

Fear of Concentration

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Some of the problems we have in getting the mind into concentration come simply from an inability or unwillingness to let our thoughts subside. We find our thoughts interesting. We find our inner mental chatter interesting. We'd be hard put to know what it would be like to have a mind where this chatter wasn't going on all the time. So we're unwilling to let go. The problem comes largely from a fascination with our thoughts.

Other problems come from fear. When we sit down and meditate, we have to be with the body. We have to let go of our interest in the world around us. And just that much is enough to strike fear into some people.

We all come to meditation with different issues about how we relate to our bodies. Some people find the idea of just being with the body and having unusual sensations come up in the body kind of fun. Other people find it threatening. So it's good to know that if you have some fear around concentration or some aspect of concentration, you are not the only one. Other people have been through this before. They had the same fears and they learned how to overcome them. It's also good to know that the dangers you're afraid of are things that can be dealt with.

One of the first reasons for fear of concentration is that people have had traumatic experiences related to their bodies. They have either been abused one way or another, or they have difficulty being with the body because it brings up memories of the abuse. These people, you find, have a tendency to go to space right away, and they seem to think that's an advanced practice. They can bypass the body and go straight to space. The problem is that they can't stay there very long. It's very tenuous, very unstable. The real work is in the body: the way your awareness relates to the body.

That's where the *sankharas*—bodily fabrication, mental fabrication, verbal fabrication—all come together. In a case like that, you've got to tell yourself that there must be some spot in the body where you feel safe. Try to find that one spot. Take that as your beachhead and then gradually expand your awareness as you begin to feel comfortable. As for any images that come up, any memories that come up, you just let them go, let them go. They don't have to have a permanent impact on the mind. This way, bit by bit by bit, you can reclaim your body.

For other people, getting into the body is not the problem—it's letting go of your sense of the world around you. There are some people who feel safe only if they know where everything is in the room around them, where everybody is in

the room around them. The idea of sitting here with your eyes closed, just being here with your breath—with your sense of the world around you, the room around you, just fading into the background—is kind of threatening. This is why you want to meditate in a room where you feel safe. People like this also might want to meditate with their eyes open for a while until they get a sense of feeling solidly grounded inside and don't need so much to relate to the world outside.

Then there are cases when you're in the body and you start having weird sensations. Rapture can sometimes manifest pretty early in the practice, even before the mind has gotten into any real jhana. There can be some manifestations of rapture that can be kind of scary. One in particular is a sense of fullness. I know personally of a couple of cases of people who had experiences of almost drowning in the past. The sense of fullness that comes when the mind settles into the body reminded them of those experiences and it was scary. In a case like that, you have to remember that you're surrounded by air, you're surrounded by air, not by water. The fullness is not a sign of drowning, it's a sign that you're settling in. If you find it too overwhelming, think of the soles of your feet, the palms of your hands, as energy escape valves. In other words, if it feels like an excess of fullness in the chest, say, or in the torso, you can think of the energy flowing out the arms, flowing down the legs, out through the palms of the hands, out through the soles of the feet. In other words, you have a way of regulating things so you don't feel so overwhelmed.

Other manifestations include the body feeling extremely small or extremely large, filling the whole room. Again, if you're the sort of person who wants to have everything under control, this may be threatening. Here you can say, "Well, I've got the control over my breath. I'm going to stay with the breath." As for the undulations in your sense of the body, just let them be. They'll settle down after a while. It's a phase you can go through.

Then there's a sense of space that comes as the sense of the shape of the body begins to dissolve away. Again, some people find that threatening. They want to hold on to the body. I mean, you do want to be right here—you don't want to go off into some other thought world—but you can be here with a sense of being right here and still have the body dissolve away, dissolve away right here.

Remind yourself that it's not going to die when that happens. It's right here, simply that the mental activities that identify this part of the body as being right here, while this connects to that, and the skin is right here, and the air against the skin is right here: Those activities are beginning to shut down, but it doesn't mean that they won't come back. They will come back when you want them. It's just that for the time being you don't need them. This is something you've got to

remember again and again and again: You don't need those activities. You're trying to pare down the activities of the mind and, in so doing, the sense of the body is going to change for a while. Ultimately, things will settle in and everything will be okay.

Similarly, when thoughts begin to die away: As I said earlier, there are some people who identify very strongly with their thoughts: "What's going to happen to me if I'm not thinking and talking to myself?" Well just shift your sense of identity. Just be with the awareness. Be with the space. As long as you need to identify with something, identify with that. Regard it as a stepping-stone. But for the time being, it's a place where you can identify.

Then, of course, there's the fear that comes when the breathing stops. And again, this can sometimes happen very early on in the practice before you've gotten properly into the fourth jhana. If it happens, don't get scared. Just remind yourself that if the body needs to breathe, it'll breathe. You can't stop it from breathing. It's simply that, by focusing on the breath, things get more and more calm, more and more still. You've got to spread your awareness to fill the whole body. Otherwise, you're going into what they call "delusion concentration," where you just zone out.

