

How Right Mindfulness Leads to Right Concentration

April 16, 2018

The chants we recited this evening—the contemplation of the body and the reflection on aging, illness, and death—are both designed to drive home the point that your real treasures are your actions. Your actions are what shape your experience, and if you act well, you have something worth holding onto. If you don't, you've got things that are going to come at you that not worth holding onto, but they're going to come at you anyhow. This teaching on karma is not an extraneous part of the teaching, and it's not unrelated to the practice, because when we meditate, we are doing something. We're not just being here. We're doing. We're choosing to focus on one thing: on the breath.

In the path that the Buddha teaches, the last two factors are right mindfulness and right concentration. The description of right concentration tells of the different levels of concentration you can get into, but it doesn't tell you how to do it. The instructions on how to get into concentration are in the description of right mindfulness. To begin with, you remain focused on the body in and of itself—in this case it can be the breath—ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. All those factors are essential for getting the mind to settle down in concentration in a way that you can actually give rise to insight.

The breath in and of itself is just your experience of the breath right now. You don't anticipate what the next breath is going to be like and you don't dwell on what the last breath was: just what you're feeling right now as you breathe in and breathe out—keeping in mind that “breath” here is not just the air coming in and out through the nose, but also the sense of energy that flows through the body. Sometimes that sense of energy flow can be strong. Sometimes it's weak. Sometimes it seems like nothing is moving at all. But the important thing is that it's not blocked. You want to make a survey through the body. See if there's any tension. That tension would be blocking breath energy, so relax it. Release it.

As you breathe in, as you breathe out, try to find a rhythm of breathing that feels good. Ask yourself, what does the body need right now? All of this involves those three qualities: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. Mindfulness means keeping the breath in mind, not forgetting. Alertness is watching what you're doing. In Ajaan Lee's explanation, it watches both the mind and the breath to make sure they're together. And then ardency is the desire to do this well, which

means, one, if you notice that the mind has wandered off the breath, you bring it right back. And then two, once it's there, you try and make sure it stays there.

When Ajaan Lee explains the practice of mindfulness, ardency is the wisdom factor. When he talks about jhana, evaluation is the wisdom factor. They go together, because ardency doesn't mean just brute effort here. It tries to be skillful effort. That means reading the situation and figuring out what needs to be done and then doing it—and having a desire to do it as well.

All of this is based on desire. Sometimes you hear people say that you should try to meditate without desire. But if you meditate without desire, you're not meditating. The mind is just wandering around. There's desire there, but it's not the desire to get into concentration, not the desire to gain insight. It's just a random collection of desires. As the Buddha said elsewhere, all phenomena are rooted in desire, and that includes the path, as you learn how to focus your desire in a way that's actually useful. In other words, you focus on the causes that'll get you to the end of suffering.

So ardency has an element of desire in it: the desire to do this well. And all these three qualities work together. You're alert to see what you're doing. You're mindful not only of where you want to be but also of whatever other instructions you can remember that have worked. When the mind is feeling antsy, how do you calm it down? When it's feeling sluggish, how do you wake it up? What have you done in the past? Try to bring that memory to bear if the problem arises again in the present moment.

And then you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any other topic that would come into the mind right now, that would get you worked up, you just put it aside, put it aside. This is one of the reasons we have those contemplations at the beginning of the meditation session, because they help you realize that no matter what happens to the world, aging is going to come, illness is going to come, death is going to come. It doesn't matter who's in power, whether the economy is good or the economy is bad. Aging, illness, and death are going to come.

And the Buddha's image is that it's like four mountains moving in. A king came to see him one day. The Buddha asked, "What have you been up to today?" And the king said, "Well, the typical things that a person crazy about power would do." Unusually frank for a king. And the Buddha said, "Suppose someone came to you and said, 'There's a huge mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path. There's another mountain moving in from the south, another mountain moving in from the west, another moving in from the north. All of them are moving in on you, crushing all living beings in their path.'

Considering that human life is so hard to come by, what would you do?” The king replied, “What else could I do? Calm my mind and practice the Dhamma.” And the Buddha said, “I tell you: Aging, illness, and death are moving in on you, crushing all living beings in their path. What are you going to do?” The king said, “What else can I do? Calm my mind and practice the Dhamma.”

So we have these contemplations of aging, illness, and death to get us focused —not to get depressed, but to focus on our actions. What are you doing right now? What are you doing to straighten out your mind so that when these things come, you don’t have to suffer? We have those chants as a way of clearing out the germs that you might have had in the mind to want to go out and think about some issue in the world that’s going to get crushed.

Then there are the chants on goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. Those are to help you get past any anger you might be carrying around from the day. Remind yourself that however you’re going to deal with other people, you want to make sure that your goodwill comes first, so that you don’t act on ill will. If you act on ill will, your actions are going to be unskillful, and there you are, stuck with bad karma.

So those chants do a little bit of the preliminary groundwork in putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. If the mind does slip out and start thinking about those things again, in some cases all you have to do is to notice it. Say to yourself, “Whoops, I’ve slipped off,” and come back. Other times, those thoughts have more pull, in which case you want to look at their drawbacks. If you stayed with that thought for a long period of time, what would it lead you to do? Usually something unskillful. Well, why think about it at all? We don’t know how much time we have, but we do have this time right now, so why don’t we make good use of it? You realize that that thinking, if it’s involved with greed, aversion, delusion, lust, or fear, is a waste of time. So you bring the mind back.

If that thought keeps eating away, eating away, then you just ignore it. You’ve got the breath right here. You don’t have to get involved with those thoughts. They’re like stray dogs that come around and whine and beg, and if you don’t want to have the dog come around again, you just don’t feed it. In this case, you don’t feed the thought with your attention, and eventually it’ll go away. The mind will begin to settle down with a sense of ease.

This is where you have to be very careful, because once there’s ease, we tend to wallow in it. We drop the topic of our meditation and just go for the ease. But the fact that we’re concentrated, ardent, alert, and mindful on the breath is what created the ease to begin with, so when the causes are gone, the ease is going to wear out, the pleasure’s going to wear out, and you’ll be left with nothing.

Sometimes the mind does stay still, but it doesn't really know where it is. That's called delusion concentration, and as the name tells you, it's nothing you want to get involved with. So try to always be alert to what you're doing each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, and don't be afraid that the ease will not have a good enough effect on the body. We have a tendency to try to squeeze as much pleasure out of a pleasant sensation as we can, but it will still be good for the body, soothe the nerves in the body, without you trying to squeeze it or wallow in it.

We're trying to train the mind so that it's not overcome by pain or overcome by pleasure, and this is where you face the test about letting yourself get overcome by pleasure. You try to maintain your focus, even in the midst of the sense of well-being, and it's in this way that you've got the mind ready to settle down, you've got all the causal factors of getting the mind into right concentration. You're thinking about the breath, you're evaluating the breath, and you're focused exclusively on the breath, making it one sensation that permeates the body. It's the one thing you're focused on, and also it's the one sensation filling the body, filling your awareness. You've got body, feeling, mind all together right here: the breath filling the body, the feeling of ease filling the body, your awareness filling the body, filling one another.

That's how the practice of right mindfulness gets you into right concentration without your having to think about the word "concentration" or "jhāna" or "first jhāna" or "second jhāna" or whatever. You focus on the breath, but the way you focus on the breath and the way you mindfully maintain that focus, that's what gets the mind into concentration.