

Inner Poise

November 25, 2005

“One who is ardent with respect for concentration,” both while you’re here and when you go back to your home life: It’s an important principle to keep in mind, as it’s something we forget so easily. Just keeping the mind still, keeping one thing in mind: It’s a part of the path that doesn’t have a lot of bright lights around it. It doesn’t have the warm buzz of interconnectedness or oneness or compassion or all those other words that get people excited about when they think about the practice. Simply the mechanics of keeping the mind on one thing continually: Doesn’t sound like much. And as a result, we don’t treat it like much. That’s the problem. Because it’s actually the heart of the path.

There is a passage where the Buddha describes all the factors of the noble eightfold path, and noble right concentration, he says, is the main one. All the other factors are just accessories that help keep the concentration right. And to do it rightly, to keep one thing in mind steadily, is really an important skill because it gives balance to the mind so that the mind doesn’t go floating off after things, doesn’t get blown around by things. It’s what gives the mind strength. It’s also what helps us live together with one another. If you’re paying attention to your concentration, you’re also helping other people by not interfering with theirs.

It’s interesting to think about how the preliminary basic factors of concentration are also the basic factors of speech: directed thought and evaluation. In other words, you bring a topic to mind and then you evaluate it. That’s the process by which the mind form sentences and gets ready to tell them to other people. But it’s also the process by which you bring the mind to one thing. That means that the time spent on thinking about what you’re going to tell other people can interfere with your concentration, and of course it interferes with theirs.

So an important principle while you’re here is to train your tongue as you’re training your mind. Ajaan Fuang once said, “Before you say anything, ask yourself, ‘Is this really necessary? Does this need to be said?’ And if not,” he said, “it’s best not to say it. Because if you can’t control your tongue, how can you control your mind?”

So try to keep your directed thoughts and your evaluations on the breath, on your meditation object as much you can, and see how little external speech you can get by with. After all, the practice of concentration isn’t something you do just while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. That’s just the external activity.

The actual concentration is a quality of the mind. It has nothing to do with whether you're sitting or standing or walking or lying down, or your eyes being open or closed. It's a balance that you maintain inside.

The more continually you can keep that balance going as you go through the day, then the easier it is when you actually sit down and close your eyes. There you are. Otherwise, if you let the mind wander around, it's as if you're tying a string around the things you think about. Say you think about a tree, so you tie a string to the tree, and then you go thinking about a store, so you run the string around the store and you tie it to the store, and then you run it someplace else. If you were to trace all your thoughts over 24 hours, you'd have a bird's nest of strings all over the place. Then you sit down and you've got to wind up your whole string again. No wonder you get only a few moments of concentration during the hour: all that string to wind back up again.

So instead, try to keep your thoughts on the breath. Just be with the body. In the course of the day, you don't have to keep track of every in-and-out breath, but try to inhabit your body as much you can. Keep your hands in your hands. Keep your feet in your feet. In other words, keep your sense of who you are and where you are right here. That way, you've tied a string around the body, and because that's the only place you've got your string, there's no string to rewind as you sit down.

So have some respect for concentration in the course of the day, realizing that keeping the mind right here is an important skill. All too often it gets shoved aside. You've got to think about this, you've got to think about that. Your concentration doesn't have much of a voice to say, "Hey, wait a minute, what about me?" It just gets trampled in the stampede.

This doesn't mean that you won't be thinking in the course of the day, but if you can inhabit your body as you're thinking, you haven't lost your center. Have a good sense of just being in your body. This is one of the reasons why we're trying to develop the sort of concentration where your awareness fills the body. It provides a range or room in which the thoughts can happen. You're still there in the room. You don't have to follow the thoughts out, no matter how much they point outside and say, "Look, look, look out there." You stay looking right at the thought. That way, you can entertain thoughts, you can be aware of other things, but your concentration can stay solid because it's your frame around everything you experience.

And it helps put things into perspective. Most of us live our lives without any frame, or we have a frame that keeps moving around. But here's our frame of reference right here: staying with the breath, staying in the body, staying with the

breath energy filling the body. When we can maintain this frame, it gives us some space.

One of the things you learn as you sit here with your eyes closed is how much nicer the breath feels when you pay some attention to it, when you give it space to do its thing as a process of the whole body. The more you can do that in the course of the day, the better. It's nourishing for you, and when you're feeling nourished inside, you don't have to go running outside to feed off other people, to get support from this person, to get encouragement from that person—just running around for scraps from other people because inside you're feeling malnourished. When you nourish the body and mind with the breath, you don't need to depend on other people as much. You don't need to lean on them as much anymore. This is one of the ways in which showing respect for concentration leads to showing respect for yourself and showing respect for other people as well.

Also, it's through concentration, through this ability to stay here continually in the present moment, that you start gaining discernment, too. We think of wisdom or discernment as things you learn from books, but that's not the case at all. You gain discernment from watching things consistently. When you're staying with the breath, you're in really good place, because that's where the body and the mind meet. Anything that moves in the mind is going to have an effect on the breath. So it's a good place to stay if you want to watch the movements of the mind, to see how they come, see how they go, see where they cause stress, see what you can do to let go of that cause. You find you can manage the issues in the mind a lot more efficiently this way, a lot more effectively, because you're right on top of them.

All too often, someone will say something, and it'll get under our skin—and then it stays there under our skin. We're hardly aware that it's there until it starts developing into a boil. Only when it bursts do we realize, "Oh. There's something going on here." By that time, it's too late. Sometimes you've said something or done something you wish you hadn't. If you can stay on top of things as they happen in the mind, see where there's that sense of dis-ease, see where there's a pattern of tension in the body when you're thinking that thought, then you can try to breathe through it and see what happens. Often the thought will just go away because you're not giving it a chance to take root and fester.

So it's important that you have a sense of what concentration can do and how important it is to maintain it throughout the day. There's an analogy in the Canon. A man is walking with a bowl of oil on his head, filled to the brim. He's walking through a stadium. To his right, there's a crowd. To his left, there's a beauty queen, singing and dancing. The crowd is very excited about the beauty

queen singing and dancing, and the man is supposed to walk between the two of them. There's another man walking behind him with a sword raised, ready to cut off his head if he drips even as much as a drop of oil. So, as the Buddha said, "Will the man let himself get distracted by the woman or the crowd? No, he's got to stay focused on the oil." Try to have that same sense of focus and the same sense of the preciousness of your concentration. Try not to spill a drop. Try to keep your poise. After all, that's what concentration is: It's the mind poised well to go through life. The more you respect it, the better your poise will be.

So try to respect concentration both within yourself and within others. Because it's through that kind of respect that the path grows and provides a frame, provides the context for your life. It gets your values straight, and when your values are straight, you walk straight. It all comes from this basic poise within.