

## *Noble Right Concentration*

*August 31, 2021*

Take a couple of good, long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body most clearly. Focus your attention there. Then ask yourself if long breathing is comfortable. If it is, keep it up. If not, you can change. You could make it even longer, or shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Try to notice when the rhythm and texture of the breathing feels good for the body right now.

When you find a rhythm that feels good, stick with it, and then think of that comfortable breath energy spreading through the body. You can either think of it radiating out like light from the spot where you're focused, or you could think of it flowing down the different breath channels in the body: down the spine, out the legs, down the back of the neck, down the shoulders and the arms, down the front of the body, coming into the head from all directions.

Play with the breath for a while. The whole point of this is you're trying to get the mind to settle down. If you force it down, it may resist. But if you give it something to play with, something to explore, it gets absorbed without even thinking about concentration. After all, this is the breath energy in your body. This is what keeps you alive, keeps the body and the mind together, keeps the blood flowing well, keeps the nerves healthy. So it only stands to reason that it should be interesting.

At the same time, you're fulfilling several of the steps in breath meditation: being aware of the whole body breathing in and breathing out, breathing in a way that gives rise to a sense of rapture or refreshment, breathing in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure, breathing in a way that gladdens the mind or concentrates the mind, engaged in mindfulness practice and concentration practice at the same time. After all, the Buddha's instructions for how you get the mind in the right concentration are there in right mindfulness. Stay focused on the body in and of itself—in this case, it's the breath—ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

In other words, you've got one topic that you're focused on. If anything else comes up that's related to the world, you put it aside. That's the formula for establishing mindfulness, but it's also a description of the mind as it's settling down into concentration. The alertness and the ardency turn into evaluation as you're evaluating the breath. The mindfulness relates to directed thought. And those two qualities, directed thought and evaluation—together with singleness of

preoccupation, where you're staying with one thing—are the causal factors that get you into right concentration.

When you do things right, then the other factors come: a sense of refreshment, a sense of pleasure. The refreshment in some cases can be really strong, one of the reasons why it's also translated as rapture. In other cases, it's more general: a sense of fullness where you feel just right being right here. The energy feels full in the body. Then you simply maintain that.

The mind can go through various stages as you let go of the directed thought and evaluation, and are simply there with the breath, becoming one with the sensation of the breath. If the sense of rapture becomes too intense, you drop that. Go for a sense of pleasure. Finally, even the sense of pleasure becomes gross. You settle down with a sense of equanimity. That's the standard definition or description of the four levels of jhana.

But when the Buddha talks about noble right concentration, he adds another factor. He calls it having your theme well in hand. He illustrates it with an analogy: a person sitting and watching someone else lying down, or a person standing and watching someone sitting. You're basically stepping back and observing your mind in concentration. When you're fully planted in the object, you can't do that. But you can pull back a little bit, and yet not destroy the concentration. You can see where things are going well, where they're not going well. It's an extension of evaluation, but it can be applied to any of the levels of jhana, because it fits in with the Buddha's observation that the Dhamma is learned through commitment and reflection.

With commitment, we're sticking with one object. With reflection, we're trying to do it well, trying to notice when what we're doing is working, what's not working, and then making adjustments. It's in this way that the concentration improves and your discernment develops. Discernment is all about seeing things in terms of cause and effect. Sometimes you hear it defined as seeing the nature of things as they are. But the Buddha was less interested in things as they *are* than in how they *work*.

After all, you could say that all things change. In fact, sometimes you hear that as the definition of Buddhist wisdom, or the beginning of wisdom: All things change. But it's not a very useful observation on its own, because it doesn't say why they change, how they change, what kind of change is good, what kind of change is bad. But if you put that observation into the context of the four noble truths and their duties, then you can refine it and actually make it useful.

The first truth is the truth of stress or suffering, and the duty there is to comprehend it. To comprehend it means to understand it to the point of getting

past any passion, aversion, or delusion around it. Stress is defined as the five clinging-aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness.

Where are you going to see those aggregates? You see them in the concentration. The breath is part of form. The feeling of pleasure that arises as you stay focused: That's feeling. The mental image you have of the breath: That's perception. Directed thought and evaluation as you try to adjust the breath, play with the breath, make the most of the sense of pleasure that comes from being with the breath: That's fabrication. Then there's consciousness of these things. You want to see how these things change as the mind gets more settled in: That kind of change is a good thing. But then you notice, as the mind gets concentrated, that even in concentration there are ups and downs in the level of stress, ups and downs in the level of focus. You try to iron those out. And to some extent, you can.

But there are certain things that, even in the most stable level of concentration, are a little bit uneven. After all, it is a fabricated thing. We're trying to put the path together. So we tweak that sentence that all things are subject to change and make it: All fabrications are subject to change. Remember—where do fabrications come from? They come from intentions. Intentions come from where? They come from the mind. So you're not interested in things in general outside, whether they change or not. You're interested in the products of the mind. They change because the mind changes. It's precisely here that you want to see cause and effect. After all, that's what the four noble truths are about. The second truth, craving, is the cause for suffering, and it's coming from the mind. The fourth noble truth, the path, is not the cause for the cessation of suffering, but it takes you there. And it, too, comes from the mind.

When the Buddha laid out dependent co-arising, it was all about causes and effects immediately present to awareness. This is the kind of insight we want. And how do we gain this insight? Not simply by sitting there watching things passively. You have to be proactive and committed. This is why we make a state of concentration, and then we adjust it, refine it, try to extend it as long as we can, because the best things to know, or the easiest things to know, in terms of cause and effect, are the things that you do.

You're doing something with the mind. It's like learning something about eggs. You can sit there and look at an egg for a long time and see that, yes, eventually over time it does rot. But that's not very useful knowledge. You learn something more useful by taking the egg, breaking it, and making different things out of it. Make scrambled eggs, make steamed eggs, make omelets, soufflés. You learn a lot about the eggs that way. And you also learn about yourself, in terms of

your own ingenuity, your own precision in developing a skill, your powers of observation. You see what your input into the eggs does to those eggs. Here's where the analogy breaks down, because what you're trying to do is see that the things that the mind does have their drawbacks. And you'd rather find something that is totally free of those drawbacks, free from the fabrication.

But again, you get sensitive to fabrication by committing yourself to doing it as skillfully as you can. When you reflect properly, you begin to see, "I've done this. I did that. This was unnecessary. This is causing stress. I can drop that." You pare things away. Ultimately, you get down to something that's not fabricated. The Buddha calls it the deathless. He calls it lots of different things. I think there are some thirty some names for nibbana, but it doesn't matter what you call it. The fact is it's there. And it's worth all the work that goes into the practice to arrive there.

So it's through this pattern of commitment and reflection that we learn about cause and effect, and we gain a knowledge that is really useful in putting an end to the causes for suffering. It all starts right here with the breath.

It's pretty amazing. If it weren't for the Buddha, we probably wouldn't have thought of looking at the breath. But of course, it's not just the breath. As you bring all of your mind to the breath, you see how they interact. That's where you learn all you need to know about what's going on in the mind, what suffering is, why it is, and how you can bring it to an end.