

The Path Converges Right Here

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When the Buddha discovered the path, the first factor he discovered was right concentration. And as he worked at right concentration, he found that other factors had to come in to support it. These are called the requisites or supports of right concentration. They start with right view all the way through right mindfulness. But they all converge here, at right concentration, and it's good to think about how they keep bringing you back right here.

Right concentration is focused on one thing: It's singleness of mind, focused on an object like the breath. As the Buddha describes it, you drop your interest in sensual pleasures. In other words, you're not escaping from sensual pleasures. You don't have to go off and find someplace that's really painful to stay. It's simply that while you're in this state, you're not really interested in them. You're not interested in sensual desires. You want to just be right here with the sense of the body as you feel it inside. That's called *rupa*, or form. Thoughts of sensuality just drop away. Or you let them drop away. Any unskillful states of mind, you let them drop away.

The fact that you're secluded from those things: That in and of itself gives a nice sense of ease. Sensual desires put you on fire. There's always a sense of lack that goes with the desire. Even when you gain the object of your desire, you know how precarious it is. So there's a sense of instability. The mind can't find any real peace that way. There's a passage where the Buddha says, "There's no other pleasure, there's no other ease, than stillness and peace." We might think of all kinds of pleasures that aren't very peaceful, but each of them is a pleasure because the mind can stay there for a while. That's the peace the Buddha's talking about.

The problem is that these pleasures doesn't let you stay very long. If you want a sense of real well-being, you have to find something that allows you to stay here for a good long time. So the breath is a good place to be. It helps you explore the body from within; it gives you a tool for dealing with problems in the circulation of blood in the body, problems in the energy flow in the body. As you work with the breath energy in the different parts of the body, it's good for those parts of the body. When the mind has a good place to stay, it's willing to settle down. It can begin to melt into the present moment instead of being tensed up and ready to spring off at the slightest provocation.

So the Buddha said, in the first jhana there's directed thought and evaluation. Ajaan Lee divides the five factors of jhana into two sorts. Three of them are the

causes. You're sitting here thinking about the breath and trying to get the breath good. That's called directed thought and evaluation. You stick with it, and it's the only thing you're concerned about. That's singleness of preoccupation. Other ideas may come jumping at you and demanding your attention, like little dogs, but you don't have to pay them any attention. If you don't pay them attention, they see there's no food there and they go away. Those three factors are the causes. The other two factors—pleasure and rapture—are the results.

Now, it helps to have the right attitude in order to maintain the causes, and this is where the other factors of the path come in.

First there's right view. It reminds you that the big issue in life is suffering. Where does the suffering come from? It comes from the mind. Why does it come from the mind? Because the mind is ignorant of itself. So this is why we practice concentration. This is why you're here: to learn about yourself right here to see what you're doing right here that's causing unnecessary suffering right here.

As for right resolve, that has a very close connection with right concentration. In fact, there's another passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about how his path started with right resolve and led to right concentration. That was when he got on the right path. He realized that he could divide his thoughts into two sorts: those concerned with sensual desire, ill will, harmfulness on the one hand; those concerned with renunciation, lack of ill will, lack of harmfulness on the other.

He looked at his thoughts not in terms of their content, but in terms of what they would do. He realized that the first sort would lead to affliction for himself or for others. The other sort wouldn't lead to affliction for anybody. So he would try to hold those first ones in check in the same way you'd try to keep a herd of cows out of a field of ripening rice. As for the others, he'd allow them to wander as they like, like a herd of cows when the rice has been harvested and there's no danger that they're going to get into trouble.

But even then, he said, as you think those good thoughts they can wear the mind down. That's what led him to want to go further, to get the mind even more still through right concentration. At the same time, while you're in right concentration, it's an embodiment of right resolve. You're not concerned with sensual thoughts. You have no ill will for anybody; no harmfulness. This is a good place to be.

