

The Power of the Focused Mind

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The greatest power in our lives is the power of the mind.

For most of us, that power is scattered around, so we don't get much use of it. When it *is* directed at something, it's usually directed in the wrong place. We start focussing on things that cause us a lot of suffering, cause the people around us a lot of suffering. This is why, if we want to get the most use out of this power, we have to learn how to train it. One, to get it focused in the right way and, two, to apply that focused power to the right issues.

When we're practicing concentration, that's the first order of business, to get the mind properly focused. There are all kinds of wrong concentration that can do the mind a lot of harm. You may focus on thoughts that lead to anger, on thoughts that lead to depression, on thoughts that are self-destructive. That's the most typical way most people focus their minds.

So when the Buddha says to have respect for concentration, he wants you to realize that you've got a very potent tool here, one that you've got to learn to use properly. For most of us it's easy to get focused on things that are detrimental to ourselves but very hard to get focused on the topics of right concentration. It requires patience.

When the Buddha talks about right concentration, he uses the word *jhana*, which is related to a verb for burning, *jhayati*. Pali has lots of different verbs for burning, but this is the one that describes the burning of the flame of an oil lantern or an oil lamp or a candle in a place where there's no wind. The flame is steady, calm, consistent. That's the kind of quality you want in your mind.

Most of the time the mind is like a different kind of fire, burning with the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. Those are like a burning log. The flames leap around and are very erratic. But what we want is to adjust the fuel, adjust the flame, to bring the mind to a still fire of steadiness and still focus.

So we start out small, and you have to protect that small point of focus. You're focused on the point of your nose, the middle of your head, the middle of the chest, whichever point feels most comfortable. Focus on that point and shelter it from other influences. In other words, other thoughts may come to the mind but you don't latch on to them, don't let them cause that little flame to

waver. Protect it, the same way you'd cup a small flame in your hands when you're trying to get a fire started in the midst of a wind. And after a while, as you don't pay attention to those other thoughts that coming blowing into the mind, it means that you're not feeding them. They begin to go away.

When the fire finally catches, then you can let it spread throughout the body, so you have that same quality of steadiness and intentness and just-rightness filling your whole awareness. The body is saturated with awareness. The images they use in the Canon are, first, kneading these good breath sensations into the body the same way you'd knead water into a ball of bath powder. Once the whole body is saturated in this way, you just sit there. Here the image is of a well of spring water coming up in a lake or of lotuses totally immersed in a lake, saturated from their roots to their tips with the water. Finally, there is the image of a person sitting with a white cloth covering the whole body. The awareness is bright, fills the whole body, and is very still, with the same kind of steadiness as the flame of an oil lamp, the flame of a candle in a still room.

So you have to look after your stillness. This is called having respect for concentration. One of the verses we chant regularly is "one who is ardent with respect for concentration." There's steadiness in the ardency. It's not that you throw yourself into it for the whole night and then collapse, too tired to do anything for the next several days. You try to maintain a kind of steadiness, breath in, breath out, breath in, breath out, and it's the consistency that makes all the difference.

States of concentration often start out small. You can think of them as little shoots growing up in a path: grass shoots, weed shoots, flower shoots, all growing up in the path. And if you're not really discerning, figuring which are the shoots you don't want in the path and which are the one's you do, you step on everything. But if you notice, this is an oak shoot, take care of it because we can use an oak tree around here, it can give shade if it's an oak tree or give fruit if it's a fruit tree: Those are the shoots you watch out for. If you take care of them, water them, make sure you don't step on them, they'll grow.

It's the same with states of concentration. They often start out small—innocuous and anonymous. But if you notice that a little state of stillness and focus on it, then the steadiness of your focus is what allows the concentration to grow. This is why patience is such an important quality.

We all know that we need more patience but we're very impatient about getting those lessons from patience. We wish patience would hurry up and give us patience from those lessons so we can get on to the next thing. It doesn't work that way. You take your time. Not that you dawdle, just that you're careful about what you do. Then the results grow.

Once the mind is in a steady state of concentration, you want to master it. What you want is the kind of concentration that serves a real purpose, and this is where the issue of discernment comes in. There are lots of uses for concentration just as there are lots of states of concentration you can get into. You want a state that's mindful, alert, fully aware, so you can use it to understand the problem of why there is suffering in life.

This was the Buddha's great discovery, realizing that this is the best issue to use your concentration for. There are other ways of using concentration. You can use it as a kind of hideaway, or you can use it to develop psychic powers. All kinds of miraculous things can come from the power of concentration. In fact there's a huge literature in Thailand of all the amazing things that people with strong powers of concentration can do.

But that's not necessarily the best use of concentration. The first order of business is the whole issue of suffering. Why is there suffering in the mind? In particular, why does the mind create its own suffering? You'd think if you had any intelligence, the mind wouldn't cause itself to suffer. But that's the whole problem: we're not very intelligent about how we manage our minds.

So what you want is to use your powers of concentration, alertness, and mindfulness to look into how the mind is creating its own suffering, where the things are that it's latching onto, where its clingings are. We look for these clingings, because whatever it clings to, there are going to be problems as soon as that thing changes. You cling to the body, you cling to feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, whatever. The clinging in and of itself is suffering.

So this is the prime use for your powers of concentration. If other powers develop, okay, well and good, as long as this one is the first order of business. Look into the question of where the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself. Look at the way you relate to your thoughts. Or if pain arises in the body, that's a prime issue right there. The Buddha likened it to being shot by an arrow, in that the mind goes in and creates more issues and shoots itself with a second arrow.

We're so busy in shooting those arrows that there are not just two arrows. There's a whole swarm of arrows we shoot at our pain. So we're sitting there with just a little pain in our leg or pain in our back, but it's riddled with arrows. We create all kinds of issues around it that just add on to the suffering.

If there weren't that basic clinging to the body to begin with, then the pain in the body wouldn't be an issue for the mind. But wherever there's clinging, you create a bridge for suffering to come into the mind. And you keep on maintaining that bridge. This is what we've got to be sensitive to: that we're constantly keeping that bridge in good order.

Sometimes we drop that bridge but it's because we've built a bridge to something else and then more suffering comes in from that other source.

And we're always focused on getting things quickly: "Why won't this pain go away? Hurry up and teach me your lessons and go away." It doesn't work that way. First you've got to look at the mind's commentary around the pain, seeing exactly where the issue is within that commentary, where the false assumptions are. This is why having a good solid state of concentration based in the body is so important. It helps get you out of that dialogue in the mind. Sometimes it's not a dialogue, it's a shouting match. It's a whole lot of people shouting at each other.

But if you're firmly grounded in the breath, firmly grounded in the body, you can just watch this conversation, this commentary in the mind without getting involved. That's what allows you to see through it, to see which voices are wounding the mind with "arrows of the tongue." Then you can disarm them.