

## *Stay Centered*

*January 10, 2021*

You may have noticed a tendency when you meditate: You're focused on the breath, and a thought not related to the breath comes up, and before you let go of it you try to figure out what it's about. Sometimes you feel committed to finish the sentence, to see where it's going. But then, at the end of the hour, when the bell rings, you just drop the meditation without any sense that you've got to tie it up nicely first. That tells you something about your priorities. The meditation is something you throw away, which is not the attitude you should have.

You should try to maintain it. As you open your eyes, bow down, and get up, have a sense of where your center is. The center that you focused on during the sit—or, if you find there's a center that's better to focus on while you're moving around: Go there and don't let go. Even as you do work around the monastery, work around the house, work around wherever you are, try to maintain this sense of a center. Take the energy that goes into distracted thinking and put it here. And remind yourself: The big problem is inside, so you want to stay focused inside.

It's not the case that your defilements are going to come up only when you're well settled here in concentration. They can come up at any time in the course of the day, and you want to be able to resist them. In fact, one of the best ways of getting to know your defilements is to try to make this center continuous as you go through the day. You begin to notice certain things pull you away. So-and-so does something you don't like: The center's been dropped, and you focused on what that person did. Or, there's something you find really attractive: The center's been dropped. That's when you know where your defilements are. Those are the things you have to defend yourself against.

It's by making the practice continuous that you begin to see these things. Otherwise, they fall into the cracks. As the mind moves from one thing to another, it'll drop into a moment of what Ajaan Lee calls "passing out," and it'll then focus on something else, have another thought. In that moment of passing out, a lot of machinations are going on. You want to be able to see through that.

One of the worst things, of course, is what Ajaan Fuang calls "dividing the day up into times": There's the time to meditate and there's the time not to meditate and do something else. You give all your attention to whatever it is that it's time to do. From his point of view, he said, "Try to make your practice timeless." In other words, regardless of what time it is outside—what chores you have to do,

what other responsibilities you have—it's always time to meditate, it's always time to be centered inside.

Only then can the practice build up momentum. Otherwise, it's like traffic in a city: It's start-stop, start-stop, start-stop, and you never get any momentum going at all. Or, like the road going up Palomar: It twists and it turns, and if you accelerate too much on the straightaways, then you have to brake more on the curves. No momentum gets built up. What you want is a practice that's more like a racetrack: You've got the straightaways and then you've got gentle curves where you have to slow down a little bit, but you can still keep up momentum. Then, you go down the straightaway again, then another gentle curve. It may be around and around in the same place, but that's a good image for what you're trying to do: You're trying to zero in on the mind. The curves here, of course, stand for your time outside of formal meditation: You can't go quite as fast. But when you hit the straightaway, you want to go right through.

As the Buddha said, there are two qualities that help at keeping up the momentum: One is putting in exertion, and the other is non-distraction. All those things that you like to think about in the course of the day, all the things you like to get worked up about, especially things outside: That's distraction. Then you tend to blame people outside for having distracted you. Well, you're the one who wanted to think about those things to begin with. There are so many things in the world that you're not thinking about. They're happening, they're right here in front of your eyes and not distracting you. You have to realize: You're distracting yourself.

It is possible to go through the day, even with a lot of activity going around, and still have a sense of a center that you carry with you. Ajaan Fuang had a student—she and her husband ran an electronics store, they had six children, they lived right above the store, so the children were running in and out of the store all the time as customers were coming in, going out—and when she hit the state of the concentration where she could maintain a sense of space, she could keep it going all day. Even as the kids were crying and having this problem and that problem, as customers were demanding attention, she was operating from that center: that perception of space. Here our distractions are a lot fewer and they're not all day. So remind yourself: Even as you're doing something else, you don't have to be distracted by it. You can stay focused on the center here.

Because there's a lot to see here. After all, where did the Buddha learn about dependent co-arising? He looked right at his mind in the present moment. All those steps: He was able to parse them out. There's that passage where the Buddha talks about Ven. Sāriputta and his practice of concentration: how he could parse

out all the different mental factors that went into his concentration. And neither of them were just showing off. They weren't just trying to make the list long.

The whole purpose there is to see very clearly what individual events there are in the mind, so that you can see where your craving is focused. Because if you aren't clear about the focal point—the *actual* focal point—of your craving, you can try to do away with it, and do away with it, and it doesn't do away, because you're focused on the wrong spot.

You know that passage where the Buddha said, "Sights you haven't seen: Do you have any craving there?" And part of you might say, "Well of course: I haven't seen Lake Baikal, I haven't seen Ayers Rock..." There are all kinds of places in the world that you haven't seen that you might want to see. But realize that the craving is not at the site. The craving is at your mental image. That's just an example to point out how, often, when we're attached to something, it's not so much the thing that we're attached to; we're attached to the perception about it. If you miss that, then you can see all the drawbacks of that thing but still hold on to the perception.

So there's a lot to parse out here. There's a lot to see. And if you let yourself get distracted, you're not going to see it. But if you try to maintain this sense of center, then little mental events will happen—you may lose the center for a little bit—but, if you try to come back as quickly as possible, you'll be able to parse things out. That's how the Buddha parsed them out to begin with: noticing what pulled him away, being determined not to get pulled away the next time, and then, of course, discovering that there was something else that pulled him away. Peeling away through the mind like this: That's how he was able to peel down to what was of real value.

Because what's of real value does lie inside. It's not going to be found by looking outside. I've always thought that that answer to the koan about the dog having Buddha nature and the master says No: It's because you're not supposed to be looking for Buddha nature in the dog. If there's anything that's worthwhile, it's inside. Now, we don't talk in terms of Buddha nature here. The Buddha never talked about it. If anybody had the right to talk about it, he was the one, but he never did. But the main point is that the really important things are here inside, and they're going to be found by looking inside.

So you want to look inside as much as you can. This doesn't mean that you don't do your duties and responsibilities. You have to take care of them, but you can do them at the same time that you're centered.

When William James wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he was very careful to be very respectful of the different traditions, except for Catholicism. He

liked to make fun of the Catholic saints. There was one story of a woman who eventually was made a saint—she was a nun—and she was totally useless. She would be assigned to teach children in school, and she'd go into trances in the midst of the classroom. The kids would go up and would take scissors and cut little pieces of cloth out of her robe, because she was obviously very holy. The head nuns put her in the kitchen to help, and she'd drop the serving dishes all around because she'd fall into these trances. That's not what you want. You can stay centered—have a clear center inside, and do your best to try to keep it open and relaxed as you focus on it—and this still gives you plenty of room to be attentive to whatever responsibilities you have.

The important thing is that you have a sense of priorities: that this spot is important to keep open, relaxed. It's important to keep tabs on it. And the more continually you can do that, the more you're going to see. The practice can build up momentum, as you begin to see not only glimpses here and there, but you begin to see how things are connected inside: how unskillful thoughts get connected, how skillful thoughts get connected, how that continuous sense of the center can get connected.

As Ajaan Lee said, "When you see cause and effect, that's when you have real insight." If you just see causes but without the effects, that's not insight. Or, just the effects but not the causes: That doesn't count, either. Real discernment sees connections, both the causes and the effects, and the only way you're going to see those connections is if you watch continually. And this is the spot to watch.