The various precepts about right action, right speech, right livelihood: When you follow them, they allow you to settle down in the present moment and not suddenly get startled by the memory of something harmful you've done. Now, there may have been harmful things you've done way in the past, before you

started taking the precepts, but you realize you've drawn a line. You've made up your mind that you're not going to go in that direction anymore. A sense of well-being comes from making that determination and maintaining it. That, too, feeds the right concentration.

Right effort, of course, is part of the path along with right mindfulness that leads directly into right concentration. You start out with the desire to abandon unskillful thoughts that have arisen, to prevent any unskillful ones that haven't arisen yet from arising, to give rise to skillful mental states, and to maintain skillful states and to develop them.

Notice the desire there. It's a good thing. This is the kind of desire you want to foster, because otherwise your desires will pull you all over the place, away from your concentration. This is why it's good to read about the *ajans*. It's good to read about people who have practiced and whom you find inspiring – people who are not too far away, not too distant in the sense of seeming superhuman. It's good to read about people who are human who have practiced the path you're following, because our society gives us other models to follow.

And we have to fight against a lot of those models: the ones that say you're a loser if you don't make a lot of money, if you don't go running over people. Other models say you have to go around helping people all the time. Even though that second one sounds good, it can get you frazzled and leave you with nothing, and after a while you suffer burnout—in Kurt Vonnegut's words, *Samaritrophia*. Your good Samaritan attitudes begin to atrophy because you're just worn out. You don't have the strength to keep them up. So you remind yourself: a good state of right concentration is a good place to nourish your strength.

So you see, when you think about the various factors of the path, they all point in here.

The qualities that you develop as you're developing those factors point in here as well. For instance, with right speech and right action, if you're going to maintain the precepts, you have to be very mindful. Mindfulness is what keeps the precepts in mind so that you don't forget them when you need them. You also have to be very alert to what you're doing to make sure your actions don't go against the precepts. And you have to be ardent. You see that you have some old, habitual ways of doing things that get in the way of the precepts, they're really easy because they're habitual, and if you're not careful you can simply slide right into them. So you've got to be ardent in putting up a wall that says, No. And you have to learn how to do that effectively.

As you do this, you're developing a lot of the qualities you're going to need to get the mind to settle down. Being mindful, alert, and ardent comes into the

factor of right mindfulness. You keep one topic in mind, such as the body in and of itself. Notice the “in and of itself.” That also refers to the idea of being secluded. You’re not thinking about the body in terms of the world—how good it looks or how much work it’s able to do out there in the world. You’re thinking about it just as the body right here. This is what it feels like to be with a body, to inhabit a body. And you’re ardent, alert, and mindful to stay with the body in and of itself.

Now, one of the ways of doing that is by being with the breath, so that you can get fully into the sense of inhabiting the form of your body, finding pleasure just being in the form, along with the different energies of the form flowing together.

All these factors come together right here. If the mind is tempted to wander out, you’ve got these factors around you like a fence. They’ll divert you and bring you right back in. In the meantime, they strengthen qualities that you’re going to need to stay right here.

So when you’re right here in right concentration, you’re at the right spot. The other factors of the path are supports or requisites to help you stay here in a way that’s really solid. They also direct your attention to what needs to be done.

You can use concentration for all kinds of things. But, as the Buddha said, the best use of it is to figure out this problem of suffering.

Why is it that we keep causing ourselves suffering? Exactly what is the suffering that weighs us down? Well, it’s the suffering we create, not so much the suffering that comes in through the senses. Notice when you take, say, a pain from outside, or a disappointment from outside, and use it to stab the heart. That activity of stabbing: Why are you doing that? Can you stop? The Buddha says that when you can answer this question, you’ve answered a lot of other questions as well. At the same time, you’ve learned how not to be a burden to other people.

So those other factors of the path support you in getting into right concentration and then remind you what it’s useful for. That way, all the factors of the path support one another. And they support you in your desire to make sense of all this, this life that we have—having a sense of what we can do with it; the best use we can make of our lives. It all starts right here.