

Concentration Work

March 18, 2022

We have lots of selves inside. There's a whole menagerie. Different selves play different roles, and the Buddha picked out three that are helpful on the path. They're different forms of becoming. Eventually you're going to have to let them go, but you have to train them first. It takes work. I've heard some people say, "Well, it's so much work. Why don't we just let go? Why do we have to bother with all this work?" Well, if you let go like that, you're back where you were. And where you were is not the end of suffering. It's immersed in suffering.

So what are these selves inside that you've got to work with to get out of that suffering? There's the self as the producer: the one who wants to create happiness and feels that it has the means to do that. There's self as the consumer: the "you" who wants to benefit from the work of the producer. And there's the reflective self: You might call it the director who watches over the other two, making sure that the producer's not lazy, making sure that the consumer is neither too demanding nor not demanding enough. This reflective self has many levels, because the reflector has to reflect on the reflector sometimes, to make sure that the reflector is not being too critical.

It's helpful to think about these things. You can ask yourself when you're sitting down to meditate: Who's in charge? Are the different selves working together?

If you find that that's too much to think about, remember: You're not here to focus on your selves. You're here to focus on your breath. So focus on the breath first. As you get used to being with the breath, you can't help but notice that your mind is relating to the breath in different ways. There are times when the mind wants to simply enjoy the breathing; other times when it's trying to figure out why it can't enjoy it. What's going on? Is the breath uncomfortable? Or is the mind simply too antsy to want to settle down? This is where you analyze the problem.

Then you try to make changes. When a sense of ease appears, sometimes the consumer will want to take over and say, "I just want to wallow around in this pleasure for a while." And there are passages where the Buddha says that you do indulge in the pleasure. But you have to figure out how much is too much and how much is enough. If you drop the producer's work entirely and simply wallow around, after a while the causes run out, and you're back where you were before you meditated. But if you don't allow yourself to enjoy the pleasure, then there won't be any enjoyment in this.

So, as we were saying today, there may be a time when you have to soften your focus a little bit to allow for the pleasure. Think of it going through the body, because the pleasure's there to work with. It's not there simply to enjoy. Or we might say: You can enjoy it when it first comes, but you don't eat it all up. Ajaan Lee's image is of having a coconut tree. The coconut will give fruit. If you eat up all the coconuts, that's all you have: one tree giving fruit. But if you take a couple of the coconuts and plant them, then you have more trees. Eat the coconuts from those, but plant some of them, too. Don't eat all of them. After a while, you become, as he says, a coconut-orchard millionaire.

So it's up to you to get a sense of what the proper balance is. This is where your reflective self comes in to see: What's the balance between working at producing the concentration and enjoying the results?

You can think of another analogy: It's like someone who's gotten a new job. He gets his first paycheck and quits the job to go out and spend all the money. Then he's poor again. He comes back and asks for the job back. And you can imagine, in the business world, if someone did this, it would be a very kind boss who would actually take him back to begin with. But there wouldn't be much prospect for that person to get very far in his work, because he gets his next paycheck, and he quits the job and goes off and spends the money again. The trick is learning how to stick with the work and enjoy the results of the work at the same time—because there is work to be done.

Those schools of thought that say, "Well, just simply let go, and there you are: the unconditioned. Let go, and there's a space all around you." Well, there's space, but it's not the unconditioned. If there's still greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind, what are you going to do? They have to be dealt with, and you need concentration in order to deal with them. Otherwise, they'll come on strong and overwhelm you. When they're clever, you won't even realize that you've been overwhelmed.

So to get past these things, you've got to get the mind really still so that you can see the subtle things going on in it—because when the mind isn't really still, it's creating a lot of noise. It's like trying to figure out if there's a mouse in your wall, but you're running around, making a lot of noise with a vacuum cleaner. You're never going to hear the mouse. You're lucky if you hear it every now and then. But if you're making a lot of noise, you might assume that there's no mouse there at all. You have to be very quiet, sometimes for long periods of time. Then, when the mouse thinks that there's nobody there, that's when it'll start moving around, scratching here, scratching there. Then you know you've got a mouse in the wall. Then you can track it down.

