

How Much Concentration Is Enough?

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How much concentration is enough? Enough is when you can observe your own mind in action. And because the actions of the mind exist on many levels, there are going to be many levels of concentration. As a general rule of thumb, the more concentration, the better – as long as it's mindful.

Sometimes you hear that mindfulness and concentration are two separate states of mind. Mindfulness is open, accepting, and devoid of agendas, whereas concentration is exclusionary and made out of effort. But that's not true. The Buddha talks about mindfulness in many ways where it has to be very focused. He says that when you see an unskillful mind state, you apply mindfulness, relentlessness, and effort to try to get rid of it as quickly as possible in the same way that if your hair were on fire, you'd bring a lot of mindfulness, relentlessness, and effort to put out the fire.

In other words, that's what you'd remember: This is what needs to be taken care of *first*. It's your top priority. And it's obvious in this case that mindfulness isn't just a matter of accepting the fact that the flames are lighting up your head, and they're beautiful shades of yellow, orange, blue, and green. You don't want your hair to be on fire, so you put it out right away. Whatever else you're doing at that time, you have to stop and let it go. Focus totally on putting out the fire. That, he says, is a function of mindfulness: remembering your priorities.

As for concentration, you want the kind of concentration where you're aware and alert. The qualities you bring to the concentration are the same ones you bring to the mindfulness practice: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. It's simply that they get more and more focused. You're more and more continuous in your focus. At the same time, the range of your awareness gets broader and broader until your concentration fills the body.

So as you're here, trying to stay focused on the breath, the first thing you want to keep in mind is that everything you're going to pay attention to for the next hour has to be related to the breath. If it's not related to the breath, you don't want it. That's something you keep in mind. You're mindful that this is where you're going to stay. And of course, mindfulness on its own can't do the work. That's why we bring in the alertness and the ardency.

You're alert to notice what's happening, and you're ardent about doing this well, sticking with what you made up your mind to do and trying to do it skillfully, with all your heart. As you're doing this, you'll begin to see the mind a lot more clearly because the activity of the mind is focused right here. This is the whole point of concentration practice. It's not like you're trying to get the mind into the deepest, ultimate concentration and just leave it there. You want it to be still enough and alert enough to observe the mind in action.

This is why the kinds of concentration where you *can't* observe the mind are not really necessary. The Buddha talks about taking the mind all the way through to what he calls the dimension of nothingness. And when you're in those states, there are basically two levels to being in them. One is when you're totally with the object; it's like putting your hand all the way into a glove. As you get really good staying there, then you can pull back a little bit and observe what you've got. That's like taking your hand part way out of the glove, but not all the way out. The Buddha calls this having your theme well in hand or well-penetrated.

In other words, you're able to observe the mind as it's engaged in what it's doing. And what is it doing? Basically, it's the same thing the aggregates do at any time. "Aggregates" is an unfortunate term that we've used to translate the Pali word *khandha* into English. It makes it sound like a pile of gravel – lots of little *things*. Actually, the aggregates are activities. Feeling feels, perception perceives, fabrications fabricate, and consciousness cognizes. Even form, the Buddha says, is a type of activity: it's constantly de-forming.

All of these things are present right here. The form, of course, is the breath. The feeling is the sense of ease you try to create with the breath—and you learn a lot about creating feelings. Feelings don't just come and go on their own. There's an element of fabrication in how we relate to the feeling. Some pains, if you think about them in a certain way, are painful, and in other ways, are actually pleasant. The pain, say, of a good massage, because you know that it's meant to cure, actually becomes pleasant. We can do it the other way around as well. We can turn certain pleasures into pains.

There's a potential there, and we've learned how to work with it in one way or another. But when we're working with the meditation, we're trying to learn how to work with the breath and breath energies in the body in a way that creates a sense of well-being and lets it spread throughout the body. That requires not only feeling, but also a perception: the mental image you hold in mind, while you're doing this, that keeps you with the breath.

