

## *Centered on Concentration*

*June 12, 2006*

The chant just now, “one with strong respect for the training”: It’s important that we realize that this is what the Buddha teachings are all about. They’re a training. Training requires discipline, with the realization that our untrained minds cause a lot of suffering. The Buddha once said that the mark of a wise person is realizing that the mind needs training. If you want to be truly happy, you’ve got to train the mind, because the biggest source of trouble in the world is this untrained mind. Greed, anger, and delusion take it over, and they can destroy all kinds of things.

Having respect for the training means that we have to have respect for the training over and above our own preferences. After all, our own preferences come from this untrained mind. We have to learn how to look past them. And it’s interesting that of a three main aspects of the training—training in virtue, training in concentration, training in discernment—the one that the Buddha singled out to the stress in those verses we chanted just now is respect for concentration, the ability get the mind centered in the body, with a sense of ease, even with a sense of fullness, refreshment, rapture.

It sounds like something we would all like, yet we tend to overlook it, dismiss it. What little bits and pieces of concentration we do have in the mind, bits and pieces of stillness, we tend to trample on, and as a result, it never gets a chance to grow.

So as we’re sitting here, we give the mind a chance to settle down. Find where those little spots of stillness and ease are, a sense of ease in the body. It’s got to be there someplace. Even when there’s pain in some parts the body, there are other parts with a sense of well-being. It may not be impressive to begin with, but if you give it space and allow it to stay undisturbed all way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, it’ll develop a sense of fullness, and the fullness will grow.

It gives the mind an anchor. The images in the Canon are many: It gives the mind nourishment, it gives it solidity, it gives it support; it’s a shelter for the mind; they call it *vihāra-dhamma*, a home for the mind; it’s medicine for the mind—all these good things.

So you have to learn how to respect it. In the beginning, it seems rather unimportant. There are so many other things that are more demanding, that require our attention right now, that seem more interesting, more important, and these bits and pieces of stillness get pushed back into the background. They don’t

have a chance to grow. They don't have a chance to reach fullness. Then, of course, when we need them, they're not there.

We often come to the Buddha's teachings more interested in the insights than in the training, thinking that if we can just grok onto the insights, that'll take care of everything. And there is some benefit in learning about the Buddha's teachings on insight first. It gives you a sense of proportion, a sense of direction in the practice—what the Buddha calls appropriate attention, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths: in other words, looking at the present moment and realizing there's not just one thing you can do in the present moment, there are actually four things you have to look for, four things you can potentially do.

You look for the stress. When you find the stress, you try to comprehend it. Or you can look for the cause of stress, the craving that underlies the stress, and you try to let it go. As for the cessation of stress, you try to realize that, notice it. And as for the path of practice that leads to the cessation of stress, you try to develop it. The Buddha never gave Johnny-one-note instructions on meditation: "just be the knowing" or "just be mindful." There are the four main categories. The meditation comes under the path, and that's something you have to develop, you have to work at it.

And particularly, you have to develop the concentration. Ajaan Lee compares it to building a bridge across a river. He says that the foundations of the bridge on the near and the far ends—in other words, on this bank and that bank—are not too hard. It's the ones that are right in the middle of the river: Those are the ones that are hard to establish, but they're the ones that are really necessary. The concentration is the middle of the three trainings. That's the one that corresponds to the foundations in the middle of the river. It takes time and effort to get those established, but once they're established, you've got a good solid bridge.

And when we develop the concentration, that's when the insights can really begin to do their work. Instead of just giving you a general perspective on things, they give you precise insights into the actual movements of the mind. They enable you to see where you've been causing unnecessary suffering, unnecessary stress. One, they give you the stillness so you can actually see these things happening. And two, there's that sense of ease and well-being, so that the insights don't hit you when you feel weak, when you feel hungry.

Concentration is a strength. Concentration is meant to be a food so that the mind feels strong and well nourished, ready to admit where it's made its mistakes in the past. If you simply read the content of the insights, as we chanted this evening—the eyes, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind are burning with passion, aversion and delusion—that doesn't leave you much. Everything is

on fire. Everything the mind lands on, looking for happiness, it sets on fire, too. That insight, taken in isolation, is pretty discouraging. But if you work on that insight from a base of concentration, it works in a very different way. It's not discouraging at all. It encourages you to keep going deeper and deeper into the concentration, exploring this area of the body that you're in, in the present moment, getting more established there, getting more at home in the concentration. As you look at all the other things you could be focused on, you realize that they don't offer the happiness that you once thought they did.

This is why the Buddha calls it awakening. We dream about things, looking for happiness here and there, and when we try to find it there, as he said, the fires of the mind scorch wherever it is. But jhana, right concentration, is a cool burn. It's a cool fire. In this way, the insight gets you deeper and deeper into concentration, more solidly established here. Instead of being discouraging, the insight is liberating.

So this foundation is very important. Once you've got a good solid foundation for happiness inside, then you can live in the world without scorching it. In other words, if you're looking for happiness in relationships or you're looking for happiness in things, then your misunderstanding—the idea that you could find an ultimate happiness there—is what burns those things up. But if your happiness is already well-established here, then you don't burn the things you touch. You appreciate things for what happiness they do have to offer, that they can offer to you, and that's plenty enough, because you've got your deeper needs met inside.

That weight we put on our relationships, that weight we put on our possessions, on our bodies, hoping for them to supply all our needs for happiness: It's no wonder those things get crushed, because it's a pretty heavy weight. But if you shift your center of gravity so that it's more inside, then you're not leaning on those other things. You don't destroy them. You don't weigh them down. You don't set them on fire.

So this ability to get the mind centered and still in the body in the present moment, to be familiar with the body, to get in touch with the energy flow in the body and learn how to direct it in such way that it becomes more and more livable here in the body: You've really got to respect this ability. You've got to give it time, you've got to give it energy, because it's what enables the whole rest of the training to succeed. It provides the foundation for insight to do its work.