

Tranquility & Insight

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One of the Buddha's main insights was the extent to which we fashion our experience. We're not simply passive recipients of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations coming in through the senses. We go out looking for these things and shaping them. Our whole experience of the form of the body, our feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, even our consciousness, has an element of intention in it. We're doing it for a particular purpose.

We want happiness out of these things, in line with whatever we conceive the happiness to be. And we shape these things because of our passion for the happiness. It's a combination of fabrication powered by passion: That's what we experience, and because we do this in ignorance, we suffer. So to stop the suffering, we have to stop the ignorance and the passion. That's what *samatha* and *vipassanā*, tranquility and insight, are all about. It's through *samatha*, the Buddha said, that we overcome our passion, and through *vipassanā*, or insight, that we overcome our ignorance.

We need both because you can know things are fashioned, and yet you can still say, "What the hell, I like what I'm fashioning, it's worth it." Even though you may know that it's impermanent and stressful, you can say, "I still get that little bit of honey on the edge of the knife, and that's enough for me." At the same time, if you learn how to get the mind really tranquil and abandon passion for things for a while, there would still be some ignorance underlying those things. There would still be some fashioning going on in the mind that you're not aware of, and there would still be suffering as a result. So both qualities—tranquility and insight—are necessary, and they need each other. This is why the Buddha said that ideally you should practice in a way that develops both tranquility and insight at the same time.

That's what the breath technique is all about. If you notice how he talks about breath meditation, it's not just a matter of sitting here watching the breath coming in, out, in, out, in, out. He says that you train yourself to breathe in certain ways,

and to look for certain things as you're breathing in and out. One of the things you're trying to see is the extent to which the breath fashions your experience of the body, and how you can calm that down. Another is to see the extent to which feelings and perceptions fashion your state of mind, and you calm them down, too.

The word *saṅkhāra*, translated as fabrication, is this activity of fashioning. When you can see the fashioning in action, you'll see that you're shaping your experience of the body simply by the way you breathe and by the way you perceive the breath. You'll also see that the way you breathe creates feelings that will have an impact on the mind. The mind is also shaped by the perceptions you have about the relationship between it and the breath and the body, and all the other things coming in and out: in through the senses, out through your activities and intentions.

As you practice the steps of breath meditation, you're seeing these things as fabrication, and in a way that allows you to get some dispassion for them. Without the calm, you can't have the dispassion, because the mind needs to feed. In fact, you have to be strategic. You don't just sit here and become complacent and indifferent to things. You have to be passionate about the concentration, because otherwise you're going to go out and feed on other things.

So learn how to feed on the stillness of mind that you can create as the mind settles down. That can be your passion. You want to do this well, to master it as a skill. Try to motivate yourself in any way that really works for you.

This is why there's no one standard technique for concentration, no one standard technique for tranquility or insight. There's a range of techniques, and you have to try out several approaches to figure out what's your particular problem, your particular passion, and what's going to be the technique that's going to help you gain some insight and tranquility to deal with what your particular passions are.

So try to gain an interest here in the breath. If the breath isn't interesting, try to gain an interest in any of the topics of concentration that seem congenial to you. Learn how to get the mind really skillful at settling down with these topics and staying with them. As the Buddha said, the mastery of concentration requires both

insight and tranquility. You have to have some understanding of how you can fashion a state of mind if you want it to settle down.

For instance, you may be sitting here, and there's a pain in a part of the body. How do you settle down in the body and not let the pain get to you? That's a skill, and it involves a certain amount of fashioning: how you regard the pain, what mental image you have of the pain. You can think of the pain as a hologram. It seems real, but there's going to be one spot in there where the hologram just doesn't exist. Try to find that spot, so you can settle in there. That's one way of looking at it.

Or you can ask yourself which side of the pain you're on. Or ask other questions about the pain. Or you can decide just to leave the pain where it is and you're going to work around it. All of this is a kind of fashioning, because you have to make up your mind what you're going to do. There has to be an intention here, and the intention has to be driven by a certain amount of passion.

You want to master this skill, because you see that it's useful. Those little pains that come up in the meditation: Sometimes they're not so little, but they're nothing compared to the bigger pains we're going to meet with later in life. So you want to be prepared. You want to have a range of skills to deal with them.

That's one way you can motivate yourself: to realize you've got things looming ahead of you in the future that may be good, may be bad, but you want to be prepared for anything.

So how do you breathe around pain? How do you breathe through it? Where do you position your awareness? Develop a passion for these issues. As the Buddha said, you develop both the tranquility and insight by asking questions. The technique is all the same: You work with the breath. The questions you're asking about the mind being with the breath in the present moment are going to determine whether you're coming out with more insight or more tranquility. If you ask about how to settle down, how to get the mind solid and unified, those are questions that deal with tranquility. If you ask how to understand the way you're fabricating things, and how to look at the fabrications in a way that helps develop dispassion so as to lead to greater tranquility, that's what develops insight.