Here it's helpful to have the perception in mind that there's breath energy filling the body, and if the body needs any energy in any part at all, in terms of breath energy, it'll come. It doesn't have to come through the nose. It can come through the pores, or from another part of the body. Hold that perception in mind. Don't think of the skin as made out of latex or some other substance that's not porous. Your skin is very porous. In fact, the word "porous" comes from your pores. Energy can come in and out. What you need in terms of oxygen can sometimes be supplied simply by exchange that goes on at the skin, especially if the mind is very quiet. And if you find that it really is settling down for longer periods of time as you're not breathing, just hold that perception in mind. You're not stifling the breath. If you stifle the breath, the body will react. But if it's got to the point where it doesn't need to breathe, why force it?

So these are some of the fears that people can have as they settle in and some of the ways of dealing with those fears. But the important thing to remember is that you are doing something that's quite safe.

There are a few dangerous things that you have to watch out for, but they may not be what you expect.

One: If you get a vision, you don't want to go with the vision. And particularly, you don't want to get *into* the vision, because it might cause you to lose your sense of the body and drift away. That's one of the ways in which people

actually have out-of-body experiences. For some people the idea of an out-of-body experience sounds pretty cool, but when you are not fully in your body, it's like not being in your house most of the year. Other things can move in. When the time comes for you to come back in, they may not want you to come back in. They may lay claim to the place. So if a vision comes up, just breathe deeply into your heart a couple of times, and the vision will go away. The visions are like a dream state, and if you re-establish mindfulness in the body, that pulls you out of the dream state.

If you find that you have actually left the body, try to think of the elements or the properties of earth, water, wind, and fire. Remind yourself: What does it feel like to be with the solidity of the body, the warmth of the body, the coolness and liquidity of the body, and the energy of the breath in the body? Call those things to mind and you'll find yourself back inside. Because when you're outside of the body that way, you're not safe, the body's not safe. Again, think of it as being outside of the house. You're lacking the shelter of the house, and the house lacks someone to look after it. So both sides are in a position of weakness. But if you find yourself outside there, you're not stuck. You can just think of yourself in contact with those properties again. What does it feel like to be in a solid body with the warmth, the liquid feelings, the breath energy? The more you've been working with the breath, the easier it'll be to do this. This is one of the reasons why breath meditation is the safest kind of meditation.

You probably know the story of the monks who were doing body contemplation when the Buddha was away. They started heading off in the wrong direction. They had gotten so depressed about the body that they'd committed suicide or found assassins to do it for them. The Buddha came back, found out what had happened, and so he called all the remaining monks together and said, "When unskillful qualities come up in the course of any type of meditation, switch back to the breath, and the breath will clean things out in the same way that the first rain of the rainy season will clean out all the dust in the air that has accumulated in the hot season, the dry season."

This is one of the reasons why the breath is safe. It gives rise to a sense of well-being. But secondly, it really gives you familiarity with what it's like to inhabit your body in a way that you feel comfortable being with the body. Most of us are like that character in the James Joyce novel who lived at a short distance from his body: kind of with the body but not really in it, not really sensitive to it. But the more sensitive you are to it, then when strange things happen, the more you'll have a sense of what to do about them.

This is a large part of our fear. We're not that familiar being with the body in and of itself. We're either outside of the body or we have to have a sense of the body in an outside physical context. But you can work with the breath so that you feel more and more secure being right here with the body, *in* the body, fully inhabiting the body so that you can finally settle down. Because you notice: When the Buddha goes through the descriptions of the four jhanas, you start out with the rapture and pleasure and directed thought and evaluation, but then the directed thought and evaluation drop away. At first, as I said, some people find that a little threatening. But you realize that all you have to do is be aware here. That's plenty enough to identify with. Then after a while, the rapture seems too much; you have to let that go. Then the pleasure seems to be too much of a burden. Then you finally get the mind to the purity of mindfulness and equanimity.

In other words, things settle back to a very normal state, simply that you're fully inhabiting the body and it's very, very still. You want that to become your normalcy, because it was at that spot that the Buddha gained all of his knowledges that lead to his awakening.

So when you finally get the mind with the body, all the variations of things that happen in the body as you are trying to settle down with it—the fullness or the flows of energy: They finally settle down too. Then you're in the space where the Buddha was on the night of his awakening. You can ask yourself: "What did he see here that I'm not seeing now?"

But first settle in. Get so that you feel secure that this is normal and the breath is at normalcy. The image that Ajaan Lee gives of settling down is that it's like going into a house of mirrors. Some of them are concave; some of them are convex—in other words, the rapture and what-not can be distracting—but finally you get to a mirror that's just flat but very clear, and you can see yourself very clearly. But it does require that you give up your sense that you have to be pushing the breath in and out, and having the body firmly defined as to what's inside, what's out. Those things you have to give up. But you find that when you do that, you're actually in a much more secure place than you were before.

So don't let the distortions and other things get in the way. You're heading to a state of really solid normalcy. And that's where all the best work can be done.