Right Speech in Right Concentration

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The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means “to develop.” As we sit here focused on the breath, we’re trying to develop good qualities in the mind. Mindfulness, alertness, urgency. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. So in this case, we keep the breath in mind. We’re reminding ourselves that we want to stay with the breath and not go anywhere else. Alertness is watching what you’re doing, noticing how the breath is, noticing how the mind is, noticing whether they’re staying together or beginning to slip apart. Ardency is what tries to do this well. If you find that the mind and the breath are slipping apart, you bring them back together again. Try to be quick about it. Don’t let the mind wander around for a little while. There’s an unfortunate tendency that many of us have with sitting for a whole hour, thinking, “Well, I have a whole hour to do this, so I don’t have to be that strict with myself at the beginning.” But that doesn’t work. You want to make the most of the entire hour. So as soon as the mind wanders off a bit, come right back. You’re trying to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. This quality of ardency is the discernment factor in mindfulness practice. In other words, you’re working on a skill, and it requires that you observe carefully what you’re doing and try to figure out how to do it well. It’s also what moves mindfulness practice into concentration practice. The combination of ardency and alertness turns into what’s called evaluation. It’s one of the factors of the first jhana. Of course, mindfulness becomes directed thought. You keep directing your thoughts to the breath, and then you notice how it feels. Does the breathing feel good? If it doesn’t, you can change. The Buddha talks about breathing in a way that gives rise to rapture, breathing in a way that gives rise to pleasure, which means you’re not just watching the breath willy-nilly do whatever it might want to do. You take what you want it to do, which may be to get it longer or shorter. You can try in long, out short, especially when you’re feeling tired. Or in short, out long when you’re feeling nervous or on edge, when you feel like the mind needs to be calmed. And then you can try deep and shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. Try to find what combination of those qualities feels best for the body right now. And if you can’t figure it out, just pose the question to the mind, “What would feel really good right now?” and see how the body responds. That way, even though we’re trying to get the mind to settle down and be quiet, we have to think our way to quietness. That’s what the direct thought and evaluation are all about. That’s the mind’s way of talking to itself. Here we’re giving ourselves specific things to talk about. Is the breath good? If not, what can be done? If it is good, how do you maintain it? How do you maximize the pleasure that can come from the breath? The Buddha talks about being aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and calming the effect of the breath on the body. One good way of doing that is to think of the breath as not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but the whole energy flow in the body, which can be anywhere in the body at all, in the nerves, in the blood vessels, going through the muscles, out to the skin. When the breath feels good, think of that good breath energy spreading down through the whole body, down the spine, down the legs, down the shoulders, down the arms. It gives a sense of balance and lightness to the whole body. And then try to maintain that. Again, here you’re doing some thinking. Concentration doesn’t mean you totally block out all thought. What you’re doing is taking the mind’s tendency to talk to itself and using it to good purpose. This is one of the reasons why the path includes not only right concentration or right mindfulness, but also right speech. Because of the way you speak in daily life, your ability to keep control over your mouth is going to be very helpful in speaking to yourself as you meditate and getting some control over your mind. Three principles in particular are important. There was a time when there was a prince who wanted to ask a trick question to the Buddha. He’d been put up to it by the Jains. Would the Buddha ever say anything unpleasant? The Jains thought they’d caught the Buddha because he had said some unpleasant things. If he denied that he ever said anything unpleasant, the prince could say, “Well, those things you said to Devadatta, that he was destined to hell, that was very displeasing to Devadatta.” And if the Buddha would admit that, yes, he would say displeasing things, then the prince could ask, “Well, what’s the difference between you and ordinary people on the street?” They thought they had the Buddha. So the prince asked the question. The Buddha said there’s no categorical answer to that question. The prince realized that the Buddha had slipped out of the net. Then the Buddha asked some questions of the prince. The prince had a baby boy in his lap, and the commentary suggests that he had the boy there. So in case the discussion got difficult, he could pinch the baby boy, the baby boy would cry, and that would be the end of the discussion. The Buddha said, “This baby boy you have in your lap, if you got a sharp object in his mouth, what would you do?” The prince said, “Well, I’d crook my finger, get in his mouth, and get the object out, even if it meant drawing blood.” So the Buddha gave the image. In fact, the prince gave the Buddha the image that he was going to use. Sometimes he would say displeasing things for the good of the person he was saying it to, or for the good of the people around him. So the Buddha said in the same way, whenever he would speak, there were three questions that had to be answered. One was, “Is it true?” And then two, if it was true, then the next one was, “Is it beneficial?” And then three, “Is this the right time and place for that?” There’s the right time and place for gentle speech, and there’s the right time and place for harsh speech, displeasing speech. Which, by the way, is not harmful to people. If it’s beneficial, there are cases where harsh, unpleasant speech can be beneficial. If the thing he was going to say passed all three tests, then he would say it. That’s the principle we should apply in our daily speech. Is it true? Is it beneficial? Is it the right time and place? That issue of right time and place doesn’t have to mean only the right time and place. The right time and place to be gentle or harsh. There are other issues involved as well. If you want to criticize somebody, you don’t do it in front of a lot of other people, unless that would serve a purpose. You try to find the right time, the right place, to say things that are true and beneficial. It’s interesting also that the Buddha never thinks of anything being false and beneficial. That possibility to him doesn’t occur. So those are the rules for right speech. If you speak in these ways, your mind can calm down. You have a good influence on the world around you. And it gives you good practice for meditation, because you’re going to be using the same mind that’s speaking to itself to speak to itself during the meditation. You want to make sure that what you’re saying to yourself is true and beneficial, and this is the right time and place. For instance, if thoughts come up that are not related to the breath right now, this is not the time and place for them. Thoughts come up saying, “I’ll never be able to do this. This is not beneficial.” So make sure your speech to yourself as you’re meditating is true, beneficial, and you use the right time and place. This way you get control over your thoughts. You get more and more focused on getting the mind to settle down. As the breath gets more comfortable, that sense of ease fills the body. There’s less and less need to talk about it. The only need is to just maintain, maintain, stay with the breath, stay with the breath. It requires less and less active thinking. Finally, you’re getting to the point where you don’t even speak to yourself in full sentences. It’s just breath, breath. Because that’s all that’s needed at that point. So as you start out meditating, remember you are talking to yourself. Just talk in ways that are true, beneficial, and timely. That’s the kind of speech that leads to right concentration. And it brings in other factors of the path as well, right resolve, for instance. We’re here to get away from our fascination with sensual pleasures, our thinking about sensual pleasures. If you’re with the breath, those thoughts get left behind. It also brings in right view. If things are not going well with the breath, you ask yourself, “What am I doing to make it uncomfortable, and what can I do to make it more comfortable?” That’s thinking in terms of the Four Noble Truths. Try to comprehend the stress of the suffering, see what’s causing it, abandon the cause, and then develop the path, the qualities that are needed to put an end to the suffering, put an end to the cause. That’s the basic framework of the Four Noble Truths, and the duties appropriate to the Four Noble Truths. Finally, realize a sense of well-being. So when you meditate, you have to think. If you’ve had practice in right speech and right resolve, then it’s a lot easier to think to yourself, speak to yourself in ways that really are conducive. Get the mind to settle down with a sense of solid well-being. Clear, still, and contented in the present.

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