Then there are fabrications that ask questions: Is this as comfortable as it could be? Or is it still lacking something? You come up with ideas about how to stay with the breath, how to get more closely snug with the breath, or how to let go of certain activities you've carried into the concentration that, after a while, are no longer necessary. Ajaan Fuang's image is of setting concrete. You need a form to pour the concrete into, and the form has to stay in place as long as the concrete is still not set. But once the concrete is set, you can take the form away.

There comes a point in the meditation when all the evaluation gets to be too much, and you can just drop it. You have to learn for yourself how to judge that point. If you find you can just *be* with the sensation of the breath, and you don't have to worry about changing it, then you can stay there without using evaluation. You find that the concentration gets more solid, and the burden of the concentration gets less. That's a lot of what insight practice is in the course of concentration. It's learning how to observe what you're doing, how you relate to the object, and how you might do it with more finesse, less effort, and create greater stillness.

Then, of course, there's the consciousness of all these things – awareness of what you're doing.

So you've got all five aggregates right here. We tend to feed off these activities in unskillful ways, but when you're doing concentration, you're learning how to feed off them in ways that are really skillful and nourishing for the mind. At the same time, you're putting yourself in a good position to observe the mind in action. Look at what you're doing while you're doing it, to see the ways in which you fabricate your experience. "Fabricate" doesn't mean totally lying to yourself; it means simply that you put things together in your own way. And we're here to learn about how we're doing this in unskillful ways and how some of our habits really do get in the way of happiness. Even though we've been holding onto them and we learned, at one point, that they might be useful, we've started using them in ways that are *not* helpful. And you want to be able to see that.

You would think that people would be very observant of their minds, but it's usually the last thing they're observant of. It's like that finger pointing to the moon. You could take that image and turn it around. Sometimes you're told that you don't want to mistake the finger for the moon. But here, instead of allowing the finger to direct your attention to the moon, you learn how to stay focused at the finger. What's this finger? Who's behind the finger? What intentions do they have? How are they trying to deceive us? You follow the finger up the arm to the person pointing. That's when you learn a lot about the mind.

This applies to all the different types of meditation you can be doing and all the different ways you have of dealing with problems in the mind. When you're dealing with lust and developing perceptions of the unattractiveness of the body, it's not the case that you're finally going to come to that golden perception that's going to totally eradicate all lust or attachment or pride in the body. The important issue is that you want to observe the mind as you're trying to fight your old habits of seeing the body as beautiful or as substantial or something really worthwhile. And you begin to see: Well, what's the difference between the times when you're focusing on it as unattractive and the times when you're focusing on it as attractive? What's going on? What are the processes that make the switch?

Similarly with goodwill: Sometimes you hear that all you need is lots and lots and lots of goodwill, and that will take you all the way to awakening. But goodwill is a fabrication; it's something you have to intend. And it's when you see the part of the mind that pulls away, that on occasion doesn't want goodwill, that you realize *both* sides are fabricated – both the side that's willing to engage in thoughts of goodwill and the other side that has some thoughts of anger or ill will. You have to ask yourself: When the mind chooses sides, what's going on? What's the process? It's when you learn how to take these processes apart that you break through to something that's not fabricated.

I was talking a while back to someone who said it's totally impossible for a human being to experience something that's unconditioned. Well, that idea is based on a definition of what a

human being is and what a human being can know, which is totally the opposite of what the Buddha's mode of exploration was. He put aside all definitions of what he was, or who he was, and looked at the processes of the mind to figure out what *can* be known. What can be experienced here, when you take apart all these different fabrications and develop dispassion for them?

This dispassion doesn't mean that you hate these things. The word actually comes from the sense of having enough food. You've been feeding off the aggregates, and there comes a point where you decide, "I've had enough! This feeding activity is like chewing on old bones that don't have any more meat. Maybe there's something better." And for different people, it will be at a different point in the meditation. For some, it's when they're contemplating the body. For other people, it's when they're trying to develop thoughts of goodwill; and for others, it's when they're focused on the breath. You develop your ability to see the mind in action as it switches from one topic to another, or switches from one perception to another. You see the process of fabrication, and all of a sudden, it loses all of its appeal because you realize that no matter which direction you go, there's going to be stress.

