

Look after Your Baby

October 1, 2016

All too often, it happens that when you sit down to concentrate on the breath, you stay with the breath for a little bit and then you're off someplace else. You come back, you stay with it a little bit longer, but then you're off again. This happens so many times that you begin to get discouraged. You think, "Maybe this concentration is no good," so you throw it away. It's like having a baby. You feed it. But then it cries. Then you have to clean up the diapers. Then you have to feed it again. And it cries. But you don't throw the baby away. You just realize that it needs extra work. It's the same with your concentration.

You need to have a sense of the value even of little bits of concentration, because those are the things that are going to grow into stronger concentration. So you keep at it: keep coming back, coming back. You fuel your ability to come back with confidence and conviction. And if your conviction is weak, you have to strengthen it, reminding yourself that other people have done this in the past. They're human beings. You're a human being. They did it. You can do it, too.

And you have to strengthen your mindfulness, your ability to remember, that you're going to stay here. All too often a little curtain falls down in the mind, like the curtain when you're watching a play. They move from one scene to another. They put the curtain down. Then the curtain comes up and you're someplace else entirely. You have to watch out for the mind's tendency to put that curtain down, because that's what makes you forget as you go from one scene to the next in your mind. So make up your mind that when the mind is going to wander off, you want to know, because if you keep telling yourself it's not going to wander off, it's not going to wander off—then when it does wander off, part of the mind has to deceive another part of the mind to do that. But if you're alert to the fact that it will wander off and you make up your mind that you want to see the steps or stages, you begin to peer through the curtain. You see that when the mind is getting ready to go, it first sends out a little feeler for something else. And when that feeler attaches to something, then it goes, like a spider casting its web filament to see if it will catch something. So watch out for the filament. Watch out for the feeler.

The mind may be with the breath, or part of the mind is with the breath, but it's not the whole thing. Something else is already sneaking off to go someplace else. And you want to see that. In other words, you have to get the mind so that it doesn't keep lying to itself. So remember, the mind will slip off, but you want to

understand why it does that. And when you can understand it, then you can prevent it.

So even though your concentration may be weak, don't throw it away. Don't get frustrated with it. Learn to value the bits of time when you *are* with the breath. If you made it to three breaths, okay, pat yourself on the back. Then say, "Okay, can I do it to four? How about five?" It may seem very meager in terms of progress, but the progress can grow exponentially. In other words, it goes from three to four and then to eight and then to sixteen, then to 256. It keeps multiplying as you get a better understanding of how the mind moves from one object to another.

All of this comes under the list of the Buddha's teachings on the five strengths. You have to strengthen your conviction. You have to strengthen your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration, and your discernment.

Those strengths are listed in a row: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, but that doesn't mean that you start with just the beginning ones. All five have to support one another. So look to see where you're lacking. Are you lacking conviction in yourself? Are you lacking conviction in the Buddha's teachings? Are you lacking conviction in your persistence? What does it mean to be persistent? It means understanding that there are some things you want to protect, other things you want to get rid of. So even though the concentration in the beginning may be small and weak, you've got to protect it. Don't throw it away.

To make another comparison, it's like planting a tree. You find the seeds, and the seeds can seem very small. But think about the redwoods up north. They have tiny, tiny seeds, and yet, they're the tallest trees on Earth. But they come from these tiny seeds. So you take the tiny seed of concentration and you plant it. And you look after it. And make sure that all the conditions are right in terms of your conviction, your persistence, your mindfulness, and your discernment. And whether it grows quickly or slowly, that's the tree's business. Those redwoods, for example, do grow very slowly. But they can do things that other trees can't do. They can reach higher. They can actually support other trees inside their crown. It's the same with your concentration. Your concentration may be slow to grow, but slow-growing concentration actually has its advantages and can sometimes do things that fast-growing concentration can't.

There are people who find it very easy to close their eyes, go, "Buddho, Buddho," and bang, they're in concentration. The problem is that they don't understand what's happened. And so then, on the days when they *can't* get the mind to settle down, they don't know what to do. But if you've gone through all

the various obstacles that the mind sets up for itself, and you learn how to get past them, then even on days when the mind is not necessarily inclined to want to settle down, you know how to get it past those obstacles, because you've had experience. That kind of slow-growing concentration is like the redwoods with other trees growing up in their crowns. It can support all kinds of insights, all kinds of good qualities in the mind.

So if your concentration is weak, okay, work with your weak concentration. Don't throw it away. Don't say, "I want a better concentration," and discard what you've got. It's like getting a baby that cries and saying, "I want a baby that doesn't cry," so you throw it out. Or, "I want a baby that doesn't have to be fed," and you throw it out. The human race would have died a long time ago if that's how we treated our children. So think of your concentration as a child. In the beginning, it'll require lots and lots of attention. We'd like to think that once we hook onto the breath, we can put everything on automatic pilot and just coast through the hour. But concentration, especially the kind that fosters discernment, is not automatic pilot. It requires alertness. It requires mindfulness. Just as when you drive, you have to be alert all the time; mindful all the time.

So don't expect that the mind's going to get in place and just stay there without your having to care for it. It's in the caring for it that the concentration actually grows and becomes stronger. So the mind that says, "I simply want a place to rest and I don't want to be bothered": That's the mind that just wants to go to sleep. However, to say, "I want to rest in concentration so that I can gain the strength to get to work" is a sign that you realize there's work to be done and you have the conviction that you can do it. If you're lacking in conviction, do what you can to talk yourself into *wanting* to do this. Talk yourself into feeling that you are competent to do this.

So, to bolster your concentration, think of those four other strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and discernment. If the concentration is weak, you have to strengthen those as well, and the concentration will become stronger along with them. Then the little bits and pieces of concentration begin to connect. Not that they flow on their own. You have to do the connecting. But then as they do connect, then they gain strength. The concentration gains a kind of momentum. That's when it requires less and less work. It doesn't require less mindfulness or alertness—those have to be constant—but the effort that gets put in gets easier over time.

Again, it's like raising a child. In the beginning, you have to do everything for it: feed it, clothe it, clean it, comfort it. But after a while, the child begins to feed itself, clean itself, look after itself. You still have to watch over it. After all, it is

your child and it's still not an adult. But it's not as difficult as in the first stage when it's a baby. So even though concentration may be difficult in the beginning, don't think it's going to always be that way. It'll mature. But for it to mature, you have to give it what it needs. Give it your full attention. Be alert. Be mindful. Stick with it. Keep coming back, coming back. Keep encouraging yourself. And that's how your feeble concentration becomes strong.