

Concentration & Insight

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We like to make a sharp distinction between concentration practice and insight practice, but they really have to go together. Concentration doesn't automatically give rise to insight. Insight doesn't automatically give rise to concentration. But for them to develop, they need to work together. Some people find that one develops more naturally than the other. But the idea is to get them in balance. Now, balance doesn't mean a constantly static equilibrium. Sometimes you're going to lean a little bit more to the left, sometimes you're going to lean a little bit more to the right, like one of those old-fashioned scales for weighing things. But if the two qualities work together, you find that they help each other along.

For instance, it takes a certain amount of insight for you to get the mind concentrated. You have to understand what kind of thoughts are going to get in the way, what ways you have of dealing with them, what tools you can bring, so that you can be prepared when the mind doesn't settle down easily.

There are various tactics for fending off distraction and for finding something the mind likes. We were talking earlier today about the carrot and the stick. The carrot is a nice comfortable feeling you can develop with the breath. If you work with it, if you explore it, you find that the breath can be really, really comfortable. Sometimes it gets so good that you get absorbed in the breathing and you can't imagine why you would need anything else to make yourself happy—it just feels so good. That's the carrot.

The problem is the mind doesn't always settle down in a very nice and cooperative way. And so you need the stick—in other words, remembering that there are problems in the mind, dangers in the mind, and that you're going to need to keep your tools at hand to fend them off.

There's a list of five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts, but it's a short checklist for covering a whole variety of approaches. The first approach is that you just replace the distracting thought with a better thought. Give it something better to think about than that thought—like the breath. Just bring the mind back to the breath and try to make it as comfortable as possible.

The second approach is to reason with yourself. In other words, if a thought is really sticky and the mind keeps returning to it, you've got to point out the drawbacks of that particular kind of thinking until the mind is ready to let it go. You take the drawbacks to heart to the point where you can tell yourself, "Oh, I

don't really want to go there." The mind drops the thought and goes back to the breath.

The third approach is that you consciously ignore that thought. In other words, you know it's there, but you're just not going to pay it any attention. It's like something in the background. You keep the breath in the foreground and just make sure you don't get involved in that other thought. You know it's there but you just let it go, don't pay attention, because by paying attention to it you're feeding it. So you focus all your attention on the breath.

The fourth approach for dealing with distraction is that once you get really sensitive to how the breath energy flows into the different parts of the body, you see that a particular thought is associated with a pattern of tension someplace in the body. It might be around the eyes, or in the arms—any part of the body. When you can locate the tension that goes along with the thought, you relax it, and the thought will go away.

A fifth way to deal with thoughts when none of these four methods get results, is to consciously press the tongue against the roof of the mouth, sort of squeeze the thought out, telling yourself you're not going to think about it, you're just going to force it out. If we were going to compare this list with a toolbox, this is the sledgehammer in the toolbox. It works as long as your willpower holds out, and sometimes that's all you need, just a little breathing space, or a little calm space in the mind—not necessarily calm, but forcibly still and not distracted. Then you can relax and let up a little bit, and go back to the breath. And maybe by that time, one of the other methods will kick in and help you along.

So you've got to be alert to the fact that even when the mind is beginning to settle down, something else can come in. So while part of you is settling down, another part of you has to keep watch. Once you find that the settled part really is solidly settled, then the watchful, wary part can be relaxed a little bit, and you can focus more and more attention on the breath itself. Allow the mind to enter into the breath as fully as possible. As long as you're alert and mindful, there's no such thing as too much concentration, too much stillness. It's when the stillness blots out the mind from its alertness, that's where you have to pull back. But as long as you're very clear about where you are, where you're focused, allow the mind just to burrow on into the breath, to burrow on into the present moment, letting go of anything that might smack of either the moment just passed or the next moment coming up. Totally give yourself to the breath right here, right now. Allow the mind to rest in that way, to gain strength in that way, so that when it comes out it's ready for work.

The work here is the insight. Sometimes the coming out is total—you come back to ordinary consciousness—but other times it's not. You step back a little bit, not so far that you've destroyed the concentration, but far enough so that you can see what's going on, and then you just watch, pose a question in the mind.

The best questions have to do with the four noble truths—where is there any stress or suffering right here?—although there are other useful ones as well. Say you sense that there's greed, anger, or delusion lurking around in the mind. The Buddha says if you really want to understand them to the point of getting past them, you have to understand not only their drawbacks but also their allure. Why is it that that particular state of mind is so attractive? Why are you willing to play along with it?

