

Concentration as Wilderness

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The Buddha compares coming into meditation, coming into concentration, to leaving your home and going into the wilderness. Of course, there are lots of different ways that people go into the wilderness. Once I was on a hike in Zion, going up to Angel's Landing. There weren't that many people on the trail that day, but there was one point where you could hear a group of people coming down from the other direction, talking very loudly. And even before I saw them, I knew where they were from. They worked at a modeling and acting agency in Los Angeles and they were talking shop. That's one way to go into the wilderness: Just carry all your affairs into the wilderness.

The other way is to realize that if you're away from home, the cares and concerns of home can be put aside. The mind feels a certain lightness. You get a certain distance from your daily concerns. And that's the best way to approach the meditation. We come into the concentration; we get used to being still and we learn how to appreciate stillness. We mentioned, in that chant just now, respect for concentration. This is a lot of it – having some respect for the opportunity to let your mind be really still for a while; not being in too great of a hurry to go someplace else. The ability to get all those wonderful insights you heard so much about requires that you gain some distance from your opinions, from your normal ways of thinking.

You find that if you settle down with the breath, large parts of the committee of the mind are not really here yet. They're still carrying on their conversations about home or work or whatever, assuming that you will give in after a while and forget about the breath. And you will – to begin with. But then you remember that you're not here for that. You're here for gaining concentration. So you come back. There'll be a battle for a while. This is why it's important to make the breath as comfortable as you can as quickly as you can.

Try to find a rhythm of breathing that feels really soothing, energizing, and refreshing for the body. In the beginning, this may mean deep, long breathing to energize parts of the body that ordinarily aren't energized by the breath. Then, when that gets tiresome, you can let the breath get shorter, more shallow. Find a rhythm that feels really good, so that when the mind does wander away from the breath, you have something good to come back to. And each time you come back, try to make the breath even more comfortable.

Ask yourself, “What am I still lacking in terms of a sense of ease, well-being, refreshment from the breath? Which part of the body isn’t getting any nourishment from the breath?” Think about breathing there, because what we’re trying to do is gain a sense that living here in the wilderness is where you really want to stay. You want to get the perspective that comes from being away from your ordinary thoughts and concerns, so that your opinions don’t loom so large. And then you can sort through them.

But to begin with, you’ve got to develop this foundation first. Take a real interest in what’s involved in settling into the breath, settling into the body. Explore what your body feels like right now.

We come to the meditation often with preconceived notions about where the breath comes in, where the breath goes out, where you are in your body, and how the different parts of the body connect. But if you actually sit here for a while, you begin to see that things don’t connect in quite the way you thought. You have sensations of the breath in places that you hadn’t imagined before, if you’re open to being observant. This is why it’s useful to read, say, Ajaan Lee’s instructions on the breath to gain some idea of what’s possible – and then to play with that, to explore how things feel for you.

Years back, I was listening to someone whose nephew had Marfan’s syndrome. Even at a very early age as a teenager, he had to have an operation on his heart. As he came out of the operation, they gave him painkiller, but the painkiller wasn’t working. He was in a fair amount of pain. And one of my students, who also had Marfan’s, went to visit him. She asked him about the symptoms of his pain – and he described them. Her advice was, “Breathe through your butt.” And as the kid told me later, it really worked: imagining the breath coming in through there, something he had never imagined before. And once he learned to imagine that, he could imagine all kinds of other things: where the breath comes in through your feet, through your hands, through your eyes and your ears. If you have chronic pain, you can use this as a topic to experiment with.

When I was in the hospital with malaria in Thailand, I found that breathing was becoming more and more laborious, because, after all, the parasites were eating up my red blood cells. Very little oxygen was getting to the muscles that were doing the breathing. I realized that if I changed my mental picture of where the breath was coming in and how it was coming in, the muscles that did the usual work for breathing got a chance to rest, and other muscles were able to pinch hit so that the breathing became a lot easier.

