

Do. Maintain. Use.

November 24, 2018

Ajaan Fuang used to say that there are three aspects to doing breath meditation, practicing concentration. One is doing it, the second is maintaining it, and the third is putting it to use.

Like right now, we're trying to do it and maintain it. Get the mind to the breath. Try to keep it with the breath. Experiment with different ways of breathing to see what's comfortable right now. Experiment with different ways of conceiving the breath that allow the mind to settle down and stay with the sensation of breathing and to connect that with the different sensations in the rest of the body. You want to get the breath comfortable and then allow that sense of comfort to spread, so you have to think of some vehicle by which it will spread, pathways through the body. You might think of the blood vessels. You might think of the nerves. They're all involved in the movement of energy through the body. And as you get really sensitive to the breath, you notice that they are connected with the in-and-out breathing.

That's the doing.

Then there's the maintaining, which is the whole rest of the hour: trying to stay here and dealing with a mind that wants to do something else. Some of the members of the committee want to stay here, and others want to go wandering off. They say, "Here's a whole hour. We can think about all kinds of things." And you may find yourself dealing with all kinds of things throughout the hour. Sometimes the distractions get so numerous that it gets frustrating, but at least you're dealing with them, trying to recognize them as distractions and coming back to the breath. Another one comes up. You slip away from the breath. Well, come right back.

You're learning an important fact about concentration, which is that it starts out in little moments, and the trick is to keep them connected. Sometimes the connections get kind of loose, but after a while you find that you can sense when the mind is about to go off, and you can head it off at the pass—in other words, reestablish mindfulness even before it's lost. That way, the concentration gets more continuous and begins to develop more momentum.

Sometimes you'll be dealing with distractions outside as you try to maintain your concentration. Try to keep your comments on the distractions as minimal as possible. In other words, a sound comes up. The sound can do its own thing without your having to comment on it. And don't feel like you're being invaded by it. Think of your body as being like a big window. The breath is the frame, and things can go right through. You don't have to catch them. You don't have to repel them or push them away. They'll go right through and they'll disappear.

As for thoughts, sometimes you have to learn how to think through why you don't want to think the thought. Other times, you simply let it be there, but you don't have to get involved. Watch out especially for the thoughts that say, "Well, I've done this now. What's next?" A

large part of the meditation is learning to do something repetitive—to stay here, stay here, stay here—so that you have a clear and steady point of reference in the mind.

Once you've got this point of reference, you can see other things moving—sometimes very subtle things moving—that otherwise you would have missed. They would have been lost in the fog or the dust raised by the mind as it moves around. But here, as it's still, the dust begins to settle, and little things begin to appear, little stirrings here and there in the body. Often they could turn into a thought or into just another aspect of the breath. You've got the choice. So try to breathe through them. Keep everything in reference to the breath as much as you can, and you'll find that you can maintain this state of concentration for longer and longer periods of time, until it becomes your default mode. It feels natural to be here. The center of gravity shifts.

The real test for your concentration, though, comes when you have to leave the monastery or go into an environment where there's conflict, or when you go back home and suddenly find yourself slipping back into your old roles, your old ways of thinking.

This is where using the concentration comes in—and “using” doesn't mean just trying to stay concentrated in the midst of these other things. You've got to look at your attitudes. You've got to look at your assumptions. The concentration is there as a point of reference, but your assumptions are going to be the big issue.

When you're here at the monastery, you're playing by one set of rules. When you go home, you find yourself slipping back into the old games, and you have to question the mind's willingness to take on the rules of the old games. What are its assumptions about itself? What are your assumptions about you? What are your assumptions about the other people around you? What are the assumptions about what it means to lose out in the old games? And why do you want to even bother playing them?

The rules of society are one thing; the Buddha's rules are something else. The Buddha's rules are that you don't want to harm anybody: You don't want to harm yourself; you don't want to harm other people. And there must be a way to do that. Society tends to assume that, “Well, somebody's going to get harmed, but as long as it's not me, it's okay.” That's the attitude. And there's a trade-off. Sometimes the jobs that are most destructive, most harmful to people, are the ones that pay the best. We live in a society where money plays a huge role in measuring people's worth. Getting ahead plays a huge role. But getting ahead in what?

You want to have the concentration there in your mind as a reference point so that you can stand apart from those rules, those values, and realize that they're not all outside. Some of them have been internalized. They're still lurking around in your mind, and here's your chance to deal with them directly. While you're at the monastery, they may not be so quick to play the games, but you have to be on your guard as you leave. Do you really want to play by the rules that society plays by? Or are you willing to be the odd ball—but the wise odd ball?

That's how you use your concentration. Use it as a basis for remembering what the Buddha's values are, because as long as you associate the breath with the practice and all the skillful qualities of mind that you've been learning how to develop around the breath, it becomes your connection to those qualities even though nobody else around you may be thinking in those terms or holding onto those values.

What this means is that the practice is not just about the techniques for getting the mind to settle down. It's also about the set of values about what's really important in life, what really is a gain in life, what really is a loss in life. Society measures gain in terms of money, status, and praise. Here we measure gain in terms of mindfulness, alertness, ardency, concentration, discernment. Those are very different things. All too often, if you win at the game outside, you're going to lose at the game inside. You have to ask yourself which game, which set of rules, really has your best interest in mind?

It's pretty amazing that the Buddha taught totally out of compassion. He had no need for anybody's approval or anybody's support. If he'd had to die after his awakening, okay, that would have been no defect in his awakening. That was all perfect. So he taught totally out of compassion. Nowadays, we're told that everybody speaks out of a desire for power, for influence over other people. But here's something very different. The Buddha taught out of a desire to help living beings of every sort.

And the duties that the Buddha teaches you are not duties he imposes on you. He says these are duties for your own good—again, unlike the duties that society will place on you. So you have to choose whose set of values is really in your own best interest and learn how to play by the rules that the Buddha set down, even if it means that other people who were familiar with you in your old roles that you took on in the old games with their various rules wouldn't understand.

This is how you use concentration. You use it as a foundation. You use it as a connection. As soon as you breathe in and breathe out, the breath should remind you of the good things the Buddha taught you around the breath. And remember: You don't have that much time to breathe. You don't know how much time you've got. It may be a hundred years, but even a hundred years is a short time when it's gone. It's not as if, when we go through the hundred years, we have a room in the mind where we can stash some of them up and they stay. They slip away. Our memories slip away. The pleasures of the moment slip away, slip away. What stays are our actions and the quality of the mind that develops from those actions. When you've won in terms of that game, that's when you've really won.