We mentioned earlier that there's a point when a world of becoming suddenly appears in the mind, and you have the choice of whether to go with it or not. To go along with it is like playing make-believe. Why are you willing to play make-believe in that way? What pulls you in? Boredom? What's the gratification that comes from these things? You have to look for that as well. When you see that there's really not much, and when you put things in the scales and weigh the gratification against the drawbacks, you'll find the drawbacks are always a lot greater. But if you pretend that there's no allure at all, after a while the mind will begin to realize that it's lying to itself and then it revolts. So you've got to be fair: There is allure, but there are also drawbacks. Which is greater? Be honest with yourself.

The big drawback is the stress and suffering caused by these thoughts. The Buddha's use of the word *dukkha* covers both suffering and stress, because there is stress even in the states of concentration, and that is what you'll have to focus on to get past the concentration. But first you want to focus upon the grosser forms of suffering. This is how insight develops: You start working at things that are really obvious. But it's amazing how we're not willing to focus on things that are really obvious. People want to skip to the more advanced levels.

I was reading recently about a conference they're going to be giving in New York next month, and there's going to be a discussion panel on renunciation. Now, are they going to be discussing renouncing sensual pleasures? No, they're going to talk about ego renunciation. They're going to jump over the obvious and go for the subtle. Of course, what happens is that the obvious stuff never gets dealt with, and the subtle stuff doesn't really have that much of an effect. You have to focus on the obvious things first: the greed, the lust, the anger, the fear. Work with those. Even though you may not be able to uproot them, at least you can start chipping them down to size, bit by bit by bit.

Because if you don't exercise your discernment in this way, how is it going to get strong? It's like a muscle. If your muscle is weak, how do you make it strong? You use the weak muscle you've got. In the beginning you can't lift the really heavy weights, but don't get discouraged. Realize that as you keep lifting slightly heavier, and heavier, and heavier things, the muscle builds up. It gets stronger and stronger. The same with your discernment: You start out with the blatant stuff, deal with that, and then start working into the subtler issues as your discernment gets more precise and clear.

Now, as you're working on these questions about where's the stress here, or what else is going on in the mind that's creating stress, sometimes you find that as you follow these questions along, things get clear. You begin to understand things. Other times, though, the mind isn't up to that line of questioning yet. Things start getting confused. When that happens, you pull back into concentration.

The comparison Ajaan Lee makes is with walking: You lean a little bit to the left on the left foot, then you lean a little bit to the right on the right foot. It's by shifting your weight from right to left, left to right, right to left, that you can walk along. And so it is in the meditation: You're practicing with one object here—the breath—but sometimes you lean a little bit more toward getting absorbed in just the stillness of the mind with the breath, and other times you lean a little bit more to the questions about stress.

The ideal practice is when neither side is too far from the other. In other words, the questioning stays in the present moment, doesn't leave the present moment. At the same time, your concentration doesn't lose its mindfulness and alertness and go off into a dead blank. As the two help each other along, as the Buddha said, those who have both discernment and jhana are the ones who are in the presence of awakening.

So it's a question of gaining your own intuitive sense of when the mind needs some rest and when it needs to ask questions. Also, try to get an intuitive sense of which questions are getting results and which ones are not. If there are questions related to the four noble truths, okay, you're on the right track: Where's the stress here? Sometimes you sit very quiet for a long time and you don't see any stress at all. It's a sign of you're not sensitive enough. So you try to make things more quiet. It's like tuning in on a radio station. If there's static, you can't hear the signal clearly, so you try to get tuned-in more and more and more precisely on to the wavelength to find where there's no static at all. Then the signal is very clear. So the more stillness in the mind, the easier it is to notice movement, to notice stress, to notice disturbance when it happens. You've got a standard against which to measure things.

So as we're focusing in on the breath, we're developing both tranquility and insight. The two help each other along. And the skill that comes into the meditation is getting that intuitive sense I mentioned just now: When do you need more rest? When do you need to ask more questions? When the questions hit a dead end, it's time to go back and get some more rest. When the stillness in the mind has had enough, you can go back to questioning. The skill lies in getting a sense of these things.

And that kind of sense can't be measured, so that one person can tell another person, now is the time to stop in place, now is the time to go onto something else. You have to use your own powers of observation to learn how to walk properly, so you don't tip over to the left, don't tip over to the right, or turn around and walk back. It's like gaining a sense of balance: Nobody else can gain your balance for you. You've got to learn how to govern your own mind.