

Calm & at Ease

March 29, 2021

In the factors for awakening, calm and concentration are two separate factors. Calm is said to be a precondition for concentration. It grows out of refreshment. It's basically the mind at its ease. You've been refreshed by the breath, refreshed by comfortable feelings, and now you let them calm down with a sense of well-being.

This is a necessary factor for concentration, whether it's concentration where you're sitting here with your eyes closed or concentration as you're going around in the world. If you're feeling anxious, ill at ease, worked up about things, it's hard to get the mind to settle down. And only when it's settled down can it stay firmly focused.

The English word concentration is a good translation for *samadhi*, because it's when the mind is firmly intent. Calm is more gentle. You're beginning to settle down, so you have to induce a sense of ease. The Buddha teaches how to induce it through fabrication in his instructions on breath meditation. You work with bodily fabrication—in other words, the way you breathe. You try to breathe in a way that's refreshing, that gives you energy. Then you allow it to calm down.

The Buddha also speaks of mental fabrication: your perceptions and feelings. You try to develop intense feelings of pleasure along with intense feelings of rapture or refreshment. Then, when the mind has been energized and refreshed, you allow *it* to calm down. In other words, you find feelings and perceptions that are more refined and calming, just as you found a way of breathing that was more refined.

Take the perception of the breath in the body: If you perceive it as the air coming in and out through the nose, that allows you to settle down to one level. But if you think of it as the energy that suffuses every cell in the body, and that the energy is all connected through the nerves and the blood vessels, that's a more calming perception. It requires less energy to breathe, and you're less concerned about deciding when to breathe in, when to breathe out. You're getting closer and closer to what Ajaan Lee calls the profound breath, where everything is very, very still.

If you're out and about in the world, trying to get the mind concentrated, firmly intent, you can also use verbal fabrication: the way you talk to yourself. This is a time of great social anxiety, what with the pandemic and the social unrest and a general lack of trust in this country. I've been hearing a lot of people talking about how they have a lot of anxiety about going out. Well, you have to talk to yourself, you have to remind yourself that the real dangers in life are not other people.

Was it Sartre that said hell is other people? No, hell is your own mind! The dangers that other people can pose to you are nothing compared to the dangers you pose to yourself. But

the dangers you pose to yourself are things you can learn how to control. Other people are hard to control, but you can control your thoughts, your words, your deeds, and *these* are the true measure of where you're going to go, how well you're going to fare. So think about that: that your most valuable treasures *are* your actions. If you're safe in your actions, you're safe.

There may be the results of past actions lying in wait for you someplace, but again, once those are taken care of, then you're freed. The important thing is how you carry your present thoughts and words and deeds with you, and how you use them to deal with whatever your past actions may be sending your way. If you're mindful and alert, okay, you've got dangers under control.

So think in that way, so that it gives rise to a sense of refreshment. And in that way, the mind can calm down.

It's the same when you're sitting here and meditating. Sometimes you need to engage in some verbal fabrication. This is what the different recollections are for. The Buddha says there are times when you're trying to focus on the breath but it feels like there's a fever in the breath; you focus on feelings, there's a fever in your feelings; you focus on the mind, there's a fever in the mind. Okay, you drop those topics and think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha, whatever you find inspiring. Let them into the world of your mind.

The world of your mind is determined by what and who you allow inside. If you're going to start thinking unskillful thoughts, you have a tendency to block out the memory of certain people. It's as if those people had never existed in the world: the Buddha, Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Lee, Upasika Kee. In that way, you're free to think your unskillful thoughts. But when you realize that this is not healthy, you want to let them back in.

So think about the Buddha.

That time when Venerable Sona was going to disrobe: He'd been doing walking meditation to the point where his feet were bleeding, and he got discouraged. He thought, "Well, maybe I can go back and be a layperson. I can still make merit." The Buddha read his mind, so he disappeared from Vulture Peak and appeared right in front of Sona. You can imagine how Sona felt: on the one hand, embarrassment, but on the other hand, a strong sense of gratitude to the Buddha for caring enough to come. So let that sense of the Buddha into your world, the world of your mind: stern but caring. Or if you prefer, if the Buddha seems too far away, you can think of any of the ajaans you find inspiring.

Or you can think about the Dhamma. Here again, the Dhamma teaches us that what's really important in life is the state of the mind. And the state of the mind is something you *can* train. If you've been heedless in the past, well, that doesn't mean you're going to have to be heedless in the future. There's that saying that if you were heedless in the past but are heedful now, you illumine the world like the moon when it's released from the clouds. It is possible to change your ways.

As the Buddha said, if it were not possible for people to drop unskillful habits and to develop skillful ones, there'd be no point in his teaching. So he taught, which means, okay, there is a point—which means that you *can* change. So even though the Dhamma sometimes seems forbidding as it points out that “this is unskillful, that's unskillful,” its purpose is compassionate. So take comfort in the Dhamma. Take comfort in the Buddha and the Sangha.

Then, when the mind has soothed its fevers, it can get back to the breath: refreshed, calmed down. You're ready to go into concentration.

Right concentration is strong, but it comes best when you do it with a sense of ease, when you can put yourself *at* ease. And that's the purpose of this factor for awakening.