

Concentration Work

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Ajaan Lee would always recommend starting out with three to seven good, long, deep in-and-out breaths to highlight the process of breathing in the body and to give the body some energy. As the mind settles down, there's a tendency for the breath to get very subtle and quiet, and sometimes it's not really enough for the body's energy needs. Ajaan Fuang had a student one time who really liked the quiet breath. She would always go there in her meditation. I remember him criticizing her one night for that. He said, "You really have to read the body to see what it needs right now. If you go just for the quiet breath all the time, it saps your strength."

An essential skill in meditation is learning how to read what your body needs. Give it more energy when it needs more, even though that may not seem as quiet and refined as you'd like. You've got to take care of both the body and the mind. Consider the issue of directed thought and evaluation. Ajaan Lee recommended that you go through the body in quite a lot of detail to settle things down and to clear things up to create a good place where you can feel at home. People complain that it's not quieting to think about the breath and work with the breath energy in different parts of the body. Well, it's part of the work needed in order to get things ready to settle down in a way that will be solid and lasting.

Be willing to do the work that's needed for a good, solid concentration. Don't just go hiding out in a little quiet corner. Allowing your awareness to spread and fill the whole body is what gives you the proper foundation for your meditation. In doing this work, you exercise your faculties of mindfulness, alertness, and discernment. There's a tendency in some circles to encourage students talented in concentration to direct their energies in the direction of concentration. If they're more talented in the area of analyzing the mind, they're encouraged in the direction of discernment. Ajaan Fuang, though, would turn tables on people. If they were already talented in concentration, he'd have them work more in learning how to think about and analyze the movements of the mind. If they were already talented in analyzing things, he'd have them learn how to be quiet: just sit with things for a while without predetermining all the time. This way, you learn how to detect when things are out of balance and to bring them back into balance when needed.

There's work to be done. Ajaan Lee called it your concentration work: the directed thought and the evaluation. When you start out with these things, they can be rather coarse; but by exercising them, you learn how to bring them to refinement. Sometimes you find that refined breath is too weak. You're drifting off. You've got to strengthen things again, to get in touch with the body and to gain a sense of how to listen to it and respond to its needs. This is especially difficult for people who have body issues, who basically want to run away and block out their awareness of the body. Learn how to trust the different sensations in the body and trust your ability to handle them. In the beginning, you may want to start with just one little, familiar spot in the body or a spot that seems okay, and be willing to hang out there for a while. It may not seem impressive, it may not seem all that quiet yet, but you're working on potentials here. You're also working on patience, learning how to allow potentials to develop in a positive direction.

One of the constant themes in the stories that we hear as children is that you can't judge things by their appearances. You certainly can't judge things now as to what they're going to be in the future: the ugly duckling that turns into a swan, the troll who has gold, the little mouse that's able to help the lion. You have to learn to look for potentials. The Buddha said to work with the potentials in the body and in the breath energy. Even though part of the mind may want to slip off into a nice little cocoon where it doesn't have to think about anything and doesn't have to deal with anything at all, that goes nowhere. You've got work to do. You've got to

come back to the breath. Even though it may not seem comfortable or blissful to begin with, you're going to explore a potential. Give it some space. Don't push the breath too much. Don't force it too much. Just allow it to go into areas where it may not have gone before.

Again, you're not trying to push or force things. The operative word is *allow, allow, allow*. Allow the breath to go down the back, allow it to go through the different organs in the torso, to go out your arms and out your legs. As you go through the body with the word "allow," you begin to notice that some parts of the body are resistant. In some cases, the resistance is pretty short-lived. All you have to do is think, "allow," and things begin to loosen up. Other times they won't loosen up so quickly. Just make a note to return to that area, and then continue to work through the parts that *can* connect into a feeling of free-flowing, mutually supportive energy among the different body parts, rather than working at cross-purposes. Think of all the different organs in the body connecting up and strengthening one another. The energy in your left arm helps your right arm, and vice versa. Your right leg helps your left leg, and vice versa. As for the parts that don't want to join in yet, just leave them alone for the time being.

It's like creating a union of different countries. Some countries are really recalcitrant. They'll wait to see how the union is going before they're willing to join. Look at the long term in order to develop things for the best results in the future rather than for shutting things off for the quick fix in the cocoon. This type of outlook will lead to a greater sense of wellbeing, a greater sense of bliss.

In the course of the Buddha's quest for awakening, he did attain formless levels of concentration that can be attained without dealing with the body at all. However, when the time came to settle on the true path, he started with a form of concentration that was very much with the body: focusing on the breath, giving rise to a sense of ease and wellbeing, refreshment, and rapture. Then he worked the pleasure and rapture through the body in the same way that you knead moisture through dough. It's when your awareness is centered in the body like this that you open up areas that might be closed, to feel more at ease with areas that you've been running away from.

At the same time, you're opening up areas of the mind that you might have closed off as well. A psychological test recently found that people who tend to go into deep concentration are very unaware of themselves psychologically. Of course, the test results didn't say what type of concentration those people were doing. There is a concentration that actually allows people to run away from the present moment, having no sense of the body at all. This type of concentration attracts people in denial or people who are ill at ease with their own bodies for one reason or another. It also doesn't yield much awareness or discernment. As a result, these types of people are not going to be very self-aware.

Wrong concentration makes you unaware of yourself. In fact, it's often your unwillingness to be aware of yourself that drives you into that kind of wrong concentration to begin with. Right concentration requires that you be aware of the whole body and learn to feel at home in the body. This may take time as you get to know and trust things. It's like developing a friendship. You can't just walk up to somebody and immediately become deep and fast friends. There are some people you have an instant rapport with, but the friendship has to be tested over time for you to know whether that rapport will really grow into a friendship. There are some people for whom it's difficult in the beginning, but you find over time that they are people you can trust. That's a friendship worth cultivating in spite of whatever difficulties may be involved. So in the long run, the work involved in learning how to develop a friendship with concentration is good, pleasurable work used for a higher end.

We may want to come here just to tune out and relax for a bit. But for meditation to be genuinely relaxing with a sense of clarity, wellbeing, and strength requires work. It's like visiting the gym. If you want to come away feeling strong, you have to be willing to exercise. Here, the work or exercise is directed thought and evaluation around the breath. Establish a beachhead in the body, an area of the body where you feel at ease and confident. Then learn how to expand from there, listening to the needs of the body. Does it need deep breathing? Does it need shallow breathing? We may have the idea that shallower or gentle breathing is better

or more advanced than heavier breathing, but that's not always the case.

Listen to the needs of the body. It's in the listening that your mindfulness, alertness, and discernment develop and, acting together, bring the mind to a really solid concentration that can act as a basis for further wisdom, discernment, and insight to arise. You have to be willing to put in the effort, confident that the effort will pay off. What you give to the meditation is what makes all the difference.