

The Uses of Concentration

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When you meditate, you're trying to find a sense of ease and well-being inside. This is one of the purposes of doing concentration—what the Buddha calls a pleasant dwelling for the mind, a place where you can rest, a place where you can gain nourishment on the path.

You simply have to be careful that you also develop mindfulness and alertness while you're here. That's another one of the purposes of doing concentration. The more quiet the mind, the more you'll be able to see what's going on in the mind. And, of course, once you have mindfulness and alertness, you can protect that sense of well-being so that it doesn't turn into sleepiness—or into delusion concentration. So those two purposes for concentration go together.

You want to give rise to that sense of well-being but you don't want it to overcome the mind, so you give the mind work to do. Once there's a sense of well-being with the breath, you think of that well-being spreading round the body. Then you make a survey: Where in the body is the breath still not going well? Where in the body is that sense of ease not willing to flow? What can you do to open things up? And how can you be aware of the whole body all at once?

When the mind has work to do in that sense of well-being, then it doesn't turn into delusion concentration. It gets even more quiet, actually, but quiet with a sense of clear awareness, full awareness.

This is when the mind is ready for the two other purposes of doing concentration, the first of which is to gain psychic powers—different types of psychic knowledge—which is optional. A lot of people gain full awakening without having those powers.

The fourth use of concentration, though, is to get past your defilements, and that's not optional. You need a sense of well-being in the mind in order to fight off your defilements, because otherwise they'll tell you that they are the only way to find happiness. You counter that argument with the fact of the well-being you've found in concentration. As the Buddha once said, you may see the drawbacks of sensuality, but if you don't have an alternative pleasure to sensuality, such as the pleasure of concentration, then the mind is sure to go back.

So don't look down on that sense of well-being. It's an important part of dealing with your defilements. Use it as something to compare with them. When a distraction comes into the mind, you can ask yourself, "Which is better: the ease of the concentration or the little bit of pleasure you get out of that distraction?"

As the ease gets more and more expansive through the body, it gives a stronger and stronger argument against the distractions.

These distractions—these defilements that come into the mind—are often dressed like you. They look like you, they sound like you, because they *have* been you in the past. So, if you're going to cut off your relationship with them, you have to have something really good to offer as an alternative. So at the very least try to develop the alternative of that well-being in concentration.

As you develop discernment based on concentration, one, you get the ability to pull out of the defilement. This is an ability that you learn from mastering the concentration itself. You sit here with the breath and suddenly find yourself with another thought; you remind yourself, "This is not why I was here meditating" and you can pull yourself out.

Well, you can do the same thing with those defilements. No matter how much they sound like you—no matter how much they seem like your true feelings, your true desires—you decide you can pull out, you know how to pull out, and that way you can look at the defilements from the outside. That makes them a lot easier to deal with.

So concentration is what gives you a place to stand so that when you step out of those defilements, you have a good, solid place to go to and not just another defilement.

So when people say, "Watch out for the pleasures of concentration," they're not saying, "Don't try to attain pleasure in concentration." What they really mean is, "Don't let yourself be overcome by the sense of pleasure. And don't get lazy." The pleasure's there, one, to soothe you—to give you a sense of nourishment—and two, to give you a good foundation for the other purposes of concentration: gaining mindfulness and alertness, and gaining the discernment that overcomes your defilements.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "If you want to be good at meditation, you have to be crazy about it"—and in that sense, you have to be stuck on the ease of concentration. The mind keeps wanting to come back, come back. That's actually something you want to encourage because, after all, being stuck or addicted to concentration is much better than being addicted to sensuality.

With sensuality as the cause, as the Buddha points out, people can break all the precepts. They can do a lot of harm to themselves, a lot of harm to the world. Whereas if you're stuck on concentration, there's no reason to break any of the precepts; there's no reason to cause anyone any harm at all.

Now, there are slight forms of harm that develop, in terms of laziness on the one side or pride on the other—if you start thinking about how you have

concentration and other people don't—but those defilements can be dealt with, and they're much more refined.

How do you deal with them? By getting more skillful at your concentration: getting more observant, more mindful, more alert. Remind yourself that you do have these better pleasures, and there's a pleasure even greater than that of the concentration.

So these three main functions of concentration all go together. We have a pleasant abiding in the here-and-now *so that* we can give rise to mindfulness and alertness, and *so that* we can overcome our defilements. So don't look down on the pleasure of concentration. As the Buddha said, one of the things you should have respect for is concentration. When you do, you're right in the presence of nibbana.