

Balanced Concentration

October 21, 2005

The practice of concentration is enough to get comfortable with the present moment, so that you can stay here for long periods of time. In fact, you can make this your home base. If you're not comfortable here, you're not going to stay. The mind will keep running off, running away. And when you do make it stay, it's forced. There's going to be an element of aversion. As soon as your mindfulness slips a little bit, the aversion pops you out anyplace else but here.

So you want to be on good terms with the breath. You want to be on good terms with your awareness in the present moment. This is going to take time. In some cases, people find it pretty easy. Things are fairly comfortable in the present. They settle down, no problem. With other people, it takes a lot of effort, a lot of time, and a lot of ingenuity as well. If there's too much imbalance and discomfort in the present moment, you just don't want to stay here. Or when you do try to stay here, things act up. So you need to be patient and very observant. Use your ingenuity to figure out: "What's going on here? Why is there this imbalance?" Sometimes you have to sit with it for a while before you can figure it out.

That's where the patience comes in. It may be a physical issue that the elements of the body seem unbalanced, or it may be a mental issue. You've got certain thoughts lying in wait when you come to the present moment: things you've done or said, or things other people have done or said, sometimes long time ago, and it's as if they're lodged in the body. As soon as you settle down, there they are. They come springing out. So you've got to learn how to work through them.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about two types of meditators. First, there are those who find it pretty easy to settle down. All they have to do is to tell the mind to stay with one thing, and it stays with one thing. No problem. There they are. Other people, though, have to figure things out before they can settle down.

The analogy he gives is of two different kinds of trees. If you have a tree out in an open field and you want to cut it down, there's no problem. No matter which side you cut from, it's going to fall down without getting entangled with anything else. The other kind of tree is a tree in the forest, where its branches are entangled with the branches of the trees. There may be only one direction in which you can cut it down. To cut it down, first you have to go up and trim this branch, trim that branch, and then you have to cut it from the right angle for it to fall down in the right place.

The trimming of the branches is where you find you've got lots of issues—physical issues, mental issues—that make it hard for the mind to settle down and just be still. We can't design ahead of time which kind of mind we're going to have—although we have been designing it willy-nilly, but when the time comes to meditate, you can't put in a request: Can I have a mind that settles down very quickly and very easily? You've just got to deal with the mind you got.

If there are thoughts that come popping up in the meditation, you have to learn different ways of dealing with them. One is, if it's a thought concerning someone who has hurt you or someone you've hurt, just spread thoughts of goodwill for the person. There's no need to get entangled any further. Or if that doesn't work—say, it's something that you did or said that you really regret—reflect on how you can't change the past, and getting embroiled in remorse right now is going to get in the way of the meditation. So you just remind yourself that the best a human being can do is to resolve not to make that mistake again. Recognize it as a mistake, make up your mind, “Okay, that's the last time I want to act in that way.” That makes it easier to settle down.

As for things that other people did or said to you, remind yourself that that's their karma. The fact that incident happened means that maybe you had done something like that far in the past that you've now forgotten. This is just your old karma coming back. Well, that particular bit of karma is now done and gone, unless you dig it up again and want to get it all embroiled again, which doesn't serve any real purpose. In other words, point out to yourself the reasons for why getting entangled in that thought really don't add up, and why the reasons not to get entangled are the ones you want to side with. Then try come back to the breath.

This falls in line with what the Buddha had to say about meditation: Sometimes tranquility leads, sometimes insight leads, but they're both qualities you need in order to get the mind into a good strong concentration. It's not the case concentration is just a matter of tranquility. You need insight, too, to get the mind to settle down. You have to understand what's going on. You have to use your ingenuity. You have to have strategies to get the mind to settle down and stay down.

After all, even people who find it easy to get the mind to settle down can have trouble staying there. And when the mind settles down because they're not thinking about anything, then as soon as something else comes up, they leave concentration. They've got this duty, that duty, and all of a sudden, they find that their concentration is gone. That, too, is where you have to exercise ingenuity, reminding yourself: “The breath is still here, I still have my sensation of the body.”

It's important to learn how not to block out that sensation of the body while you're dealing with other things.

This is a skill that takes time. And it's not just a matter of determination. It's also a matter of understanding what's going on, checking to see, when the mind leaves the present moment, where is it going, why is it going there, what are the things that trigger it to jump out and leave the body and go streaming outside? Ajaan Lee talks about this habit of mind to stream outside. He said that that's precisely what's meant by the word *asava*. It's a Pali term that means outflow, effluent, or fermentation. The mind goes fermenting outside. Well, what's the yeast? What's the impetus to get you flowing outside? If you don't see that, you can't stop it from happening.

As Luang Puu Dune comments, the mind flowing outside is suffering. And it's your lack of mindfulness that allows you to go outside, your lack of understanding of what's happening. Because it is possible to stay centered in the body and yet know things outside. You're aware of them, you can deal with them, but you've moved your center of operations inside, where it's more secure.

So bringing the mind into the present moment and getting it to stay here is not just a matter of feeling comfortable and at ease with the object. That *is* one essential element, but also it requires understanding what the mind does, how the mind moves out, how the mind moves back in, why it moves.

So regardless of whatever issues you have in getting the mind to settle down or to stay there, remember you've got to use both tranquility and insight, both a sense of calm and the ability to figure things out.

This is why the mind causes suffering: We haven't figured it out yet. To figure it out means, one, watching, and two, asking the right questions.

The Buddha once said that normal reaction to suffering is bewilderment, because it comes in so many different ways. Sometimes there's a physical pain and there's not much question about the fact that it's very painful. Other times, there's a more neutral message from the body, and yet the mind can interpret as pain for any number of reasons.

What this means is that pain and suffering are very complex things. If they were easy and simple, all you'd have to do would be to meditate once or twice, and that'd be the end of the matter. But there are actually lots of different ways the mind can create suffering, even out of fairly comfortable circumstances. Other times, it can live in real difficulty and yet not suffer at all. This is why pain is bewildering. And this is why we have to take time to watch it, to be patient, to see what's going on, and then to ask questions about what the mind is doing to

fabricate this pain, how it's dressing it up, how it's dressing it down. It's all a matter of stillness and insight working together, being brought into balance.

So when issues come up in the meditation, remind yourself that these are the two things you've got find a proper balance for, as they apply to that particular issue. On the one hand, how can you keep the mind as calm as possible, as settled-in as possible? On the other, what questions can you ask to understand things? If you get one without the other, the meditation won't go very far. It works best when you've got both.