

Adjusting the Flame

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There are three factors in the path that deal with the topic of right concentration—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration itself—and all three are necessary to get the mind to settle down. Right effort is generating the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones, and that gets parsed out: If unskillful qualities have not yet arisen, you want to make sure they don't. If they have arisen, you want to get rid of them. As for skillful qualities, if they haven't arisen yet, you try to give rise to them. If they're there, you try to develop and maintain them, and bring them to the culmination of their development.

An important part of the formula is that you generate desire to do this. In other words, you motivate yourself. You decide this is a good thing you want to do. You're not just forcing yourself against your will. If you find that the mind is recalcitrant, resistant, you do your best to talk it into wanting to do the practice. Which is why the Ajaans always say that, at the very beginning of the practice, take stock of your mind to see: Which direction is it heading? Is it heading toward lust or anger? Is it heading toward restlessness? Is it heading toward sleepiness? Then make adjustments, so that your mind is in the right mood.

Ajaan Suwat would often talk about giving rise to a sense of conviction, a sense of feeling inspired that this is something you really want to do, this is a good use of your time, and it's a privilege to be able to meditate. Then, with that motivation in mind, you look at what's going on in the mind. Thoughts will come up that you may like, but you say, "These are not skillful thoughts, so I've got to learn how to get rid of them." And again, you have to make yourself *want* to get rid of things that in the past you may have liked. So there's a certain amount of psyching yourself up to do this.

Then, based on that, you develop right mindfulness. You remember that you've got to try to get the mind to settle down, so you try to remember the topic, such as the breath, and then you remember what's worked in the past, what hasn't

worked in the past, so that when something comes up that's going to pull you away from the breath, you remember, "Okay, I had this problem in the past, and this is how I dealt with it."

Say that sleepiness comes up. You don't tell yourself, "Oh, now's a good time to rest. It's been a long day, it gets dark early outside, I feel like I need some rest." That kind of talking to yourself is not helpful. You remind yourself that you don't know how much longer you're going to have to meditate but you do have right now. So focus on that. Try to keep the mind with its proper frame of reference: in this case, the breath in and of itself, coming in, going out. As the mind settles in, you're going to have to think about what's working and what's not working. Some of the problems may be with the mind, some may be with the breath, but the instructions as to how to deal with those problems and get the mind in concentration are in the right mindfulness section. The right concentration section is basically descriptions of what it's like when it's done well. The formula for right mindfulness is like the recipe; the formula for right concentration is like the restaurant reviews or the picture in the recipe book that tells you, "This is what it's supposed to look like when you do it right."

So you keep that in the back of your mind, but your main point of focus is going to be the breath. You're trying to get the mind into jhana but you don't get it there by thinking about jhana, although it's good to have a conception of what the word means. It doesn't mean trance. It basically means absorption. You're getting absorbed in something. And as they say in the Canon, it's possible to get absorbed in anger and absorbed in lust. In other words, you're thinking about something incessantly, obsessively, but in cases like that, it's unskillful. That kind of thinking, that kind of jhana, is going to lead you down the wrong road.

You want to get obsessed about your breath. What's there to obsess about? Well, you realize that the breath is the force of life. The way you breathe is going to have a big impact on the body, and especially when you conceive of the breath not as just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also as the whole flow of energy in the body that dilates and then contracts, and dilates again, contracts again, letting the air come in, letting the air go out. That energy field is all over the body. It's all around the body. Thinking of it this way is especially helpful when

you read in the descriptions or the analogies for a jhana saying that you're going to be allowing the sense of ease that comes as the mind begins to settle down to spread throughout the whole body. When a sense of refreshment, or even rapture comes, you spread that around the whole body as well.

If you can think of the breath as being the solvent that allows that sense of ease to spread, it makes it a lot easier to get to that state where you're fully absorbed just in the process of breathing, and the whole body is involved. In the beginning, you have to make adjustments because the mind can slip off either into restlessness and say, "Okay, I've had a little bit of pleasure now, what next is coming up?" or into sleepiness. Things get comfortable in the body, comfortable in the mind, and what do we usually do when we get comfortable like that? We fall asleep. We have to learn how to resist that.

This is where it's good to think of the verb that goes along with the noun for jhana, which is *jhayati*. It both means being absorbed in something and burning with a steady flame. It's the word they use when they talk about the flame of an oil lamp, which is very steady. If you think of your mind as being like a fire, when you're not in jhana it's flickering all over the place. Little flames go here, flames go there, they jump all around. If you've ever tried to read a book by a flickering fire, you know how hard it is. But if you try to read a book by an oil lamp, it's relatively easy because the flame is still and well regulated.

So you get focused on one thing, get interested in it, and then do your best to make sure that the mind doesn't drift off either into excess energy or deficient energy.

