

Right Concentration

December 27, 2007

I don't know if you've noticed when we chant the sutta, "The Analysis of the Path," as we did last night, that the longest section is the one describing right concentration. It's the only section that talks about stages in the practice. And it gives a fairly detailed map of the different elements in each stage. The question is, how do we relate to the map? It's tempting to say, well, there's this ingredient, there's that ingredient, and so you pull the different ingredients together and hope that what you've got is a state of jhana.

But it doesn't really work that way. It's like being told that durian tastes a little bit like garlic, a little bit like onions, a little bit like custard. It has a little bit of cyanide, a little bit of vitamin E. So you throw all those things together, thinking that you're going to get durian, but what you get is an inedible mess. If you want to get durian, you have to plant the seed. Here the seed is the topic of the meditation. The topic, as the Buddha said, is the four establishments of mindfulness. For example, staying focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That's the process you focus on. Once you've planted the seed and keep watering the seed, the tree will grow. When it's mature, the tree will start giving fruit. If you've planted the right seed, you're going to get the right fruit. So you don't have to go designing the fruit. You just have to be very careful to plant the right seed and care for it well.

So focus on the breath in and of itself. As you're focusing on the breath, put aside any sensual passions. There's the phrase in the description of jhana, "secluded from sensuality." Some people interpret that as meaning totally cut off from any input from the physical senses. Some interpret it as meaning secluded from sensual pleasures, so that you have to meditate in a place that's unpleasant or a place that's very boring. But neither of those interpretations is what the Buddha means. Sensuality, in his sense of the word, is your passion for your sensual thoughts and plans: the extent to which you love to obsess about those things. So in being secluded from sensuality, you're not trying to close off any contact with outside senses and you're not trying to put yourself in a dull, boring place. You're trying to develop a more internal seclusion: If you see any sensual passion coming up, you sidestep it. You put it aside.

Right here is where the analysis of the body into different parts comes in handy. If there's anything in the body that's got you lusting for it, you can think about all the other disgusting things right next to it in the body. If you're feeling some greed for food, think about the whole process of getting and eating food: exactly how much work goes into preparing the food, how short a time it actually tastes good in the mouth, and then what it's like as it goes through the digestive system and comes out the other end. In other words, you're using some thinking here to protect yourself, to pull you away from unskillful thoughts, and in particular from sensual passion.

Another way of gaining seclusion from sensuality is to fully inhabit your sense of the body. This is what *rupa*, or form, means when you're in jhana: the sense of the body as felt from within. You feel the inside of your hands, the inside of your feet, the inside of everything. The mind isn't living out in the world with its thoughts about sights or sounds or smells or tastes or

things that come and touch the body. You want to be on the level of form: the body in and of itself as it's present to you right here from the inside right now. And as you're alert and mindful, you're ardent: You want to use your alertness and mindfulness in a skillful way.

In other words, notice how the breath feels and ask yourself: Is this the kind of breath sensation you could settle down and spend lots of time with? If it's not, what can you do to change it? This is where evaluation comes in. The classic image for the first jhana is of a bathman working water through his lump of bath powder and turning it into a kind of dough. Of the different images used for the jhanas, this is the only one with a conscious agent deliberately doing something and evaluating the results. You're finding a sense of pleasure and fullness with the breath, and then you deliberately work it through the body as a whole, evaluating the results as you go along.

In doing so, you learn an awful lot about this sense of the form of the body and how the energy moves through it and around it: how the energy can move in a comfortable way and how, if you force it in the wrong way, it can get very uncomfortable. You have to observe and learn what works and what doesn't. In this way you're not only developing a nice place to be in the present moment, but also learning about how the different aggregates—such as the aggregate of feeling and the aggregate of form—interact; how your perception has an effect on these things. You'll see how you come to the meditation with specific perceptions in mind, a particular idea of how the mind focuses itself, of how the breath works, of how the energy in one part of the body relates to the energy in another part of the body. As you meditate, you get a chance to test those perceptions. If they're not working, try out other perceptions.

All of this is evaluation. When you've got the right focal point, you're evaluating it properly, and you're keeping a specific topic in mind as continually as you can, you've got all the causal factors needed to get you into right concentration. Then you don't have to think about anything else. You don't have to ask yourself, "Do I need to add a little bit more rapture, a little bit more pleasure?" If you've got the causes right, the results will come on their own. The rapture and pleasure are results. If you aren't getting the right results, focus back on the causes, which are directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. When these are right, the pleasure will come as a sense of ease, whereas the rapture can come in many different forms. In some cases it's simply a sense of refreshment, of lightness or fullness in the body. Other times it's more intense: a sense of thrill running through the body, or your hair standing on end. Again, your main concern is to stick with the causes. You don't want to go out redesigning the fruit, painting the fruit, squeezing the fruit, or pulling on it. Focus on the causes, and the fruit will mature on its own.