So don't abort the path by letting go too quickly or dropping the work too soon. You keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. It gets more subtle, and the sense of well-being that comes with the concentration gets more solid over time. Sometimes there's the temptation just to say, "Well, this is good enough." But if you're seriously concerned about any possibility for the mind to lie to itself and to deceive itself, or any possibility that the concentration might start falling apart, you realize you've got to keep looking, looking, looking: Where are there still any disturbances in the mind, even in the concentration? Concentration, after all, is fabricated. It's made of your intentions. Even though you try to make your intention as steady and unmoving as possible, still there's going to be some wavering. Only if you're really still can you see that. And only if you're really earnest will you say, "This *does* matter."

Here, again, the lazy approach is, "Well, it's a little bit of movement. Doesn't matter at all, that's just the way it is." It's the people who keep questioning the phrase, "that's the way it is"—those are the ones who get far. Think of Isaac Newton. Whether he actually sat there and watched the apple fall from the tree, he did ask that question: "Why does the apple fall?" Science, up to that point, had said, "It's the nature of apples to fall." When he asked why, people said, "Why are you digging up this question? It's already been settled." He said, "No, it hasn't. Why is it that apples fall, but the moon doesn't fall?" They said, "Well, the moon is a different kind of substance." Again, they thought the question had been settled. But he kept pursuing it and finally came up with the laws of gravity that governed apples and moons and the Earth. Since then, with that knowledge, we've been able to do an awful lot of things we couldn't have done before.

It's the same with the meditation. You've got to ask questions. When things get really still and there's a movement in the mind, you've got ask: Why? Here, again, you've got the producer, consumer, and the reflective self. The consumer has to have really high standards. The reflective self has to watch this concentration that you've produced: Is it really up to snuff? Is it satisfactory? And the producer will try to create even more still states of mind. It reaches a point, though, where it can go only so far that way. There's only so much stillness that you can fabricate. The reflective self then asks, "Okay, could there be something that's unfabricated?" That's when the mind is really ready for this. If it hasn't done the work, it's not ready.

So as you realize that there's work to be done, don't shy away from it, because the work really does pay off. There's so much work in the world that doesn't pay off. It's one of the reasons why, when people come to the practice, they want to hear that it's simply a matter of letting go, letting go, of not doing, simply being:

because so much of the work in the world is pretty worthless and not very satisfying. But what's appealing is not necessarily what's good for us.

So as the Buddha says, there's work to be done. As Ajaan Lee says, concentration has work to do: directed thought, evaluation. You have the directed thought and evaluation in the first jhana. Then the reflective self hovers around all the levels of concentration when you're contemplating them. That fifth factor the Buddha talks about—where the analogy is of a person sitting, looking at someone lying down, or of a person standing, looking at a person sitting—is an analogy for watching what the mind is doing. This is where it gets a real workout. It relies on your ability to reflect. After all, with those two principles of finding the Dhamma—you commit yourself to getting the mind still, and then you reflect: Is it still as it could be? Any potential for unstillness in there?—when you keep alert like this, then there's the prospect for something special.

The Buddha talks about different levels of equanimity. He divides them in different ways in different parts of the Canon. There's worldly equanimity and unworldly equanimity, and then even more-unworldly-than-unworldly equanimity. That's one system. Worldly is simply being equanimous about things arising at the senses. Unworldly is the equanimity of the fourth jhana. And the more-unworldly-than-unworldly is the equanimity that comes after awakening. Then in another explanation there's equanimity based on multiplicity—that's everything up through the fourth jhana. Then equanimity based on singleness starts from the formless state of infinite space on up. Below both of those there's householder equanimity—simply making yourself equanimous about what's arising at the senses. There's renunciate equanimity—that comes after you've contemplated things in terms of the three characteristics and gotten past them. So there are different ways of dividing the pie.

The important thing is realizing that simply being equanimous about things, saying, “Well, I don't want to get involved with things. I just want to let go”—lies at the bottom of the ladder. The higher forms of equanimity don't come from giving up. They come from working. Then, when the work is done, that's when you can be really equanimous. It's important to be clear about that.

The mind is doing work. It's subtle work. We're not sweating out under the hot sun, forced to trudge long miles. We're sitting here very quietly, just breathing. But the mind gets the big workout—not so much in being clever, but in learning how to observe itself and be true to itself, and be truthful with itself, getting really good at taking on these three roles: your ability to produce states of concentration, your ability to enjoy the concentration, and your ability to reflect on what you're doing so that you can do it better. Those three abilities, those three

selves: Those are the ones that get a workout. When they've done their work, you can put even *them* aside—but not until they've been thoroughly trained.