If you have too much energy, the mind is going to want to leave. One of the ways of dealing with that is to focus on the sense of ease that comes with the breath and ask yourself which parts of the body are not getting it. You may have a sense that things are okay in a general way, but go through the body very precisely. As long as the mind has the strength to think, give it something calming to think about. How is the breath energy in the space between your fingers and your toes? How is it at the base of the spine? How is it in the different parts of your head, in your eyes, in your ears? In other words, give the mind something to think about but something that's calming. That gets you even more interested in the breath.

Now, the problem going the other way is that you're getting sleepy. This is where you have to ask yourself if the way you're breathing is part of the problem, because there's a tendency, when the mind gets calm, for the breath to get really subtle, and you just drift off. Part of the problem is the sense of ease that comes, and you drop the breath to go for ease. And ease is a much vaguer thing to focus on. If you focus there, you can easily get into what's called delusion concentration, where things are quiet but hazy. You're not quite sure where you are, what you're focused on. It's concentration without mindfulness and alertness.

So the first thing to remember is always to stay with the sensation of breath. Don't leave that. And the second thing is that, as the breath gets comfortable, you have to start spreading your awareness around to fill the whole body, because if you really are fully aware of the whole body all at once, it's energizing. It may happen that the way you're breathing is getting a little bit too calm, in which case it's good to think of breathing in long out short. That'll give yourself more energy.

You can try deep breathing; you can try moving the spot of your focus around. Three breaths, say, in the middle of the chest, three breaths down by the abdomen, three breaths up at the neck, three breaths in the middle of the head, three breaths focusing on the back, moving around. Try to be systematic about it. That much extra work will help give the mind something to focus on in addition to the breath because sometimes that's the problem: You focus on one thing and you wander off.

Another way to deal with sleepiness is to focus on two spots at once. Think of the middle of the head or the base of the spine, and think of a line connecting the two. Can you maintain that sense of being aware of two spots at once?

Or you can think of the bones in the body, combining that contemplation with your awareness of the breath. Ask yourself: "Where are your fingers right now? Where are the bones in the fingers?" Relax any tension you may feel around the fingers. Then think about the bones in the palms of the hands and relax any tension there, both in the palms and in the backs of the hands. And then the wrists, the forearms, the elbows, the upper arms, the shoulders. Then start down by the toes and go up through the feet, the ankles, the shins, the knees, the thighs, the pelvis, up the spine. Visualize the different bones and also ask yourself,

“Where is the bone that I’m visualizing right now? Where is that located in my sense of awareness?” And then relax the area around it. So what you’ve got here is a combination of thinking and calming at the same time.

Try to see whether you need to emphasize the thinking a little bit more or the calming a little bit more. It’s the combination of the two that gets the mind to settle down, to adjust the flame so it’s just right. It’s not flickering around and it’s not going out. You want to maintain a certain steadiness because that’s what this is all about: getting the mind to be really steady and learning not how to be waylaid by the different things that can happen as the mind gets steadier.

Sometimes the sense of the body will get distorted. It may seem suddenly very small or very large. You may feel that different parts of the body are missing. What do you do? You stay with the breath. And gradually things will sort themselves out and get quiet. Really steady and really clear. That’s where we’re aiming.

You’re not here to check off a list, “Well, I’ve done jhana now, what’s next on the itinerary?” You’re here to get the mind really steady so that you can watch it to see what’s going on. And you need it to be steady for a long period of time because sometimes you’ll do something now, and it’ll be a while before you see the results. So you’ve got to be here, on top of it, to see the connection between your actions and their results. This is what really matters: You want to be able to discern suffering, as the chant said just now. It sounds strange. We all know that there’s suffering, but the problem is that we don’t really discern it: what it is, where it’s coming from, in all its gradations from stress up to big suffering.

You have to put the mind in the right state so that it can watch these things and then discern, “Okay, this is where the suffering is, this is what the cause is, this is how I can put an end to it.” That’s what concentration is for. Your *bhavana* lessons come in learning how to get the mind to settle down and realizing that you’re causing yourself some unnecessary stress by having a mind that’s out of whack, out of balance. So you bring it into balance and learn how to get rid of some of those causes. Then, once the mind is quiet and steady, you can see things deeper still. The more steadiness you have, the more clarity you have, then the more you understand and the more you’d be able to solve this problem of why it is we want happiness but keep on creating suffering.

The problem is not with the desire for happiness. It's how we go about it, and we go about it through ignorance. So if you can bring some knowledge to the process, you begin to see what really is happiness, what really is suffering. You can see it clearly, so you don't have to be told by anybody. You see for yourself, and that requires that you get the mind in a position where you can really trust what it sees. That's what we're doing right now: getting the mind solid, steady, still. And it's the state of steady awareness that you're aiming for. The words jhana and mindfulness and effort and so forth are useful as signs pointing in this direction, but don't be so obsessed by the signs that you forget to look at what's actually here.