So try to gain an interest in what it’s like to inhabit your body, what it’s like to get a sense of how the energy flows in the body in ways that surprise you. This way

it's like going into the wilderness and taking an interest in the trees around you; the plants around you. You begin to forget the issues of home. And as you go through the trees and go through the plants and you come to the edge, say, of the Grand Canyon, the vastness of nature suddenly overtakes you, and you realize now petty and small your normal daily concerns are.

There will come times in the meditation when the concentration gets big. You finally settle down and there's a large sense of ease. The breath energy is all connected in the body and the constrictions you had on the awareness in the body begin to fall away. There's a sense of your mind filling the whole body, sometimes filling the whole room. And when you reach that, the thoughts that come through your mind seem so petty and so minor.

Now there will come times when insights come in. As we were saying today, the rule of thumb is that if it's relevant to what you're doing right now, okay, apply it. In other words, you gain some insight into how you're focusing on the breath in a way that's not as skillful as it could be, or how you're coming back to the breath in a way that's putting too much pressure on it – lots of details about what it means to settle into the body. You can gain insight into how you relate to the breath energy and you begin to see there are many levels of breath energy in the body.

There's one level – it's a very subtle breath – that as soon as you start to breathe in, the breath energy has already gone throughout the whole body. And there are the other more obvious waves of energy that go through the body as you breathe in. But that first one is useful to get in touch with, where you begin to see that there are certain parts in the body that are the starting points for the impulse for the wave of energy going through the body. A slight tightening up may happen there as you breathe in and then get released as you breathe out.

And you can ask yourself, if you've been here long enough, and feel settled in and secure enough in the body: What happens if you don't allow that tightening or tension of the in-breath to start there? What happens then? Things open up. You find that there's a level of energy in the body that's very still. It doesn't come in; it doesn't go out, and you can stay there. Once the breath gets still like this, your sense of the body begins to dissolve until it's just a mist of little sensation-dots. You can think about the space between the sensations, and that space has no limit.

So as you find that as you come into the wilderness, there's lots to learn about – little details about the animals and trees, but also just the vastness of nature. So when you look at your thoughts and see them come passing through, you just let them pass by. They're like clouds.

Sometimes some committee members will say, “Well, ordinary thoughts are no longer of interest,” and they’ll try to come up with all kinds of other things, either telling you how, given that you’ve got so little free time in general, you’ve got to use this free time to think about this, you’ve got to plan for that, or “Here’s a great insight with lots of lights and colors.” But again, if it’s not really relevant to what you’re doing right now, just let it go. If it’s really important and really useful, it’ll be there when you come out of the meditation. If it’s not, you haven’t wasted any time over it. You haven’t let it destroy your concentration.

So take an interest in this space inside, this wilderness inside. And then you can become a hunter and gatherer in the wilderness. Remember that the sense of wilderness, as opposed to domestic life, exists only for people who either are farmers or live in cities. Hunters and gatherers don’t even have the concept of “wilderness,” because wilderness is where they hunt and where they gather, where they take their food, where they feel at home.

So learn to be a hunter and gatherer inside. Be at home in this wilderness and learn how to see that the concerns of the village are small and petty – the concerns of the Internet village, the concerns of your house village, the concerns of your work village, TV village, school village, whatever. See them as small. This has many advantages. One is that you have a really good place to stay here. And two, the opinions that you churn up throughout the day: You begin to get a sense a distance from them. You can loosen your attachment to opinions that you begin to see are really not that useful, not that helpful. And even with the ones that *are* useful and helpful, you realize that there are times when you pick them up and times when you put them down. You don’t need to carry them around all the time.

You learn how to be at home here. And then right here, where you’re settled in with the breath, was where the Buddha was when he gained awakening: in the wilderness, focused on the breath. Get to know this area really well, because when awakening’s going to come for you, this is where it’s going to happen.