This is why the four noble truths are the framework that you hold in mind as you're looking at things. You notice that if there's stress, there's got to be a cause. What are you doing at the same time you're experiencing this stress? What are you doing that's making the level of stress go up or down? If it's making it go up, how can you stop doing that? That's what it means to abandon the cause of stress: You stop doing it because you see the connection. And the only way you're going to see the connection is if the mind is still enough, engaged in an activity right here, here in the present moment, and you're watching yourself as you're engaged in that activity. You're watching the processes.

That's where you see something that's totally free of conditions. Then you know at that point, that even though someone else could tell you, "No, you couldn't see that," their words have no impact on you at all because you know what you've seen. And in the process of getting the mind still through the concentration, you've learned how to observe the mind reliably. It's going to take a while to be *really* reliable in your powers of observation. You'll have some false assumptions, but if you watch carefully enough and if you're developing enough integrity, you'll see through those false assumptions. You'll *know* if something is fabricated or something is not fabricated. And that's when all your doubts about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are gone.

The Buddha really did teach something that's timeless. He knew what he was talking about, and it wasn't a teaching that depended on his culture or his time. The teaching really does have something of essence, something of solid value here. But it requires that you watch yourself very carefully. Your integrity has to have solid value, too. It requires that you really look at what you're doing. This is why it's important to get the mind into concentration in a way where you *can* observe yourself.

Sometimes you hear that you've got to get the mind into deep concentration where you can't hear, or see, or sense anything. But again, the Buddha never said that. There's the case of Alara Kalama, who'd been the Buddha's teacher before he gained awakening but who was not awakened. Still, he did have very strong concentration. He talked about one time when he was sitting right next to a road. Five hundred carts went past, and he didn't hear a sound; he was so deep in concentration. But that was it. He was just concentrated – no insight, no ability to observe the mind—or he wasn't inclined to observe his mind. That was what was lacking in his concentration.

Then there's the case of Moggallana, the Buddha's foremost student in terms of his psychic powers. His concentration was good enough to rival the Buddha in terms of psychic powers. But he told the monks one time that, even when he was in what's called the imperturbable concentration—which starts with the fourth jhana and on up through the dimension of nothingness—he could still hear sounds outside. The monks got upset; they thought he was making false claims. They went to see the Buddha. The Buddha said “No. What he said was true. There is that state of concentration where the mind is imperturbable, but it still hears sounds.” He added that Moggallana's imperturbable concentration was not totally pure, but after all, Moggallana was an arahant. If it was good enough for him, it's good enough.

So it's not a question of trying to make your ears go deaf. You simply want the kind of concentration that's still enough so that you can see very slight movements in the mind. And it's mindful enough so that you remember to pose questions. Once you're really, firmly there, then you start posing questions about it so you can see: “Okay, what's going on here? What intentional elements are keeping this going? Where are they causing stress?” Those are the questions that lead to insight.

We're here to watch ourselves in action. Do what you can to get the mind still enough so that you can really see actions of the mind you haven't noticed before. They're all going on, all the time. This is why the path is gradual and why it takes a lot of practice: because you've got to get your powers of discernment more and more subtle. That comes from getting better and better at the concentration. So the question as to how much concentration is enough: The only way you can answer that is by developing as much concentration as you can and learning how to observe it and use it properly.

There's no one-size-fits-all. Some people can hit the first jhana and bang! There they are. Other people have to spend a long time in concentration – get really, really deep, in and out, in and out, many times – before they see what they're doing in a way that really breaks through. As for where you'll be on that continuum, there's only one way to find out. That's to get your mind really, really still and watch. In other words, you have to answer that question for yourself.