Then there's always the question: How do you know you've hit the first jhana? You can't really know at first. It doesn't come with a sign that says, "Now entering jhana, Population One." When you find the mind in a state that feels really good, really comfortable, with a sense of coming home, then when you leave it, put a post-it note on it: This might be something important. In other words, you apply a label to it, but at the same time you realize you're not yet really familiar with the territory, so you don't want to be too quick to incise the label in marble.

The only level of jhana with a really definite signpost is the fourth, which is where the in-and-out breathing stops. There's a sense of awareness filling the body and it's all very still. The mind is still, the body is still, and everything's perfectly balanced. All the breath-energy channels in the body are connected, so they nourish one another. There's no need to breathe in and out, so there's no in-and-out breathing at all. At that point you know you've hit the fourth jhana

and you can put a more confident note there. Then you can look back at the various stages you've been through, and you might have to rearrange the notes a little bit. Or you find that you've taken more than four steps coming in. There are passages in the Canon that talk about five stages in jhana practice, others that talk about three. So it's possible that your path into the fourth jhana might not have the same number of steps as somebody else's.

I noticed that when Ajaan Fuang was teaching his students, different people would have all sorts of different experiences in the meditation until they got to the point where everything was very still in the body. The in-and-out breathing finally stopped. Breath energy was filling the body, awareness was filling the body, everything felt very connected, balanced, and very bright: not necessarily with a light, but with a sense of real clarity. Then from that point on everyone seemed to go through the same stages.

But the process of getting into that point is going to be a very individual thing. The important factor is that you find a meditation topic you really like. There's got to be an element of delight here because you're trying to develop a state of becoming, a healthy state of becoming, an alternative to the unhealthy and unskillful states of becoming you've been engaged in before. And an important component in becoming is delight. With right concentration, you have to develop a strong sense of ease and wellbeing. That's the only way to pull yourself away from the temptation to keep falling back to the sensual delight that feeds your old sensual indulgences.

The Buddha once said that even though you may have a right understanding about the drawbacks of sensuality, if you don't have access to the kind of pleasure and rapture that jhana can provide, you're always going to be tempted to go back. So mere insight on its own isn't enough to pull you away from those temptations. You need something else—something stronger and more visceral—to provide the mind with a sense of wellbeing. This is what right concentration provides.

There's a nice sutta in which the Buddha talks about a bull elephant who wants to go down to the river and bathe alone. When he lives with an elephant herd and goes down to the river, the she elephants and baby elephants bump into him. He wants to drink clear water and of course they've muddied up the river. So he decides to go off on his own. Then, as he's living alone, when he goes down to the river, the water is clear. Nobody is bumping into him as he bathes. He comes out, breaks a twig off the tree, and scratches himself with the twig. He finds satisfaction. He allays his itch.

The Buddha said that it's the same when you practice right concentration. You gain a sense of seclusion, and then the pleasure, the rapture, and the sense of equanimity are like scratching yourself with the twig. It feels good. It allays your itch. And that's an important part of the practice. Without that sense of ease and wellbeing, everything gets very dry. At the same time, once the mind is satisfied in this way, you get to see the activities of the mind really clearly, you get to see the body really clearly, because you're right here. Very consistently here. Alert. Mindful.

Then you begin to see your body and mind in terms of the aggregates in action. You see form, i.e., the form you're inhabiting. You see feelings, the feelings that come from the different ways the breath energy moves through the body. You see your perceptions in action, your fabrications in action. For instance, when you move from the first to the second jhana, you let go of verbal fabrication, and your relationship to the breath changes. Singleness of preoccupation is a factor of all the levels of jhana, but when you get into the second jhana, the Buddha uses a new term: unification. In unification, it feels as if your awareness and the breath

become one. You no longer feel like you're sitting outside of the breath kneading it through the body; you're immersed in a lake with the cool water of a spring welling up inside. You're actually one with the breath. You don't have to adjust it anymore; you don't have to evaluate it anymore. Things begin to meld together, merge together, with a sense of oneness. That oneness remains as a factor of your concentration all the way up through the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This is what happens when you let go of the verbal fabrications of directed thought and evaluation. When you get to the third jhana, you let go of one aspect of mental fabrication—the sense of rapture—because it starts feeling gross. When you get to the fourth jhana, you let go of bodily fabrication. In other words, the in-and-out breath actually stops.

