

Steps in Concentration

February 6, 2021

When the Buddha taught concentration, the how-to part of the instructions was in his description of right mindfulness. You're focused on the body—for example, the breath—in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

So where's your breath right now? Anything that's not related to this breath at the moment: Include that in "the world." You're going to give total importance to the breath in and of itself. You're going to keep it in mind and you're going to be alert to what you're doing.

That means keeping watch over the breath and keeping watch over the mind at the same time. Ajaan Lee makes a comparison with a pulley: You pull the rope back and forth over the pulley. You pay attention to the breath; you look at the mind. Is the mind staying with the breath? Is it happy with the breath? If it's not, turn around and look at the breath again. What can you do to make it better?

This desire to make it better: That's the ardency. That's what turns ordinary mindfulness and ordinary alertness into something good. So give your full attention to this little cluster right here. And as you do, the mindfulness turns into directed thought, and the ardency and the alertness turn into evaluation, as you try to make it really good and get the most out of being with the breath.

This is where mindfulness begins to shade into concentration. What kind of breathing is good? When you get a comfortable sensation from the breath that you can maintain all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, and all the way in between the breaths—in other words, something that's not disturbed by the in-and-out of the breath—protect that. And how do you breathe in a way that protects it?

Ajaan Fuang would use the word *prakhawng*, which is the word used to describe how you would hover around a child who is just learning how to walk. You don't hold the child, because, after all, you want the child to learn how to walk on its own, but you also want to make sure the child doesn't fall. So, *just* the right amount of protectedness; *just* the right amount of pressure.

As you can make that sensation feel good, then think about letting it spread. What would be a good direction for it to spread? Up? Down? Out to either side? Into the front? Out the back? It depends on where you start. Ajaan Lee would have you start at the back of the neck, right about the base of the skull. That's probably because, as he was first working with this method, he was suffering heart

problems. When you suffer from heart problems, there's a lot of tension in the back of the neck. If you can create a good sensation there, that helps to alleviate a lot of the pressure, a lot of the tension. Then you can think of it spreading down from that spot.

But you may have another spot where you like to start. Choose a spot that's sensitive: in other words, sensitive to variations in the breath. Then think of it connecting up with other spots in the body as well. Think of spreading your awareness so you fill the whole body. Then breathe in a way that feels good within the context of that whole-body awareness.

The Buddha gives an image of a bathman. Back in those days, they didn't have bars of soap; they had soap powder, or soap flour, which they mixed with water and made into a kind of dough. Then you'd rub that dough over the body. The bathman had to be very careful to make sure the water got mixed properly—had to knead it through the dough. In the same way, knead the comfortable sensations—the breath—through the different parts of the body. Wherever there's resistance, if you have trouble going through those spots, go around them. Or you can think of them loosening up, using whatever perceptions can help spread things through the body.

Of the various similes that the Buddha gave for the different levels of right concentration, this is the only one that has a conscious agent doing something: He stands for the evaluation. You get that comfortable sensation and you spread it through the body, work it through the body, deal with whatever blockages there may be until everything feels connected.

After a while, as you're evaluating the relationship of the breath to the mind—and the mind to the breath—your powers of evaluation tell you, "You don't need to evaluate things so much anymore." Everything spreads easily; spreads well. That's when you can move in on the breath. You've got a sense that your awareness is one with the breath: The breath fills the body; your awareness fills the body; breath fills the awareness.

At this point your ardency, alertness, and mindfulness have a much simpler job, which is just to remember, "Stay with the breath." Or, just "breath, breath, breath." You don't even think in terms of full sentences at that point. You're fully alert to what's happening, you try to maintain the consistency of this focus you've got here, and the sense of ease and sense of pleasure will move through the body on their own, without your having to direct them.

The image here is of a lake fed by a spring, and the spring in turn is fed by rains that come again and again so that it doesn't run dry. As a result, cool water from the spring permeates the whole lake. And because everything in the body's

connected, you don't have to work it through. Just allow it to spread. There may even be a feeling of an upwelling pleasure or energy in the body. That can sometimes happen. Just allow it to move through. Don't try to bottle it in. If you do, it becomes oppressive. Think of all the energy channels in the body being open: The body can be like a big sponge. Everything is wide open all around.

When everything gets saturated, things begin to calm down even more. Here, the image is of a still lake with lotuses growing in a lake. They haven't grown up above the surface of the lake, so they're totally saturated with water, from their roots to their tips, and they're very, very still. In these analogies, movement stands for rapture; water stands for pleasure. You've just got pleasure: very still. So again, you *prakhawng*: You hover around it, and just stay very, very still.

The breath will get more and more subtle, and the sense of pleasure will get more refined until it turns into equanimity. You're just alert, awake, aware. This is where mindfulness is said to be finally purified.

The image is of a man sitting with a white cloth covering his whole body. Your awareness fills the whole body in that way. There's a very strong sense of being balanced here. Now, in the beginning, the balance may feel a little wobbly, but as you develop your sense of balance—your sense of “just right”—there's nothing you have to do: Just stay right here. Maintain what you've got. That's it.

When the mind gets really still like this, people all too often ask, “What's next? What can we make out of this?” Don't make anything yet. Just let it stay there. Get used to being very still, very solid, because the mind needs a place like this.

As we go through life, we have to develop a lot of equanimity. But the Buddha said there's what he calls household equanimity, where you have to will yourself to be equanimous, and then there's renunciate equanimity, which comes from getting the mind firmly concentrated. Ajaan Fuang would make a distinction between what he called small-hearted equanimity and large-hearted. Small-hearted is when you basically give up on things: You don't see anything better, and you don't see that things are worth getting worked up about. It's a mild form of depression, and that's not what we want. We want equanimity that comes from a sense of being solidly based: The energy needs in the body are satisfied; your alertness is full, spreads wide around, doesn't feel much restriction at all—just that need to stay balanced.

This is going to be your refuge—and it's going to be your source of knowledge, so protect it well. Have a sense of its value. As the chant says, “one with respect for concentration”: Have some respect for this stillness.

There may be times when you wonder, “When are the insights going to come? How long can you afford to just stay still like this?” Well, you can't force the

insights. Insight isn't something you *do*; you can do the concentration, and you can ask questions about it when it's solid enough. You create the conditions, and then the insights can come.

So focus on the conditions, focus on the causes: being ardent, alert, and mindful. Those three qualities will play different roles as your concentration develops. They're all right here, it's just that their role gets more and more subtle. Your work is to make it more continuous. Because when things are really still like this, that's when you can see subtle movements that otherwise would have stayed hidden. So look for whatever stillness you can find, protect it, keep it in balance. And a lot of the path will come together right there.