The Buddha doesn't talk about tranquility and insight as techniques. They're

qualities of mind developed by these different questions. But the process is all the same: You try to get the mind into a state of concentration and then you try to understand what you're doing. As with any skill, your primary emphasis at first is going to be the object. You want to focus in on the breath, try to understand the breath in all the various ways it moves around in the body. But after a while, as you get good at that, you begin to develop the ability to step back a bit and watch the mind in action around all of this, to see the power of your perceptions, to see what it is that motivates you, where you're fashioning things. As the Buddha said, you get good at the concentration, and then you start stepping back to see that this concentration you're practicing here is made up of those aggregates.

Now, you've heard about aggregates. The Buddha said that when you cling to the aggregates, there's going to be suffering. In fact, that's what lies at the heart of the suffering that weighs the mind down: the clinging to the aggregates. You've got these aggregates right here in your concentration. You've got the breath: That's form. You've got the feeling of pleasure around the breath: That's feeling. You've got the perception of the breath that holds you with it; the thought-fabrications that help adjust the breath and make it just right; and the consciousness that's aware of all these things. So you've got all five aggregates right here. You want to see to what extent you can master them—and in the course of mastering them, you're going to find that they have their limitations.

It's one thing to sit here and say, "Gee, whatever concentration I get comes and goes, and it's inconstant, stressful, and not-self," and think that you've done the work of insight. But that's not the work of insight at all. You first want to see how far you can overcome the inconstancy of the concentration. In fact, you're pushing against the inconstancy here. You're pushing against the stress. You're pushing against not-self—in other words, you're trying to get some control over these things, so that you can see how far you can go with them.

It's when you run up against limitations: That's when you know for yourself how inconstant, stressful, and not-self they are. That's when the dispassion can really set in.

In the meantime, try to be passionate about the concentration, be passionate about trying to master the mind, because if it's not mastered it's going to create a

lot of trouble. Pain can come up in the body, and you can make it even worse than it is if you're not careful. This is why the Buddha said that everything depends on heedfulness: realizing that there are dangers, and the big dangers lie in having a mind that's out of control. That sense of heedfulness helps to develop the passion you need in order to stick with the practice. Ultimately, you'll find that once you've gotten far enough in the practice and you've seen how far the concentration and the mindfulness and all these good qualities of mind can go, that's when you can really let everything go.

But in the meantime, you've got to hold on. Hold on to the good things; hold on to your path; hold on to the passion that wants to get beyond suffering and wants to understand things well, so that you develop both the knowledge and the dispassion that will enable you to get free of all these things.

And what's left when you're free? The Buddha talks about a little bit. He doesn't say much about it except that's it's the greatest possible happiness there is, the greatest well-being there is, the greatest freedom there is. He tells you this much to get you motivated. When you get there, you find that there's a lot more to it than just that.

So remember, you've got to develop both of these qualities, tranquility and insight, together. Sometimes you'll find that the insight leads and the tranquility follows, or the tranquility leads and the insight follows, but you need both. If you have just one, as Ajaan Lee says, it's like walking with one leg. All you can do is hop, hop, hop, and you don't get very far. But when you use two legs, you can walk all over the place. You can walk for miles, you can walk for hours, but if you hop, you can hop at most for five or ten minutes.

So remember that this is a long-term process we're engaged in here, because you want the knowledge that sees how things are fabricated and how you are, through your intentions, shaping your experience. You also want the stillness, the tranquility, that allows you to step back a bit from all that, and ask yourself: Is it really worth it? The path is worth it, but there are a lot of other things that we're fabricating that really aren't.

When you develop the path, you develop a passion for the path so that you have something to compare with your normal habits, the way you normally

fashion things. The insights, when they come, have to be particular to you. We're not trying to squeeze the mind into a sausage factory to create sausage insights. We're trying to see precisely what is it about your way of fabricating your experience that's causing you stress and suffering. So insights are personal. They come from developing your own sensitivity to what you're doing right here, right now.

Which is why the Buddha didn't teach just one insight technique or one tranquility technique. He taught a full repertoire because there are lots of particularities to how we create stress for ourselves, and you're going to need a tool that's just right for you. This is why there's a certain need for trial and error in the practice. It's only in that way that you can really make the practice your own, so that you can deal with your own suffering, and provide the insights and the ability to develop dispassion that work precisely for your own habits of creating suffering for yourself. So learn how to use your own powers of observation, your own ingenuity in asking the questions of tranquility, asking the questions that lead to insight, as you're sitting here working with the breath.