

## *Calming Mental Fabrication*

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When the Buddha teaches concentration practice—breath meditation practice—he gives you a physical fabrication to focus on, i.e., the breath coming in, going out, and then he gives you a verbal fabrication, the instructions, “Keep track of the breath; remain focused on the breath—ardent, alert, mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” So you keep reminding yourself, “Stay focused on the breath in and of itself.”

Remember the qualities you have to bring here. Mindfulness: You’ve got to remember to stay here. Alertness: You’re going to watch what you’re doing and watch the results of your actions. And then you want to be ardent: Once you’ve seen what you’re doing and the results of your actions, you decide, “Is it good enough?” If it’s not, what can you do to make it better?

The Buddha says that you want to move in the direction of pleasure, equanimity—that’s a mental fabrication—and he gives you some images to hold in mind as to where this should go.

The first one is of a bathman working water through a pile of bath powder. Back in those days, they had a soap powder that was like flour, which you would make a kind of dough that you would then rub over your body as you were taking a bath. To make the dough proper, you had to make sure that it was moistened; you didn’t want to have any dry powder, so you had to work the moisture through the whole ball of powder. It’s a good image to hold in mind, because once the way you breathe does develop a sense of ease, well-being, then you try to work that sense of ease and well-being through the body, leaving no dry patches.

In the beginning, the body’s going to resist a little bit, because there will be patterns of tension here and there, blockages here and there. You have to work through them, which means going through the body and noticing, “Where are there patterns of tension right now?”—because those will cause the blockages.

If there’s tension in your neck, think of it relaxing, and then go down the spine, out the legs, out to the toes. Start at the middle of the chest, right around the heart, and go down through the stomach, the intestines. Work out any kinks you might feel in there, any patterns of tension, from the back of the neck, down the shoulders, down the arms—or anywhere you feel that it feels good to have the sense of pleasure flowing.

As a general rule of thumb, you want to remember that you don’t push the breath around. You simply open the channels and let the breath do its own thing,

because, if you start pushing things around, you'll actually be pushing the blood and the lymph around. Sometimes they get stuck up in the head, or there's a tightness in the chest, so think of the breath flowing freely. Your only duty is to open the roads.

Ajaan Lee has a nice image. He says it's like a country where they have lots of roads connecting all the different towns. Think of Thailand. When I first went there, there were not that many highways. There was one highway that went from Bangkok up to Chiang Mai, and another highway that went from Bangkok up to the Northeast, to Vientiane. That was pretty much it for the main body of the country, which meant that if you wanted to go anywhere, you had to go on either of those two highways. So there wasn't much circulation, not much going from here to there. But then over time they began to open up new roads, so that now it's a real network. And, in opening up the roads, the government didn't have to push people onto the roads and tell them that they had to go. The fact that the opportunity was there was what inspired them to go. And it's the same with the breath: You don't push it around, you just open things up—open up the roads, open up the channels—and the breath, when it finds there are places where it can go, will go.

That's the first image, the bathman. Then once things have been opened up and you just stay there with a sense of your awareness filling the body, the breath will well up. The image here is of a lake fed by a spring, and the cool waters of the spring fill the whole lake.

Now, with the bathman, the bathman has to consciously work through the powder. That's directed thought and evaluation. There's a conscious effort to open things up. But once you get past that, think of the spring water coming into the lake. The spring water doesn't have any intention. Just the fact that everything is wide open allows it to flow. That stands for the flow of rapture.

Now, there are passages where Ajaan Lee says that when there are good sensations in the body, try to spread the quiet sensations, the still sensations. That's for the next step, which is once the sense of flowing energy has been nourishing enough and actually gets a little tiresome, what you want is stillness. You tune in to a more still level of energy in the body and you realize there's a still energy permeating the whole body. It's perfectly still all the time. You may first access it, say, at the point where the diaphragm meets the ribs, right at the sternum. Other people find it at the back of the hands, the tops of the feet.

The image here is of a still lake with lotuses growing in the lake, and some of them don't get up above the water, so they're saturated with the still water of the

lake from their roots to their tips. That's another perception you can hold in mind.

