

Yes & No

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The Buddha's description of what right concentration is like is in his description of right concentration. His description of how to do it is in his description of right mindfulness. You choose a frame of reference that you're going to stay focused on. You try to keep track of that, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

There are two activities there. One is choosing your topic. And the other is learning how to say No to everything that's going to pull you out into the world. The "world" here can either be the world of the senses outside or the world of sensual fantasies. You want to make sure the mind doesn't go wandering off to either of the two.

The image in the Canon is of a quail. It leaves its ancestral home where it's safe in the middle of a plowed field where the stones have been turned up, where it can hide, and it goes out to a place where it's exposed. And, sure enough, a hawk swoops down and carries it off. The poor little quail laments, "Oh, my lack of merit. If I hadn't left my ancestral home, this hawk would have been no match for me." Well, the hawk is a little piqued by that. So he lets the quail go. He says, "Go. Find your ancestral home. But even there, you won't escape me." The quail goes down to the field, stands on top of one of the stones, and calls out, "Come get me, you hawk. Come get me, you hawk." And then the hawk swoops down. And just as the quail knows that the hawk is coming down at full speed, it hides behind the stone, and the hawk shatters his breast.

The hawk here stands for Mara. And the ancestral field stands for being in your frame of reference, establishing mindfulness. To be outside of that is to be out wandering around in the world: the world of your thoughts; the world of your plans for sensual pleasures; thoughts of ill will, thoughts of restlessness, anxiety, uncertainty, whatever. This is where Mara can catch you. You have to learn how to say No to those thoughts. But you have to do it wisely. You can't just say No and expect them to go away.

I was reading this evening a description of how to use determination in meditation, and basically it was described as a series of wishes. "May the jhana factors arise. May the jhana factors be balanced." But it doesn't happen that way. You can't just wish your way into these things. You have to learn your skills. And saying Yes to the breath is one skill. Learning how to say No to everything else is another skill. All too often, when we say No to a thought, we clamp down on the energy in part of the body. And that feels uncomfortable. This is why you have to learn how to keep the breath energy wide open throughout the body no matter what's going on in the mind. And make a distinction between the thought and its relationship to the body.

There will be a spot in the body that tenses up a little bit as the thought develops. It'll stay tense as long as you're with that particular thought. In fact, one of the ways of undercutting a

thought is to find out where that little bit of tension is and to think of the breath going right through it, to dissolve it away. But there are other times when you have to reason with the thought and basically say No—while, at the same time, not clamping down on the breath energy in the body.

Now, the Freudians would say that you're repressing thoughts. But there's a difference between repression and suppression. Repression is when you deny that the thought is there. Suppression is when you know it's there but you still tell yourself, "No, I'm not going to go there right now." And one way you can deal with it is to say, "I'll think about this later." The part of the mind that keeps insisting, "You've got to think about this. You've got to think about this": You can tell it, "Look, I've got to get the mind to settle down first and then I can think clearly about this issue." As long as the mind isn't settled down, it's going to be hard to sort things out. That's one way.

In fact, if you have an important issue you have to deal with in your daily life, you give the last five, ten minutes of the meditation session to that issue, promising yourself, "Once the mind has settled down and has recovered from its wounds of the day and gets its attention together, okay, then we'll think about the thought. And we'll be in a much better position to think about it clearly."

Sometimes the mind will be willing to take a rain check like that, but sometimes it won't. It gets very insistent, that you have to think about the thought *now*. This is where you have to learn a few karate chops.

You figure out, what is the real drawback of that thought? Or you can figure out why you like thinking about those things to the point where you realize that the reason for liking it is not really worth it. Then, when the thought comes in and says, "You're going to be thinking about this at some point, maybe in five minutes' time, so you might as well think about me now," you can tell it, "I don't need to think about you now. I'm responsible for now right now. What happens five minutes down the line; ten minutes down the line: I'm not responsible for that yet. But I am responsible for now. And if I don't show some responsibility right now, then when five or ten minutes comes, it's going to be hard to be responsible then, too." In other words, you have to be in charge.

