

The Value of Concentration

May 6, 2005

It's not all that hard to focus on the breath. As soon as the thought comes into the mind, you're right there. The hard part is in staying there, and for that you need to have a strong sense of how valuable it is to have a peace of mind, to have the mind centered in one place. You need to be very protective of what you've got.

In the beginning it may not seem like all that much. Just being still in the present moment for a second or two is not impressive. So you need to keep reminding yourself that it's not going to be impressive right away. You have to give it time, give it a chance to grow.

It's like any plant that starts out as a seed, which may not look like much. But some seeds will surprise you, like the seeds of a redwood tree. They're tiny little things, but they can grow into the tallest living thing on earth if they get the right conditions.

In the beginning, the right conditions for concentration include finding a quiet place, like we have here. But you can't depend on the quiet place to do all the work for you. You've got to be watchful, because there are dangers on all sides of your seed. Fires can burn it. Birds could eat it. It may get too little water, too much water. So you have to keep watch over your seed.

One of the ways of protecting it is through the restraint of the senses. In fact, in texts frequently mention restraint of the senses as a prerequisite for getting the mind into concentration. If you're wandering all around the things you look at, the things you hear, the things you taste, touch, smell, think about, then you're leaving your windows and doors wide open. There's no protection for your seed at all. It's not so much that the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations will destroy your seed. It's the greed, anger, and delusion that come out of the mind looking for those things: Those are going to burn your seed.

So you have to be careful. Whatever is going to come out of your mind could destroy this little seed of concentration, this little seed of stillness. You've got to be very careful to keep the mind in check. Even when your eyes are open and you're engaging in life outside, you have to be very careful about how you look, how you listen, how you engage the objects of your senses. If you find yourself especially drawn to something because it's pretty, look for its other side. Or if you find yourself really upset about something, look for its other side as well. Try to balance things out.

That way, you find you have a little circle of protection around this seed of quietness, this seed of stillness. While you're sitting here with your eyes closed, you have to be meticulous as well. On the one hand, of course there are going to be the hindrances. On the other hand, you have to watch out for your tendency to go along with the hindrances. When you think of something you find really attractive, it's very easy to say, "Well, my mind needs a little refreshment. It needs a little something to keep it amused, keep it entertained. After all, this meditation is getting kind of dry." You have to watch out for that. Or if a little something comes along, it seems little. "This couldn't matter," you say. "Just let this thought come into my mind a little bit." But if you're going to be sloppy while you're meditating here, you're going to be even sloppier when you're outside.

So you've got to be very meticulous to watch over your stillness. Don't let anything touch it. As Ajaan Lee said, it's like putting a lid over a dish of food so that flies can't get to it. You've got to be very watchful, meticulous, heedful, because anything can come along at any time to destroy your stillness. Even something as dull as boredom can destroy your stillness. So whatever voices come into the mind that would pull you away even the least little bit, you have to learn how not to listen to them, not to pay them any attention, not to give them an inch of space in your mind. Or if they're going to be chattering away in the background, make sure they stay in the background. Give all your attention to the breath.

After a while when the mind does get still, you'd think that would be the end of the problem, that the stillness would be enough to keep you attracted. But that's not always the case. You can start getting complacent. Laziness is natural to all of us. When things seem to be going well and nothing seems to disturb the mind very much, you start letting down your guard. When that happens, those little tiny fires of greed, anger, and delusion can burn away here, burn away there. Think of them as little tiny bugs. They nibble here, they nibble there, and at first they don't seem to be doing any damage. The mind seems impervious to them. But if you let them stay there long enough, they start eating away, eating away, and all of a sudden, oops, it's gone. They've got your seed.

This is one the reasons why the Buddha said that heedfulness lies at the base of all skillful qualities. It's heedfulness that gets you started on the path and it's heedfulness that keeps you on the path, realizing that it's so easy to slip off or to find a spot in the path you like and just lie down and stop walking. But this path is like one of those magical paths in fairy tales or fantasy stories. If you don't walk on it, if you lie down on it, it starts to dissolve underneath you. It's a path you've got to keep following. You can't ever let down your guard.

As for other qualities you're trying to develop on the path, there's the quality of meticulousness, being very careful about what you do, and having a strong sense of the value of the path. Your ability to see little things will make all the difference. After all, the movements of greed, anger, and delusion in the mind start out very small. The good things in the mind start out very small as well. To catch these movements, you have to be very observant, very meticulous, very precise. This habit of being meticulous and precise is what protects the meditation to make sure there's no crack anywhere where even the slightest little thing can come sneaking in.

When your sense of protectedness is that solid, that consistent, then your stillness of mind has a chance to put down roots and grow. Precision becomes an integral part of it. So don't be careless. When things are bad, don't get discouraged. Just keep coming back to whatever concentration you have. When things go well, don't get complacent. Don't let the concentration fool you into thinking that it'll always be there no matter what. After all, it's something fabricated, something intentional. So learn to treat it as something of value, and that's when it'll show you what its true value is.