

Doing, Maintaining, Using

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Ajaan Fuang once said that there are three stages to concentration practice. The first is learning how to do it. The second is learning how to maintain it. And the third is learning how to put it to use. The doing is not all that hard—focus the mind on the breath. The breath is right there. You don't have to go scrounging around. You don't have to go to the ends of the earth to find your breath. It's right next to the mind. It's simply a question of learning to be more sensitive to it. That's the hard part of doing it: having a clear sense of when the breath is coming in, when it's going out, having a clear sense of when you are making it unnecessarily uncomfortable.

This involves watching it for a while, and then adjusting it. Think, "a little bit longer," think, "a little bit shorter." See how the breathing responds, and how it *feels* as it responds. You can think, "deeper," think of your whole body all the way down to your toes breathing in, breathing out. Think of the breath all around the body. Think of the body as being like a big sponge and the breath is coming in through all the pores. See what way of conceiving the breath feels best.

Once you learn how to do this, then the trick is learning how to maintain it. In other words, learning how not to slip off. Learning how to make it comfortable is one of the tricks in learning how to maintain it, because the mind is always looking for food. What we're doing as we're meditating is giving it good food to eat. The sense of comfort that comes with being familiar with the breath helps get the mind more and more inclined to keep coming back. It's like feeding a stray dog. If you give it good food, it's going to come back.

The mind has a tendency to stray, but as long as you feed it well, it'll learn more and more that this is a good place to be, a really good place to feed. You can think of the meditation techniques as cooking techniques—you're learning how to feed yourself well. Most of us are the kind of person who just goes rummaging through a garbage heap, then eats whatever, anything that even remotely resembles food. And of course you get sick that way. Sometimes you get good food, sometimes you get bad. You hear stories about restaurants throwing out good food. So sometimes you get good food as you rummage around, but a lot of times it's garbage, really bad garbage. Sometimes it's spoiled. But you keep on eating it because you don't have better food. You don't know how to cook.

There was a homeless shelter in DC years back. They went around to all the embassies and all the really good restaurants in DC and just asked for their leftover food. Then they took that and served it at the homeless shelters. All of a sudden the homeless people were eating French food and other exotic dishes. This got the homeless people interested in this kind of food. So right next to the soup kitchen the people who ran the shelter opened a cooking school where they offered to teach the homeless people how to cook French food and other exotic dishes. As a result, many of the homeless people became really good chefs. They were able to get jobs. This is a good metaphor for our meditation. We learn how to eat well, how to feed the mind well, so we don't have to go running through

garbage bins. As the mind learns to feed well, it'll have a tendency not to want to go back to its old ways.

This leads naturally to that third step: using the meditation. The mind needs strength in all kinds of situations, and not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed. In fact, it especially needs strength when you're dealing with difficult people, difficult situations, situations that give rise to anger, situations that give rise to fear. One of the important uses of concentration is to learn how to keep the mind with the breath in the midst of all kinds of strange situations, all kinds of challenging situations. Instead of leaping out, putting all your awareness outside, you try to keep your awareness centered inside as you deal with whatever's hard to deal with. That way you're coming from a position of strength. So you learn how to stay with the breath and keep the breath comfortable when there's fear, when there's anger, when there's greed, when there's uncertainty, when there are all kinds of things happening around you, or happening inside the mind.

This is where the concentration really shows its benefits, in that you can keep feeding and strengthening the mind even in the midst of difficult situations. It's also by learning how to feed the mind in situations like this that you gain more and more insight into the mind. You begin to see how it slips off into its old habits, what tempts it to slip off. Sometimes it's fear. You're afraid if let our old defenses down, this new defense is not going to help us. But as you get more confident in your meditation, you begin to realize this is a much better defense, coming from a position of strength. When the mind is calm and centered, you can think more clearly. Then you learn how to apply it. In situations where you would tend to get depressed, you can cheer up the mind simply by the way you relate to the breath, by the way you relate to your sense of the body. Other times, when the mind seems scattered all over the place, you can learn how to focus it and settle it down, and just keep it really, really solidly based.

The Buddha talks about three important skills in learning how to keep the mind centered. One is gladdening the mind, another is steadying the mind, and the third is liberating the mind. Whenever you find that a particular feeling has taken over, you learn how to pry the mind loose from that, from its grip, so that the mind is free even in the midst of situations that would normally tie it down or oppress it.

So all of these are techniques in the proper care and feeding for the mind. As you feed the mind properly like this, it leads naturally into gaining insight into the various component factors of your meditation. You've learned that in this situation you have to add more pleasure, in that situation you have to change your perceptions, in this situation you have to change the way you think about these things. Well, these are all different aggregates: feeling, perception, thought constructs. And as you learn how to use them in different ways to deal with different situations, they begin to stand out more clearly because you see them in action, you've used them in action.

This is when you're going to gain real insight into them, how you can relate to them in a way that's healthy rather than just grabbing on and gobbling them down. This is how the mind begins to gain insight into its attachments. Because it sees the component factors, it's learned how to use them in a way that it's really on familiar terms with them, and it's changed its relationship to them.

They now become tools rather than things that you would identify with or things that you are constantly chewing on, because you've learned how to feed the mind better, feed it more skillfully.

So wherever you are in the practice, if you find that you haven't been able to do the concentration, work on just bringing things together here. Once you've learned how to do it, then learn how to maintain it. And when you learn how to maintain it, the way to gain insight into it is not to try to take it apart yet. It's through learning to apply it to all kinds of different situations so that you get a really good feel for it. As you gain that feel for it, then the various elements of form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, and consciousness begin to separate out. You can watch them for what they are. Then when you let them go, it's not that you throw them away. You've simply learned that you don't have to identify with them. You can pick them up when you need them, put them down when you don't. So this is how the practice of concentration leads to discernment. It teaches you how to eat well, how to feed the mind well, to the point where ultimately it doesn't have to feed anymore.