

The Alternative of Concentration

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The suttas often compare the practice to learning a skill. Many of the similes that the Buddha uses to teach meditation, to teach concentration, to describe the arising of insight, are illustrated with similes drawn from different skills: the skills of being a carpenter, the skills of being an archer, the skills of being a cook.

It's useful to explore these similes, to explore the similarities—especially if we have a skill, either related to art or to sport or to a craft of different kinds—to see what we can learn from that skill that we can apply to the practice.

We touched on this a little this afternoon. When you're learning a skill, when you get good at something, there's a sense of well-being in the mind as you're doing it because you're right there.

And where does that sense of well-being come from? It comes from two things: one, a sense of physical relaxation: The body is relaxed as you're getting into the skill. The rate of the breath is easy.

More importantly, the sense of well-being comes from the mind. The mind is focused on what you're doing right there in the present moment: watching what you're doing, watching the results of what you're doing, immediately making adjustments if necessary. The more you can stay unwaveringly with that process, then the greater sense of well-being, the greater sense of absorption comes into the mind.

When people talk about being “in the zone,” it's a term that's often used with sports but it applies to other skills as well. The mind is really focused, it's really still, so that things become extremely clear. You're sensitive to the slightest things that are happening, and everything seems to flow because there are no interruptions. The flow comes from this feedback loop that's not interrupted.

So you take those lessons and you apply them to the meditation. One of the reasons we focus on the breath is because you can create a sense of ease that makes it easier for the mind to settle in. You breathe in such a way that the body doesn't feel tense. You adjust it so that you don't go off into the other extreme of getting so loosened up that you get really drowsy or your attention drifts. You want to be right here, watching the breath coming in, working with the rhythm of the breath, working with the texture of the breath, the whole quality of the breath energy.

It's useful when you start out meditating to make a very quick scan through the body—through your various joints, especially around the wrists, around the

hands, any part of the body that tends to be tense most of the time—and just consciously relax it, to create the right feeling tone for what you're about to do.

Then the mind can begin to settle more and more securely into the present. But the sense of well-being doesn't come just from the breath. It also comes from the quality of the mind's focusing in, staying with this feedback loop: watching the breath, adjusting it, watching what happens when you adjust it, making further adjustments back-and-forth. The more uninterruptedly you can stay with that feedback loop, the more you get into a real state of absorption.

As the Buddha said, there is no happiness, there is no true ease, aside from peace. And even though the peace of concentration is not the ultimate peace, still it gives you an idea of the direction in which you're heading.

When you come out of the meditation, especially if you've been able to maintain this sense of continuity, this uninterrupted flow in the feedback loop, there's a sense of rest, a sense of refreshment, a sense of well-being that's hard to explain. Just sitting here breathing? Is that enough to explain why you feel so refreshed?

The breath can explain some of that but not all of it. It's more the state of uninterrupted flow in the mind. That builds up a kind of power, a nourishment. It's almost like the spinning of a generator that develops a magnetic field. You have a sense of a more highly charged field in the body.

And again, you can't explain it simply through the breath. It's more a quality of the mind: the mindfulness that's immersed in the body, the mindfulness that saturates the body, the awareness and alertness that saturate the body. That creates that sense of a field.

Even though this isn't the ultimate goal of the practice, it's a good skill to master. It's the path that we follow that gets us to where we want to go. It also opens up new alternatives in the mind.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how people react to pleasure and pain. When pain comes, they feel resistance, they try to push it away and they go running to sensual pleasure because they think that's the only alternative to pain. So they feel what's called a passion-obsession, *raganusaya*, for pleasure. As far as they can see, sensual pleasures are the only alternative to having to suffer pain. But then the pleasures show their drawbacks, and turn painful. So the mind runs back and forth between these things, and the whole political situation in the mind gets determined by what we see as our alternatives.

But when you practice concentration, you develop sense of pleasure that's not dependent on sensual things. Even though you start out with what seems to be a sensory pleasure in the breath, the centeredness of the mind, the continuity of

attention that you're allowed to build up here creates a different kind of pleasure, a different kind of well-being which is a lot more nourishing. You begin to realize you have this other alternative as well, so that you don't have to go running after sensual pleasures, finding gratification here, finding gratification there and running back and forth between indulgence in the pleasure and then when you begin to see that that's unskillful, running back to self-affliction.

The mind tends to alternate between these two as long as it doesn't have a really good alternative. Which is what we're trying to create as we're practicing concentration, giving the mind a different place to go. That way, instead of fighting back-and-forth between indulgence in pleasure and then self-affliction, you've got this other place to go which is much better than either one. This is the Middle Way.

Having this sense of well-being that can come simply from being centered changes the equation, changes the balance of power in the mind. You get less tied up in questions of whether you should indulge a particular desire or whether you should beat it down. You've got this alternative. You can go into this sense of concentration.

Then, from the perspective of having this alternative and learning how to maintain this state, you begin to see more and more clearly what's a skillful way of dealing with desire, what's a skillful way of dealing with lust. This provides a touchstone, because you notice the desires that really pull you out of concentration are the ones you have to deal with, and lust is a primary culprit.

The other side of the mind, the side that inflicts punishment on itself: That's dangerous when it damages the state of concentration as well.

So concentration provides both an alternative and a touchstone for giving you a perspective on the mind's normal jumping back and forth between sensual indulgence and self-affliction. It gives you a better sense of what kind of indulgence is skillful, what kind of indulgence is unskillful. And what kind of harshness or self-affliction is skillful and unskillful.

Because there are times when you really do need to get out the whip. Other times, you really do need to indulge in the desire for pleasure just to keep the mind in the proper balance. The concentration is what tells you what that proper balance is.

From its perspective, you can see which pleasures are innocuous and which ones aren't; which forms of being harsh with yourself are innocuous or actually helpful, and which ones are not. You can measure them right here.

Which is what happens with any skill. As the mind gets more and more centered, more and more absorbed in performing whatever the action is, and you

can do it more skillfully, you develop a more intuitive sense of what's going too far to the right, what's going too far to the left.

So try to take the same attitude towards meditation as you've taken to any skill that you've mastered in the past.

Having this alternative really does change the equation in the mind, changes the balance of power in the mind. It gives you a sense of well-being that's totally inner-dependent, doesn't have to depend on things outside.

When you have this alternative inside, you find that you can trust yourself with outside things a lot more confidently. The mind doesn't have to feed on this thing, doesn't have to feed on that thing. You've got an alternative place for it to feed. It's a lot better, and the nourishment is a lot more nourishing, so you don't have to worry so much about the mind sneaking off and feeding on snacks out of the pantry all the time.

You've got your source of nourishment right here; you've got your source of well-being right here. Just learn how to get more and more skillful about tapping into it and learning to put it to good use.