

Respect for Concentration

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Respect for concentration goes two ways: respect for your own concentration and respect for the concentration of the people around you.

Respect for your own concentration means that you really give value to the little quiet moments in the mind. They're the spaces we tend not to look at. We're more interested in the thoughts in the mind—what we can think about this, what we can think about that—and the few moments when the mind seems to rest between its thoughts don't seem to hold much interest at all.

The beginning skill of meditation lies in learning how to notice them. As you let go of a particular thought, let go of a particular creation of the mind, the mind is actually released from that thought, and there's a moment of stillness. What you want to do is learn to appreciate those moments, give them more space so that they connect. Even though there may be thoughts murmuring in the back corners of the mind, that's not where your attention is. Your attention is with the stillness. You give it space. You pay attention to it. You're careful about it.

There's the word *citta* in Pali. One meaning is "mind" but another meaning is "intent." You're really intent on these things. Focus your attention on the still moments. Give them your full attention. Give them space to grow so you don't step all over them.

Most of us, when we meditate, are looking for the flashing lights and bright visions, really extraordinary states of mind. We have to keep reminding ourselves that the flashing lights usually tend to be around casinos. Pretty unreliable places to go into. The aspects of the mind that you can really depend on are more like the grass on the path—because there in the grass are the little shoots of trees that really do hold promise. Little shoots of oak trees, little shoots of pine trees—whatever. If you give them space, give them fertilizer and water, make sure bugs don't eat them, they begin to grow. What may not look all that promising to begin with suddenly becomes major shelter for the mind.

Having respect for concentration also means that you have to rearrange your life. Look at the ways in which you're draining the mind of its energy, draining the mind of its focus in terms of the things you read, listen to, watch on TV, the people you hang around with. You have to look intently at your life to see if it's a life conducive to concentration or not, conducive to the health of your mind or not, and be willing to make changes. Subject the mind to fewer and fewer

distractions, fewer and fewer stimuli that are going to excite greed, anger, delusion—so that the mind has space to gather its strength, so that it's not always having to contend with drains on its energy. In other words, you have to learn to husband your strength for the things that are really important.

There's a story they tell of a Chinese martial arts master whose students were going to be giving a demonstration one day in a pavilion in the forest. The road to the pavilion had a donkey on the side, and the donkey was known for its meanness. It liked to kick people who came past on the road. So the martial arts students came along and said, "Hey, let's test our skills here with the donkey before we get to the pavilion."

The first one goes up to the donkey, tries one stance, and gets kicked across the road. The second student says, "Ah, that's not how you do it, you fool, you do it like this!" He went up with another stance but he got kicked across the road as well. In the end all the students got kicked across the road, no matter what stance they took. So they consulted among themselves and said, "What would the master do?"

Well, the master was coming along behind them, so they hid in the bushes by the road to watch him—and as soon as he got to the donkey, he kept his distance and walked way around it.

The sign of a good warrior is knowing which battles to take up and which to leave alone. It's not that you go running in and take on everything at once. You look at your strength, you look at the issues, what's really important, what's really worth expending your strength and energy on, and save your energy for the important things. Learn how not to waste it.

The other side of respect for concentration is respect for other people's concentration. We here at the monastery don't have a "No Speaking" rule. But it's wise to keep your speech to an absolute minimum. This is an area where, if people want to be quiet, we should learn how to respect their desire to be quiet without their having to explain an awful lot. In other words, they come to the meal, they want to eat, they want to eat quietly—you leave them alone.

It's good training to learn to look at your speech. If you have an absolute rule against speaking, then the mind just goes on chattering to itself, chattering all the time, to fill up the space. But if you're allowed to speak, you're reminded to speak wisely. Ajaan Fuang had a good rule for this. He said, "Ask yourself before you say anything, 'Is this really necessary?' If it's not, you don't say it."

I found that when I first started to try to apply this rule to my own speech, it cut my speech down about 95%. You come to realize that a lot of the chatter in the course of the day is just that: idle chatter. It fills up the space, and you know what filler usually is: styrofoam peanuts. Shredded newspapers.

The problem is when you're trying to fill up space, many times whatever comes into your mind pops out of your mouth without your really thinking about what the consequences are going to be. A lot of the speech that creates problems is composed of things you didn't really intend to say but somehow they managed to come out.

So, try to show respect for the concentration of people around you, too. This way the fact that we have a lot of people here, instead of becoming a hindrance, actually becomes a help. Many people notice that when you sit in a room full of meditators it's a lot easier to get concentrated. But then if you leave the room and everyone chatters, it just destroys it.

So, show some respect for concentration because it's basic respect for the mind. Concentration is what all the other good qualities—like discernment and release—depend on. To show respect for concentration is to show respect for our desire for true happiness. Give respect to the fact that other people desire true happiness as well. This is the path. The Buddha once said that Right Concentration is the heart of the Eightfold Path. The other seven factors are its requisites, things that help it along, that give it strength, but concentration itself is the heart.

So, keep that in mind. Try to maintain that heart, don't let it stop beating because it's hard to get started again. If it beats erratically that's not much help, either. You want a steadiness to the concentration so that it becomes your background, the basic center for the mind.

We're working on a concentration that's centered but expansive. You have one spot where your main focus is, but the range of your awareness should spread to fill the whole body. This way there are no hidden corners, no places where denial or other dishonest mind functions can hide.

You want a spaciousness where thoughts can come up into the mind without destroying the concentration. If you want to, you can watch them come, you can watch them go, but the concentration, the sense of foundation remains—because that's what *samadhi* means: a mind established, a mind solid in its footing.

So, you want a type of concentration that has space for things to come and go. You might want to think of your awareness as a large screen, in the sense of a screen on a window. It's a net through which the air can pass. It's a particularly useful image for when you're sitting where there's a lot of noise. You can try to fight or resist the noise, but that destroys your concentration, turns it into a real battle. But if you think of your awareness as a big screen with a lot of holes that the noise can come through and just go out the other side without your having to react, that makes it a lot easier. There's much less struggle. There's space in your concentration for things to come and go without destroying the concentration.

That applies to thoughts as well. They can come and they can go but you don't have to get involved in their content, those little worlds that exist within a thought.

This is the kind of concentration that forms a basis for discernment. In other words, you can begin to analyze the concentration. You can think, but it doesn't knock the concentration off its foundation. When the Buddha talk about the concentrated mind, he called it "*mahaggattam cittam*," which means an expanded mind. Not a narrowed mind. It's an expanded mind. That's the kind of concentration that allows discernment to arise, that allows the factors of the path to develop.

Now, your mind can expand that way, your concentration can expand that way, but you have to start small. Like anything solid and big. I'm always amazed at the redwood trees in northern California: their seeds are infinitesimal, but when one of them takes hold, it can become an enormous, awe-inspiring tree.

The same with concentration. We all have concentration to one extent or another. Momentary concentration is something everybody has. To practice concentration means learning to recognize those moments and give them space so they can grow to the point where they can take over, so they connect and become the natural home for the mind.

Homes need a solid, large foundation so they don't tip over; and that's the kind of concentration you want. If you give respect to your concentration that's the kind of foundation you'll get.