this state. People who don't, still find that they drift off very easily. They fall into what Ajaan Lee called delusion-concentration: *moha-samadhi*. Things are quiet, pleasant, still, but you have no idea where you are.

So the important thing in this stage is to give the mind work to do in the pleasure. Just as with momentary concentration you focus directly on dealing with the problem – its weakness in the face of pain or displeasure – here the problem is the mind's weakness in the face of pleasure, so you focus on the pleasure. This is why Ajaan Lee has you spread the breath throughout the body: both to give you work to do within the pleasure *and* to enlarge your frame of reference. Normally, as you get more settled down, and the breath gets softer, more refined, it gets harder and harder to keep track of. So you need to expand your frame of reference to include the whole body. *That* you can keep track of, even if the in-and-out movements of the breath grow still.

There are lots of ways of working with the breath in the body. One is to stay focused on the same spot you're always focused on, and just broaden your sense of awareness – the range of your awareness – so that it encompasses the whole body. Then you allow the breath to adjust so that it feels good, as good as possible, throughout the whole body. Another way is to go through the body, section by section, working on the breath energy in each section until it feels pleasant, and then letting the pleasure in all the sections connect. This way you get used to working with your pleasure.

This is one of the distinctive features of the Buddha's teachings. He doesn't take pain or pleasure as an end in and of itself. Each of them has its uses. When pain comes, what do you *do* with it? When pleasure comes, what do you *do* with it? Instead of simply suffering from the pain or enjoying the pleasure, you learn how to work with these things so that they can take the mind to a deeper level of concentration. What happens when you work with that sense of pleasure and broaden your awareness is that the mind gets so totally involved as a whole that it can't do anything else. It's as if you've nailed its hands and its feet down to the floor, so all it can do is just *be* there. Or you might make another comparison: The mind that slips off to the past or the future has to be a very small mind. It's almost as if it needed to go down a little tube to go to the future or to the past. But when the mind is large like this it can't fit down the tube. It's stuck. If it's going to go, it has to shrink.

So as you're sitting here with this broadened awareness – centered in one spot but filling the whole body – you're really fixed in the present moment. This is why this third level of concentration is called "fixed penetration." And from that point on, all you have to do is maintain that state, learn to keep your balance there. The breath will go still – sometimes it even seems to stop. Just let it stop.

You don't need the in-and-out breath anymore, for the brain is using less oxygen, and you're getting all the oxygen you need through your pores. Remember the gold woman in *Goldfinger*? Remember why she died? Because the gold paint had covered her pores, and she couldn't get the oxygen she needed through her skin. This shows that there's already a lot of oxygen coming through the skin. So when the breath stops coming in and out, don't worry. You've got all the oxygen you need. The body can be still, filled with awareness. And that's it. This is the state of concentration that doesn't get waylaid either by pleasure or by pain. It's the kind of concentration you want. You get here by letting go of other thoughts, but also by being very focused on the breath.

This is where it's different from falling asleep. When you fall asleep, things get still and then you just let go totally, let go of all your mindfulness, all your alertness, and move off into another stage of becoming, as the texts call it. Whatever little dream world happens to appear in the mind as we fall asleep, that's becoming in action, and it's usually in this state of threshold concentration.

So this is what you have to work past. Learn not to get carried off by the pleasure, the sense of ease. Tell yourself: There's work to be done. It requires skill. If you're not skillful, working with the pleasure can create pain and the mind won't want to settle down. But keep working at it again and again, and after a while you'll develop skill. You do your work, but you work in pleasure. You create an even more agreeable place to stay as you work with the sense of energy in the body in whatever way gives results. Ajaan Lee gives some recommendations, but notice that in his Dhamma talks he talks about the breath energy in all kinds of ways. There's no one way of conceiving the breath that's going to work for everybody.

So explore and work things out on your own. After all, it is your body that you're settling into. You listen to the instructions to gain pointers, but you also have to use your own imagination, your own ingenuity, your own powers of observation to see exactly how the energy in the body is comfortable or not, where you can maximize the comfortable spots and let everything spread so that the comfort all connects. Then you learn how to stay there.

And don't think of the staying there as just waiting blankly until you're allowed to do insight practice. The skill of learning how to stay in concentration develops precisely the mental qualities you're going to need for insight – because you're going to get more and more sensitive to even the slightest fabrications of thought in the mind. You learn to see right through them and not get carried off into their little worlds. And that's precisely the skill you're going to need in order to see fabrication just as that – fabrication. It's like taking the old Zen story of the finger pointing at the moon and turning it around: You *don't* want to look at the moon; you want to look at the finger – because the finger is what's fooling you. It's pointing you *away* from what it's doing. You don't want to look where your thoughts are pointing your attention; you want to look at them simply as fabrications.

So all the important work in developing concentration and insight happens right here: learning how to deal first with pain and then with pleasure, so that the mind can settle down in a way that's still, solid, and very alert, no matter what.