

## *Discernment in Concentration*

*October 12, 2022*

Ajaan Fuang once divided meditators into two types: those who think too much, and those who don't think enough. The purpose of the training is to turn both types into a third type—those who think just right.

Think of Ajaan Chah's image of people walking down the road: He sees some people who are going to fall off the right side of the road, so he tells them, "Turn left." He sees other people walking down the road who are ready to fall off the left side, so he tells them to turn right. The words may be different, but the purpose is the same.

So when you listen to instructions for meditation, you have to ask yourself, "Am I the type of person who's falling off the right side or the left side? Do I think too much or not enough?" Most of us here in the West tend to think too much. The ones who don't think enough find it easy to settle down, but they don't have to reflect too much on what they're doing, and as a result their concentration doesn't automatically lead to discernment. As Ajaan Fuang once said, "You have to kick them in order to get them to think."

As for those of us who think too much, we have to learn how to use our thinking to get the mind to settle down. In other words, we have to reflect on what we're doing: As we focus on the breath, what's the best image to hold in mind? Where is the best place to focus?

And *how* do you focus? Some people, when they focus on a spot in the body, tend to tense it up. Can you learn how to stay at that spot and release the tension at the same time, and yet maintain your focus?

And how do you figure out what way of breathing is best? How do you adjust the breath? If you put too much pressure on the breath to adjust it, then no matter how much you adjust it, it's not going to feel good because you can't get a sense of ease through pressure.

So you have to learn a light touch. Just hold in mind the perception: "The breath is going to feel good all the way in, all the way out," and see what that does to the way the body actually breathes.

In other words, you're playing with perceptions, and you become very self-aware about playing with perceptions. In that way, you begin to notice connections. If you just randomly think this, think that, without being self-aware about it, you might be able to get the mind to settle down, but then you don't have any knowledge about how you did it, or how you can do it again.

Meditation it's going to require a lot of observation. On the one hand, your powers of observation will get better as you get the mind more still. But on the other, the needs of the body, the needs of the mind are going to change from day to day, sometimes in a single day from session to session. You have to learn how to read that, to figure out: "What does the

body need now? What does the mind need now? Does the body need good *long* deep breathing? Does it need more gentle breathing?” These are things you have to observe.

And at what point do you go against the instructions? I found for myself one time that, with my frequent migraines, one way of getting out of the unhealthy breath cycle that seemed to promote those migraines was to breathe in, expanding the abdomen to the point where it hurt, and only then breathe out. If I kept that up for a little while, it was like resetting the body.

So, you have to use your ingenuity as well. After all, it is *your* breath: You’re sitting here with *your* body and *your* mind, so feel free to experiment. But try to be very conscious about what you’re doing, very deliberate about what you’re doing—so that you begin to get a sense of skill in the meditation.

This is the kind of concentration that leads naturally to discernment because there’s discernment *in the concentration itself*. The stillness of the mind requires that you think about it and observe: What are you doing? And how are you doing it? You’re doing it through the aggregates. Remember, the aggregates are activities. When the Buddha defines them, he defines them as verbs: Even form he says deforms; feelings feel; perceptions perceive; fabrications fabricate; consciousness cognizes. These are activities, and you use them as you get the mind to settle down.

In this way, you get on familiar terms with them. As a famous philosopher once said, “The things we know best are the things we do.” And for the most part, most people do things, say, with their hands, and they know those things pretty well, but what they do with their mind tends to be pretty obscured. It’s because we function in this ignorance that we’re creating suffering for ourselves.

But if you’re deliberate about what you’re doing as you settle down, you begin to realize, “Okay, this is the form of the body: This is the warmth, this is the coolness, this is the energy, this is the solidity.”

This is the feeling: The feeling may go with the type of breath energy you’ve got going, but after a while you begin to realize, okay, the feeling is one thing, the breath is something else.

Then there are the perceptions: The images you hold in mind as you do this.

Thought fabrications: The comments that the inner commentator is making—focusing on this issue, focusing on that—making comments, asking questions, evaluating. And then, just *intending* to stay. Even when you drop the directed thought and evaluation, you have to maintain an intention to keep this going.

Then of course, there’s consciousness, which is the awareness of all these things.

So, there you are: You’ve got all five aggregates. And you get to know them because you’re *using* them—consciously. As you become more conscious of them as you play with them, you get familiar with them, and that sense of being familiar with them carries over into the rest of your life.

For instance, you see the power of perception with the breath, and you begin to realize your perceptions have a lot of power in other areas as well—for good or for ill. So why use them for ill? You have the choice.

Perceptions can be pretty arbitrary. You have the right to choose how you perceive something. We talk about having a “true perception” of a situation, but there are lots of true perceptions of any situation.

Just the simple fact that you’re sitting here with your eyes closed focusing on your breath: How would you describe that differently in different languages? And how would different sciences describe it? How would a biologist talk about it? How would a chemist talk about it? How would a physicist talk about it? How would the Buddha talk about it?

They would all have correct perceptions, but they would be correct for different purposes. Remember, the Buddha said that perceptions are like mirages. There’s a similarity, but also there’s a dissimilarity between the mirage and the actual reality out there, so *choose* your perceptions well. Realize that they have their limitations, but they also have their impact. And if you find that you’re getting obsessed about how you perceive an issue, remind yourself, “Okay, I have the choice to perceive things in a different way. Maybe my current choice of perceptions about the issue are an unwise choice.”

We were talking today about social anxiety—wondering about what other people think about you. Well, their thoughts about you are mirages; your thoughts about their thoughts about you are mirages of mirages, so why deal in uncertainties like that? We’re not here to impress one another, we’re not here to be liked, necessarily—we’re not here to be disliked, of course, but whether other people like us or don’t like us, they have that right to grant us or withhold from us their liking.

And as I said, a lot of their perceptions are mirages too. When you think about how arbitrary this can all be, you ask yourself, “Given that I have the choice, why choose perceptions that are driving me crazy?”

This is where you can see one of the benefits of the meditation as it spreads out into daily life: You’re learning about the workings of your mind, and the workings of the mind don’t work *only* when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. This is how the mind works as it goes through the day. When you begin to realize the element of choice that you have in your meditation to use your aggregates in a way that creates a good solid state of mind, then use that same freedom of choice in other areas as well.

This is the kind of concentration that gives rise to discernment—as you’re doing the concentration. But be prepared for the fact that there’s going to be more demanded of your discernment than just seeing how you do the concentration. You want to take that quality of being reflective and use it to deal with whatever issues come up in the mind—whether they’re in concentration or out.

It's the mind's ability to see something, to gain an insight into something—and then turn around and look at itself gaining the insight and how it responds to the insight: That's the direction in which the really useful insights go.