There are two ways you can observe the mind in the course of practicing jhana. One is as it's in a particular state of jhana. In fact, all the way up through the dimension of nothingness, you can observe each state while you're in it. It's like having your hand in a glove. It can be fully in the glove, partly in the glove, or totally removed. When you're fully in the higher jhanas you can't observe them, but when you're partly in them, you can. You pull the mind slightly above its full absorption—but not totally out—so that you can observe what's going on in that particular state. Another way to observe it is, as you move from one level to the next, to see different fabrications, different perceptions, just peeling away.

So you're beginning to see exactly what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about the five aggregates. You see them in action—for they *are* actions. You see the distinctions among them.

You also see how they interact, which means that you're not only in a really nice shady place with a branch that you can use to scratch yourself anywhere you itch. You're also in an ideal place to watch what's going on right here in the present moment in terms of the aggregates. This allows you to start looking at things in and of themselves as they come into being right here, right now.

This is why right concentration is the heart of the path. It's the first element of the path that the Buddha discovered. You probably know the story. He'd gone to the extreme end of self-affliction through the various austerities he had forced himself to undergo, and after six years he realized that this wasn't working. In spite of all his investment in that particular path, he had the good sense and the humility to realize that there must be another way. So at that point he hearkened back to the time when he was a child and had entered the first jhana while sitting under a tree. The question arose in his mind: "Could this be the path?" And he said, "Yes, this is the path." So right concentration is the factor that he first realized was part of the path. From that point on, as he worked with it, he began to realize that other factors had to support it as well. But right concentration is the central one, the one you can't do without. And the time spent on developing right concentration is very well spent: both because it's a good place to stay and because it's an ideal place to start seeing the process of becoming in terms of the five aggregates.

So you keep it in the back of your mind that this is what you want in the practice, this is where you're headed as an interim goal on the path. But as with every aspect of the path, you have to combine your desire for a particular goal with an understanding of the steps that will take you there. As the Canon says, desire for awakening is a good thing. But it's a good thing only when it gets you to focus on the actual steps that will take you to awakening. And the same principle applies to jhana. You know in the back of your mind that this is where you're headed

but you can't be obsessed with what's written on the map. You have to be more obsessed with the causes that will get you there. You seclude the mind from sensuality. And where do you do that? By focusing on the four establishings of mindfulness.

The Buddha says that this is your territory as a meditator. If you wander off your territory, it's like the quail who wandered away from the plowed field where he could hide from the hawk. He suddenly finds himself out in an open meadow where a hawk swoops down and catches him. As the hawk carries him off, he laments his bad fate, "Ah, I shouldn't have left my safe field. If I hadn't, this hawk would have been no match for me!" The hawk says, "Okay, I'll let you go there, but even there you won't escape me." He lets the quail go. The quail goes and stands on top of a stone turned up by the plow and shouts to the hawk, "Okay, come and get me, you hawk. Come and get me, you hawk." And the hawk, without bragging, just folds his wings and dives down. The quail sees that the hawk is coming at him full speed and so jumps behind the stone. The hawk crashes into the stone and dies.

This is the analogy for when you wander off into sensual passions: You're out where the hawk can get you. But when you're here in the body—ardent, alert, and mindful—you're in your safe territory. Just keep inhabiting the body as you go through the day. Whether you're in jhana or not doesn't matter. As long as you have this sense of fully inhabiting the body, being in touch with the breath energy in the body, you're in the right location, you're in the proper territory. As for the map of the different stages, keep that in the back of your mind. If you look at the map while you're driving, you'll drive off the road. Use the map after you've come out of meditation to reflect on what you experienced, what happened in the course of the meditation. Over time you'll arrive at your own more complete map of the different stages the mind goes through, the different ways it settles down, the different types of concentration you can get into. But all this comes from having a proper sense of cause and effect.

This is why the Buddha put right view at the very beginning of the path: seeing the practice of meditation as a type of kamma, something you *do* to get the results that you want, with the realization that the results have to come from causes. If you focus on the causes, with the sense of where you want to go kept in the back of the mind, the causes will take you there. In this case, it's not done by focusing on your memory of what was stated in the texts about jhana. It's done by focusing on the breath, getting to know the breath by evaluating it, adjusting it, settling in. That's where you'll see right concentration.