Finally, the last perception is of someone sitting very still, surrounded by a white cloth. Here, the fact that there's no more water means there's no more sense of pleasure. There's more of a sense of equanimity filling the body, along with a stillness filling the body. The breath settles down and doesn't seem to move. You're alert, mindful. This is where mindfulness is pure, equanimity is pure, and everything is perfectly poised. The fact that you're not breathing is not because you're trying to stop the breath or stifle it; it's simply because everything is so well connected and there's a sense of fullness in the breath energy that there's no felt need to breathe.

From there, the Buddha provides even more perceptions. The next one is paying no attention to the perceptions of form. In other words, the sense of a boundary or a shape to the body begins to dissolve. There's just a mist of sensations, and there's space between the dots of the mist, so you focus on the perception of space, knowing that you could go back to the body at any time, but this is so much more spacious—that's the only way you could describe it. You begin to get a sense that the space permeates not only your body but also the air around you, the walls of the sala, the air outside, the ground beneath us; there seems to be space in all directions. That's a perception you can hold in mind, too.

From there you can go to the sense of awareness: just knowing, knowing, knowing. That would be the perception you hold on next.

And finally you let go of the perception of oneness—the oneness of the knowing—and it's replaced by a sense of nothingness; again, a perception. This, the Buddha said, is as far as perception attainments go.

So he's giving you an object lesson in how you can use those three kinds of fabrication—bodily, verbal, mental—to get the mind to settle down.

This is right in line with his instructions on breath meditation. Once you're sensitive to bodily fabrication, you try to calm it down. When you're sensitive to mental fabrication—your feelings and perceptions—you find feelings that are more calming, perceptions that are more calming.

You can do this either just to get the mind to a spot where it feels really good and quiet, or to start understanding what's going on in the mind—how it fabricates things. The best way to learn about the process of fabrication is to fabricate something really good.

So he gives you some recommendations, and it's good to keep them in mind, because the picture we have in mind of what we're trying to attain here will have a huge impact on what we do.

There's a Pāli term, *cittass'ek'aggatā*, which is sometimes translated as one-pointedness of mind. If you hold that image in mind, it's going to have a huge influence on what you're trying to do—to get everything reduced to one point, block everything else out—but that wouldn't fit in with the other images the Buddha's providing for concentration. It turns out, though, that in that term, *ek'aggatā*—*eka*, “one”; *agga*, which they're translating as “point”; and the *-tā* turns it into a noun, it's the “-ness” in English—*agga* doesn't actually mean “point.” It can either mean the top of something, the summit of something, or it can mean a meeting place, a gathering place. Given the perceptions and the images the Buddha has you hold in mind for what you're doing, the translation of “meeting place” or “gathering place” seems to be more relevant.

We're trying to gather the mind around here; it's gathered around the breath, and it doesn't send any pseudopods out to scout around the world. Everything gets brought in here, brought in here, with a sense of spaciousness, a strong sense of well-being. Even the equanimity: There's one passage where the Buddha said that equanimity is actually a very subtle form of pleasure. So it feels right, being here; you're centered, stable.

This is the state of mind in which you can see things really clearly, which is why it's the heart of the path. There's one passage where the Buddha describes the path basically as seven requisites for noble right concentration, everything else being there to support this, to make it really right. So this is the center of the path; make this your center as well.

Once you've learned how to create this as you're sitting here, don't let it just fall off your lap as you get up and walk away. Try to take it with you as much as you can as you go through the day. It may not be quite so firmly grounded, but it's nothing to toss away or to look down on.

Ajaan Suwat commented several times that his best insights came while he was doing walking meditation—i.e., wherever he was walking. So, even though the concentration when you're walking is not quite as stable as the concentration while you're sitting, still, the fact that the mind is moving around a little bit lets you see the movements of the mind, reflect on them, and yet not go running with them.

That aspect of concentration can stay with you no matter what your posture—if you make up your mind that that's what you want to do. This doesn't happen on its own; it happens because you want it, and you want it so much that you want to do it well.

So you've tamed your desires in line with the fabrications that the Buddha recommends. These fabrications have gotten results for a lot of people in the past, and here's your opportunity to join that fortunate group.