

## *On Not Twisting the Cow's Horn*

*March 28, 2016*

The description of right concentration includes, in the first jhana, directed thought and evaluation. A lot of people approach those two processes as something they have to add to what they're already doing. But that's not the case. Your mind is engaged in directed thought and evaluation all the time. It's how we talk to ourselves: You think of a topic; you question it; you make comments on it.

The difference with the concentration is that you choose one object and you stay there. All your directed thoughts and evaluations focus right there. You think of the breath and you comment to yourself on the breath: How is the breath going right now? Is it good? Is it not? Is it comfortable? If it's not comfortable, what can you do to change it so that it is comfortable? Make it longer? Or shorter? Or should you make it heavier or lighter? You experiment. All this comes under the heading of evaluation. You keep at it until you get a sense of well-being from the breath.

Sometimes, though, you find that the mind is not willing to settle down. It's got other issues. That's where you have to pay attention to the other parts of the description of jhana, which is that you put aside unskillful qualities and you put aside sensuality. In other words, any thoughts about how you'd like things to be a particular way in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations: You've got to learn how to drop them. The other unskillful qualities are defined as all the wrong path factors, from wrong view all through wrong mindfulness: You're keeping the wrong things in mind. You have wrong intentions. You have wrong resolves; wrong views about things. These can get in the way of your concentration, too. In cases like that, you've got to do some extra work.

Clear away the forest of the mind, or at least make a little clearing, some space where you can settle down. In some cases, this is simply a matter of turning your thoughts to the breath and then staying there. Other times, the thoughts are not going to stay there. They want to go back—either because there's something not right with the breath or there's something not right with the mind.

So that's something you have to evaluate as well. You're sorting things out in here, whether they're involved with greed, aversion, or delusion, or with things past, present, or future. Step back from them for a bit and try to identify, "Well, what's the problem here? What does my mind latch onto? Is it habitually angry, or greedy or lustful or fearful?" Get a sense of what precisely the problem is and then do some intervention.

As the Buddha said, part of right effort is that when you see that something unskillful has arisen, you try to abandon it. You don't just sit there and watch it. You watch it to some extent,

to figure out what it is, but once you understand what it is and you have some idea of how to deal with it, you go ahead and do that. Then you do your best to keep it from arising again. That's when you give the mind something else to think about, something more skillful. This is how you can lean the mind into concentration.

Once it's there—you're with the breath and the breath starts getting comfortable—then the next step of evaluation is: What do you do with that sense of comfort? It's all too easy just to focus on the comfort and wallow in it. And you could stay there for a while, but things would begin to get very blurry. This is how you get into delusion concentration, where things are all fuzzy. When the delusion concentration is strong enough, you come out of it and wonder, "Where was I? Was I awake? Was I asleep? What was I focused on?" You can't really say for sure. It's just a very vague but pleasant sense of being very still. That's not helpful, because you want your powers of observation to be alert and active, even as the mind gets still. You want to know exactly where you are and what you're doing while you're doing it.

So how do you deal with the present pleasure so that it doesn't take over and blur out that alertness? Well, you stay with the breath and then you think, "How can this pleasure spread?" Give yourself a task to do here in the body. If you start feeling a sense of pleasure in the middle of the chest, allow it to expand so that it fills the whole chest; then from the whole chest down through the whole torso, up into the head, down through the arms, down through the legs. If it starts in the head, think of it going down through the neck, both the front of the neck and the back of the neck, so that it suffuses the entire body. When you can do that, a sense of well-being drenches the body. At that point, you don't have to do so much evaluating anymore. The breath, the body, and the pleasure begin to meld. You can just be with the sensation of stillness, with the sensation of pleasure, and with the breath, immersed in the breath, all at the same time.

Don't let the pleasure separate from the breath and don't leave the breath for the pleasure, because the fact that you're paying attention to the breath is what allows the pleasure to stay. It's just that your relationship to the breath changes. This is what happens all the way through concentration. You stay with the breath, but your relationship gets more and more refined as you figure out that certain activities or certain feeling states are good for a while, but then they start getting gross—not gross in the sense of disgusting, but gross in the sense that they're very blatant and burdensome for the mind, and you want something more subtle, something more refined. So you drop the more blatant things and see if you can maintain the sense of being centered here. If you drop them and you find that you lose your center, that's a sign that you're not ready to let them go yet, so you pick them up again.

What you're trying to do here is to peel away different activities in the mind so that you can get a sense of just being aware, clearly aware, and very alert, right here in the present moment, with as little disturbance as you can muster. Some people—when they get to that sense of just being awake, aware, and alert in the present moment—want to stop right there. It

feels pretty good. If a thought comes up, they say, “Oh, there’s a defilement coming up, so let’s just not think at all.” But actually once you get to that sense of awareness, you’re finally in a position where you can really do some serious work, so that you can see, when something comes up, “Why did it come up? What came up with it? If it’s a thought that I have to hold myself back from thinking, what part of me wants to think it? And why?”

