

## *Discernment Fosters Concentration*

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There are a lot of mental qualities that go into training the mind, and the Buddha has several lists. In some of the lists, concentration fosters discernment; in other lists, discernment fosters concentration. The five faculties, five strengths: Those are lists that put the concentration first. You start with a certain conviction in the Buddha's teachings and you get to work, get the mind to settle down. When the mind is settled down, then it starts gaining insights.

In the seven factors for awakening, though, discernment comes before concentration. That's for times when it's difficult to get the mind to let go of its concerns about the world. It's not going to just settle down quietly. You've got to think your way there, reason with the mind to the point where it's willing to settle down.

You see this type of concentration a lot in the Forest Tradition. In Ajaan Lee's books, before he started teaching his breath meditation method, he talked a lot about contemplating the body, contemplating the elements, contemplating the three characteristics, as ways of getting the mind to settle down and be quiet. In other words, you think about all the things that the mind is entangled with, and you give yourself reasons for getting unentangled. You don't use just brute force to get it to settle down. You cut off all the avenues by which it would leave the present moment. If it starts thinking about a particular topic, you realize, "I've cut through that one already, I've seen through that one already. Why bother with it again?"

So it's good to go through those seven factors for awakening, especially at times when news of the world is very much with us. We've got to keep reminding ourselves of where the real issues are in our minds: our own skill and lack of skill. We're not here just to accept the fact that we lack skill, we've got to do something about it. There's a passage where the Buddha says you've got to see fear in death, or danger in death. The word is *bhaya* in Pali. It's an interesting word that means both fear and danger. The closest equivalent I can think of in English is the word *terror*. There are terrors outside, and we feel terror inside. And when the Buddha's saying to see fear in death, it's not to be afraid of the fact of death, it's to be afraid of what your mind will do at death if it's not trained. That's the big issue right now: the fact that the mind needs more training.

So. The seven factors for awakening: You start with mindfulness. You try to get the mind to settle down in any of the frames of reference. Then you start

looking at what's skillful and unskillful going on in the mind. In other words, this is for times when the issue's not so much the breath or the body; the issue's with the mind. You have to train yourself to look at the mind not in terms of the content of its thoughts, but in terms of where those thoughts are coming from and where they're going to go.

This is how you develop the factor for awakening called analysis of qualities. It's interesting that the Buddha pairs this with the hindrance of uncertainty. In other words, in both cases, you develop analysis of qualities at the same time that you starve the hindrance of uncertainty by paying careful, appropriate attention to the skillfulness and lack of skillfulness in the mind.

If you think about the Buddha's description of how he got on the path, he learned how to divide his thoughts into two sorts: those imbued with sensuality, ill will, cruelty on one side; and those imbued with renunciation, non-ill will (i.e. goodwill), and non-cruelty (i.e. compassion) on the other side. So there he was: He was looking at the thoughts in terms of where they came from, because where they came from was going to determine where they would go.

And he treated the two types of thoughts differently. It wasn't just a matter of accepting whatever came up, or learning how to be okay with the unskillful thoughts for fear that the ego might get damaged if you're not okay. He saw that the skillful thoughts should be encouraged, or at the very least tolerated; the unskillful thoughts, though, had to be kept in check.

He gave the image of being a cowherd: You've got to keep your cows out of the neighbors' rice fields. Otherwise, there's going to be a lot of trouble. So you've got to beat your cows, hold them in line. And how do you do that? With cows you can use brute force, but with your thoughts you don't use brute force. You learn how to reason with them, point out that wherever they want to go is not really worth going. In other words, you look at the long-term results of those thoughts.

This makes you recall the Buddha's instructions to Rahula, because that's what basically he's teaching Rahula when he teaches him to look at his actions in terms of what his intention is and what the results of the actions are. He'd start with his outside actions and then he moved into actions in the mind, learning how to see where they were skillful, where they were not.

In teaching Rahula this way, he was preparing him for precisely this factor for awakening: analysis of qualities—developing the state of mind, the maturity, that allows you to look at your actions and say, "Yeah, that was a mistake, I'm not going to repeat that." You remember the mistake, and you're honest enough and accountable enough to admit it to other people. That way you can learn. You learn

how not to get knocked over by your mistakes, but at the same time you learn how to take them seriously.

This is precisely the type of attitude you want to foster as you develop this factor for awakening, because then, from there the list goes on to persistence. You get down to work. Anything that's unskillful in the mind, you hold it in check. As for skillful thoughts, you allow them but you try to lasso them in, realizing that the most skillful thing you can be doing with your mind right now is to get it to calm down.

So when the mind is not sending thoughts out, its relationship to the body changes. When we have thoughts, and especially if they're elaborate thoughts, we squeeze different parts of the body. When we bring the mind back to the present moment, we have to consciously allow those parts of the body to be un-squeezed. Let them fill up with breath energy. You can think of their being starved of blood, so you allow the blood to flow there.

It's this way you get the beginnings of the factor for awakening that in Pali is called *pīti*, which is translated as rapture or refreshment. This is an energizing quality, and you maintain it as long as it feels needed, as long as it feels good. Some people read the descriptions of concentration and say, "I've done this so far, now what's next?" Well, allow each step to do its work. We're not here to do the seven-minute jhanas. As the mind begins to settle in, it's important, as the Buddha says, to indulge in the well-being. That doesn't mean you forget the topic and just wallow in the pleasure or the sense of rapture. You maintain the causes, but you keep doing them as long as it feels necessary, to refresh the body and refresh the mind. Because that's another meaning of the word *pīti*: refreshment. When things have been squeezed so much by our thinking, they need time to recover. They need to be refreshed.

Then, from there, the mind begins to get more and more centered. It has a sense of calm. It gets concentrated—in other words, solidly focused—and you maintain that focus. As the sense of rapture begins to get too strong, you tune in to a more refined level of energy right at the same spot. You don't have to move. If the rapture's going to do its thing, it can do its thing. You don't try to hold it in, bottle it up, or suppress it. You just tune in to a better, more peaceful radio station.

Then hold in mind the perception that breath is an energy that originates in the body—it's not something you have to pull in from outside—and this change in perception allows the mind to settle in. The breath can grow more and more calm until finally it stops. You don't feel starved of breath, you don't feel like you're suffocating, it's just that the breath energy in the body is full. Everything is

connected inside. If there's a felt lack of breath energy in one part of the body, the breath energy in another part will move in. And you learn how to maintain that.

It's in this way you use your discernment to foster concentration. Then, of course, you can use the concentrated mind to further your discernment. The image in the Canon is of two hands washing each other: Your right hand washes your left hand; your left hand washes your right hand. The discernment allows you to settle down; once the mind has settled down, the discernment grows more refined. As the discernment's more refined, the concentration gets more refined. They support each other this way, and it's when they work together that you can start seeing things in the mind that you didn't see before; let go of more and more subtle problems that the mind creates for itself. Discernment is the primary factor, but it needs to be supported by concentration.

So as you sit down to meditate, take stock of your mind. There will be days when all you have to do is say, "I'd like to get the mind still," and it settles down, no problem. Other days, you have to think your way there. So keep in mind that the Buddha provided maps for both. Use whichever one is helpful, and then put the map aside and study your own mind, because that's where the genuine insights are going to arise.