

Building Concentration

September 19, 2021

When we practice mindfulness, it comes in two stages. The first is simply the stage of establishing a frame of reference, as when we stay with the breath—that's the body in the body—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. This means that any other topic that comes up in the mind, we're not going to go there; we're going to stay right with the breath.

Once that frame of reference is established, the next stage, the Buddha said, is to be aware of origination and passing away. Now, sometimes you hear that translated as “arising and passing away,” but that's not what the Buddha said. Origination, *samudaya*, means causation—seeing what the *causes* are for things to arise in the mind—which is very different from simply watching things arise, because the way you know the causes, of course, is to try to manipulate them.

It's like being a scientist. Scientists don't simply watch animals or watch minerals. They experiment. They change things here, change things there, put this chemical together with the mineral, that chemical together with the mineral, prod the animal. And, by changing the causes, they see which causes have an impact, which ones don't, and—for those that do have an impact—what kind of impact it is.

Or you can make a comparison with building a building. Back when I was at Wat Dhammasathit, there was one time when I came back to America. Ajaan Fuang came along, and he noticed at my house that my father was an amateur carpenter—a good one. When we got back to Thailand, he said, “Okay, the father's a carpenter; the son should be a carpenter.” He gave me the task of building a little hut to dye robes. It had a roof, one wall, and a little stove inside, all handmade. One of his instructions was not to buy anything new but to use old scraps that were already there at the monastery. If I wanted to buy anything new, I first had to get special permission.

But what it meant, of course, was that I suddenly had to understand how to make a roof—how the rafters fit together when you put a roof together. I'd seen roofs many times but never really paid close attention. But, now that I had to build one, I had to pay close attention. When other people build roofs, how do they do that? When they put up a wall of concrete blocks, how do they do that?

It was by having to build something that I learned a lot more about wood, a lot more about buildings. I'd used buildings many times before but never really

looked into the details of their construction. But once I was forced to, I came away with a lot more knowledge.

It's the same with the mind. When you're trying to put together a state of concentration, you have to figure out: What are the causes and what are the effects? Ajaan Lee has already given some advice. He says—when you're trying to get the mind into concentration—directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation are the causes.

Directed thought is when you focus on a topic, as when you establish mindfulness. Evaluation is the next step. You're trying to do this well, which is part of ardency, which is also in mindfulness practice. You're trying to develop a sense of ease in the body. Well, what kind of breathing will do that? You experiment. When you find a rhythm and texture of breathing that feels good, what do you do with it then? Try to maintain it. But what happens if the body changes? Well, you change the breathing.

Then the Buddha says to let that sense of ease and refreshment spread throughout the body. How do you do that? Again, Ajaan Lee gives some advice based on his experience about letting it spread through the body. But how do *you* let it spread through the body? That's something you have to figure out for yourself. You gain a sense of when you're pushing too much. You get a sense of when all you have to do is simply *think* in the mind, "Let it spread," think of the channels in the body through which it could spread, and it goes.

That way, you learn a lot about cause and effect, both in the body and the mind: how your perceptions play a role in the way you're experiencing the body, which kinds of perceptions are useful, which ones are not. That's how you learn about origination—cause and effect.

As Ajaan Lee once said, if you know causes but without knowing the effects, that's not discernment. If you know effects without knowing the causes, that's not discernment, either. You have to know the two together, and the best way to know that, of course, is to make sure the causes come from within. Those are the ones you know most clearly. After all, you should know what you're doing. That's what alertness is all about.

In this way, as you put together a state of concentration in the mind, you learn an awful lot about the mind: all the processes of fabrication, how things get put together in the mind. It's when you try to build a state of concentration that you really get to know these things. Otherwise, they just pass, pass, pass by your eyes. You see them but you don't really see them. There are potentials there that you miss because you haven't tried to develop them.

So in the stage of origination and passing away as you focus on the breath, this is what it means: trying to create a state of concentration, noting what works, what doesn't work, so that you can see how a state of becoming gets formed in the mind.

The same applies for distractions. You can simply follow the distractions but, again, you won't really know them that well. It's when you fight against them—that's when you know them.

As the Buddha said, "If you want to know somebody's purity, have dealings with them." Sometimes that means getting in arguments with them and seeing how they behave during an argument. Do they behave in an honorable way? If you just go along, go along with whatever they say, you're never going to really know. But, when you actually have dealings with them, you want to make sure that you don't lose out to them and they don't abuse you—of course, you don't abuse them—then see how they behave.

It's the same with your defilements—those distractions as you meditate, those thoughts of greed and distress with reference to the world: You're going to know those only if you say No to them. Try to say No more and more quickly. You begin to see how these things form in the mind—what stages they go through. IN that way, you become less and less vulnerable to them.

So you don't simply watch things come and go; you try to make good things come and make them stay—this is what the Buddha said is meant by "mindfulness as a governing principle." Here we're trying to give rise to concentration and make it stay. That's how mindfulness and concentration go together to produce discernment—the kind of discernment that can lead to release.