One of the skills of meditating, as the Buddha said, is learning how to think the thoughts you want to think and not think the thoughts you don't want to think. But first you have to learn how to pull out of thoughts no matter what they are, no matter how important they seem, no matter how insistent or how repeated they are. You have to keep on saying No. But it's not *just* saying No. You have to figure out what's the best way to say No to this kind of thought so that at the very least it'll leave you alone for a while. After all, all you're asking for is a little space, some time to get into your safe territory. Then you can bring the thought into your safe territory, rather than going out into the exposed world and dealing with the thought on its terms. You have to be the one who sets the conditions.

Another area you have to say No, of course, is when you start thinking about how much progress you want to make in this particular session of meditation. You try to grab everything all at once. So remember: Your frame of reference is to take one thing at a time, one frame of reference at a time. As you get better, other things will come in and connect. But, for the time being, you want to get really good at that one thing.

Ajaan Lee, who talks an awful lot about working breath energies throughout the body, does say that some people find that if they try to work with the whole body all at once, it's too much. So you one find section of the body. You make that comfortable. Just stay right there for the time being. He said it's like starting an orchard. If you invest all your money and plant the entire piece of land with trees, if it then turns out that the rains don't come, or locusts come, they'll eat up your whole orchard and you'll have nothing left. So you focus on one corner of the orchard. Plant your trees there. And then, if they're mangoes, you get the seeds from the mangoes, and then you can plant those seeds. Eat the mangoes and plant the seeds. Eat the mangoes. Plant the seeds. In other words, figure out what you're capable of and then stick with that. Things will grow on their own.

You have to start out small. Sometimes the concentration is like a little flame. The wind is blowing and you have to cup your hands around the flame to protect it, to give it a chance to catch on the fuel. Then it'll grow. So that's another area where you have to learn how to say No: when the mind wants to take on too much all at once. Stake out a little territory and protect it.

Sometimes you hear that mindfulness is wide open. It accepts everything and doesn't say No to anything. But that's not how the Buddha taught mindfulness. He described mindfulness as a governing principle as more proactive: that when you see that there's something good that hasn't arisen in the mind yet, you actually try to give rise to it. And once it's there, you want to make sure it stays, that it doesn't pass away. So it's not simply a matter of watching things arise and pass away.

There are some things you make arise, other things you *prevent* from arising, and other things you *make* go away. As for the skillful things, you want to keep them from going away.

So there are some things you say Yes to and some things you say No. And you have to learn how to say No effectively, just as you have to learn how to say Yes effectively. Yes, of course, means giving your full attention to the breath, your full attention to what the mind is doing with the breath: watching the breath; watching the mind, making sure they stay together. That's the Yes. The No applies to anything that has to do with the world of the senses, the world of sensual pleasures, your issues with the world outside. They don't have any space in here right now.

So learn the skills for saying No. Otherwise, concentration will never develop. But if you do learn the skills, then you find that even in difficult situations you can keep the mind centered, which is when the concentration shows its real value. So, you can't wait for the mind to say, "Okay, now I'm ready to settle down and be concentrated. I've thought through all my

issues.” You have to clear out a space first. Keep everybody else out. And make sure you’re in your ancestral territory. Then you can actually bring those issues in and look at them as events in the mind, instead of big important issues outside. You can step back from them and get some perspective on them. See them in the light of karma. See them in the light of what the Buddha teaches about the causes for suffering.

In other words, you don’t deal with the world on its terms. You bring the world into your mind on *your* terms so you can see the extent to which your concept of the world is a construct. You watch the mind as it makes that construct and you begin to ask yourself, “Why does the mind like doing this?” When you bring the issue into your field, then you can see it as a process. And that puts you more in charge.

But first, before you bring it in, you’ve got establish your territory, to have a clear sense of which issues are in your ancestral field, where you say Yes; and which is the world outside, where you say No. That’s how the mind can come to right concentration.