It’s in asking these questions that you learn a lot about the mind and you clear up a lot of things that up to now have stayed hidden. You’re peeling away the noise that you make that gets in the way of hearing the more subtle noises of defilements as they’re beginning to form in the mind. It’s as if you’ve been humming a tune to yourself all along that prevents you from hearing the subtle noises in the room, the scratchings of the mice in the wall. So you’ve got to stop humming. That’s when you can hear things. Or if there’s a sound that’s even more distant, even more subtle, you’ve got to get very, very quiet.

It’s like those satellites they send up to detect infrared radiation from the different stars. They have to put a huge shield around the radiation detector so that the heat of the satellite itself doesn’t interfere with the signals they’re trying to receive. In other words, our problem is that we’re sending out signals all the time. We’re sending out heat all the time, so we don’t see the subtle sources of heat that are coming from other places.

The solution is that we’ve got to cool things down; quiet things down. And then look very carefully to see what’s arising with what. That’s what the word *samudaya* means: things that arise together. There’s craving and there’s going to be stress. The craving’s going to be subtle and the stress is going to be subtle when your mind is really still. But you want to catch these things while they’re subtle. You don’t want to wait until they’ve taken over.

Sometimes, when things get still, you don’t see anything happening at all. Well, that’s when you can probe things a little bit. A thought comes into the mind and it seems to go away right away. Test it. Tell yourself, “Let’s think the opposite thought.” If there’s a slight thought of desire, say, for thinking about tomorrow’s meal, okay, counteract that. Think about the foulness of food. It’s edible only for a very short time. Then once it’s past your throat, you wouldn’t want to eat it again. Or think about where it comes from. Everything comes out of the dirt: plants, animals. I understand there’s a new law, trying to keep dirt out of fruits and vegetables, as if they didn’t come from the dirt to begin with.

And so here we are, eating dirt. Part of the mind’s going to object to that thought. You want to notice that. The part that objects: That’s what you’ve got to ferret out. It’s the same with the contemplation of the foulness of the body. The part of the mind that objects to this contemplation is the part you want to look into. Why does it object to this kind of inquiry? What pride, what lust, what other defilements are in there in that objection?

In other words, you poke things a little bit. You poke the mind to see how it responds. If you don’t do this, if you just sit here with everything being very, very quiet, you might say, “Well, it’s pretty easy here being quiet.” You’ve heard about the horrible effects of efforting, or

putting too much effort into the practice. You may have seen some of your own misguided efforts in the past, and you decide, “Well, just sitting here without any effort, that’s nice.” Then any of this questioning and probing sounds like an unnecessary activity—but it’s not.

Think about what the Buddha said about trying to get milk out of a cow. There’s a right way and there’s a wrong way. The right way is to pull on the udder. The wrong way is to twist the horn. Now, suppose you’ve been twisting the horn for a long time and somebody says, “Hey, twisting the horn doesn’t get any results.” So you stop twisting the horn and say, “Well, this is pretty good. I don’t have to do anything at all.” And, sure enough, not twisting the horn is better than twisting the horn. But you still don’t get any milk. You may be relaxed and at ease, but part of your mind is still hungry. You’re not getting the nourishment you need. But meditation is all about finding the ultimate nourishment. We’re looking for a state of mind that is so well nourished that it doesn’t need to be nourished anymore. That can come only by looking very, very carefully and questioning the kind of nourishment you’re taking—the little bites and nibbles you take on the side.

We get the mind still so that we can see subtle things going on in the mind. We don’t get it still just for the sake of stillness. We don’t “be with the knowing” just to be with the knowing. We’re with the knowing so that we can see what’s going to come up in the knowing when there’s a minimum of disturbance or a minimum of background noise. We want to see the subtle things because the subtle things are what drive the mind. If you don’t dig them out, they’re going to stay there and keep driving the mind. We’re not here just to accept the fact that they’re driving the mind. We want to put an end to it because these subtle things can grow into big things and cause a lot of suffering. Especially as your strength of mind and strength of body begin to wane, you find that these little subtle things get more and more power if you haven’t dug them out.

So, dig them out while you’ve got the chance, while you have the strength, because that way they won’t continue to bamboozle you. As the body gets weaker, aging, illness, and death are going to come, and the choices you make while you’re old and sick and dying can have a huge impact on your future course, so you want to make sure that you’ve cleared the mind of its germs—so that the lack of strength in your body doesn’t infect the mind. We’re doing this for our own protection, of course, but in protecting ourselves from our unskillful qualities, we’re protecting other people too. It’s good to be heedful about these points because they really do make a difference.