

Concentration Teamwork

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When you meditate, it's important to have a clear sense of cause and effect around what's going on in the mind. We're trying to get a sense of ease, a sense of fullness and refreshment: That's the result.

In the Buddha's terms, he says it's born of seclusion. In other words, you're secluding your mind from thoughts about the sensual pleasures you might want to enjoy. You're secluding it from unskillful states. And the fact that you're not bothering the mind with those things gives you a sense of ease, a sense of well-being.

In Ajaan Lee's explanation, the sense of rapture and pleasure comes from the other three factors of the first jhana: directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. In other words, you've got the mind focused on one thing, the breath. You're thinking about it—not thinking about anything else—and you're evaluating it: Is it comfortable? Is it a good place to settle down? What could be changed in the breath to maximize the comfort, to maintain the comfort, and then to spread it around?

Now the two explanations come down to the same thing. When you're thinking about the breath in this way, your mind is going to be secluded from sensuality. And you give rise to a sense of well-being in this way. You're still not fully settled down. There's still a probing and a thinking. But the mind is settled down in the sense that you're with one object, and it feels good.

The problem is that when it starts feeling good, we start letting go of the work that gave rise to it. This is why it's important to have that sense of cause and effect. If you abandon the cause, the results are going to go. This doesn't mean the ease goes away—simply that you lose your focus. In some cases, you just come out of concentration. In others, you drift off into a fuzzy place that Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration, where the mind is quiet but there's very little alertness, very little mindfulness.

So you've got to watch out for that. What's happened is that you've dropped the directed thought and evaluation before the time came for that. This means you've got to go back and do some more work because the act of evaluating is your concentration work. That's what gets things to fit together snugly with a sense of clarity and a sense of real solidity that this is a place where you could stay for long periods of time and not complain. You'd be happy to be here.

If you stop the evaluation just to wallow in the pleasure for a while, you're going to be leaving right concentration. So go back and evaluate some more. Keep working away. The problem is that once there's pleasure like this, it seems very much like falling asleep. The breath is very still, very quiet. And out of force of habit, you simply get lazy. So you've got to work against that tendency. There's still work to be done.

The Buddha said that one of the secrets to his awakening was to not be content with the skillfulness that he'd already attained. So when the pleasure comes, don't content yourself with the first hit of pleasure. See it instead as a sign that things are settling down properly and that you've finally found a good place to work, just like finding a vein of ore in some rock: As soon as you find a little bit of the ore, you just keep digging away at that vein.

So what more is there to evaluate? You can think about the breath going in different directions. You can think about the breath going into parts of the body that you don't pay much attention to. You can try different focal points. If you've been focusing at the tip of the nose, you can try, say, the base of the throat, the tip of the breastbone, or the spot just above the navel. There are lots of places you can focus.

You can also look at the way you breathe in and breathe out. All too often, as we're focusing on the breath, we tend to squeeze the breath energy out of the body as we're breathing out, as a way of emphasizing the fact that now the breath is going out. That squeezing is not what you want. You're actually trying to breathe in such a way that the breath energy in the nerves and in the blood vessels feels full even as you exhale.

This is why Ajaan Lee has you breathe deeply at the beginning of each session. But then, as you're breathing out, try to maintain that sense of fullness throughout the body. In other words, you don't squeeze the breath out. Or if you find that you're creating a little bit of tension at the beginning or the end of the breath, again as a way of marking the in-breath from the out-breath, see if you can stop that as well, so that the in-breath and the out-breath seem to be flowing together.

What you want to do is get away from the sense of the breath coming in and going out, and focus more and more on the sense of breath energy already in the body, the energy that's there all the time whether you're breathing in or breathing out, because that's going to become more and more the center of your focus. And it switches your sense about the breath.

We tend to think of breath as the air that's coming in and going out. So as we breathe in, we're thinking about breath coming in. But there's also the fact that

the air would not come in unless there was a spread of energy originating in the body. In that sense, the breath actually begins inside—not outside. And as you switch your perception that way, it allows the mind to settle down more deeply and more solidly with the breath.

So as you're focusing on the in-and-out breath, breathe in a way that doesn't squeeze the breath energy out of the body. Then as you switch your perception so that you see the breath coming from within the body, hold that perception in mind and see what's getting in its way. What's happening to the spread of breath energy throughout the body? Where does it feel like it's running up against obstacles? Patterns of tension, patterns of tightness: Can you dissolve them away? Try to maintain a sense of full body with things flowing smoothly.

This is another way of preventing delusion concentration. As long as you have the perception of full body clearly in mind, you're going to stay awake. If you drop that, everything becomes a blur. It's very easy to lose your mindfulness and alertness. So be very clear where the body is right now and what its posture is. This, too, is part of your concentration work.

As you do this, the need for the directed thought and evaluation begins to subside because you're right there: one with the body, one with the breath, and one with the breath energy in the body. All you have to do is hold that perception. But be very clear about holding that perception. Don't let it go.

Things get more quiet in the body. The breath gets more quiet; the movement of the energy in the body gets more quiet. But there's a sense that everything is very well connected. In fact, you begin to sense that if there's a lack of breath energy in one part of the body, an excess in another part will just come flowing right into where there's a lack because everything is connected. So you don't need the in-and-out breath so much. It begins to get lighter. If it stops, don't worry. The body will breathe if it needs to. But you've changed the dynamic. It becomes less and less what you need from outside and more a matter of how to simply maintain what you've got inside.

In this way, you drop your thinking not out of laziness, but simply out of the fact that it's not needed. But you hold onto that perception. In all the levels of concentration, all the way up to the perception of nothingness, the perception is what keeps you there. And you've got to learn how to maintain this perception because as you get to the more subtle levels of concentration, there will be fewer and fewer sensations to confirm the perception. You're dependent more and more on the perception itself to hold you there.

When you're with the breath, if the perception happens to lapse, the feeling of the breath is still there to remind you. But as you get into some of the more

formless perceptions, there's nothing there. And you can maintain those levels only if your perception is really strong—i.e., only if your mindfulness is really strong. So always keep that perception there as your foundation. There's a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, and they will do their work. They'll soothe the mind and soothe the body, as needed. All you have to do is let them do their work. You do your work.

It's like having a team working on a job. If one member starts trying to do the work of the other members, there can be a lot of problems. But if each person knows what's his or her duty—this is what he or she has to take care of, and they do that—everybody's working together. There's no stepping on, over, or under other people's boundaries. The job gets done.

So you do your work. The breath will do its work. The pleasure will do its work. That's how your concentration work gets completed.