

## *Getting Familiar with Concentration*

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The mind has its own rhythms, its own pace in the practice. It's not up to you to determine what that rhythm or pace is. All you can do is provide the right conditions for it to grow. Whether your mind is going to be a banana tree that grows so fast you can almost watch it grow, or an oak tree that grows slowly, that's not up to you to decide. But what you *can* do is to plant it in the right location, give it the right soil, water it properly, give it the right fertilizer, and then it'll grow.

That's what we're doing, as we practice. We may be impatient to get the insights or the states of concentration we've heard about, but impatience is not a factor of the path.

What are the factors of the path? Desire is a factor of the path. It's part of right effort. There has to be the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities and to foster skillful ones. That much you can desire, but you can't desire that it's going to happen within an hour or a day or two weeks or whatever. You just work on whatever comes up. Sometimes you find that the mind throws a lot of issues back at you; sometimes there's hardly anything at all. It easily settles down, and you wonder why you had problems before. Then, during the next session, you find that all the problems that were hiding out in the previous session come up all at once.

Your duty is simply to deal with whatever comes up. If a skillful quality hasn't arisen yet, you try to give rise to it. Once it's there, you try to foster it. Focus on the things that you *can* work on. In other words, you're responsible for the causes. As for when the results will ripen, you can't determine that ahead of time. All you know is you're fostering the causes that will help the desired results to come, if not now, at least sometime down the line.

This is why we work with the breath, staying with the breath, keep returning to the breath, getting to know the breath, getting familiar with the breath, getting on good terms with the breath. That's planting the mind in the right place, and giving it the soil, fertilizer, and water it needs. Because if you're going to see anything, you're going to see it right here. All the insights you need to know will appear right here. But as for *when* the insights will come, you can't determine that ahead of time. But you can determine that right now you can keep the mind right here.

If you find the mind wandering off, you bring it back. Try to learn to be skillful in bringing it back, so that it's happy to come back, happy to stay. After all, the

Buddha said that insight is insight into the process of fabrication, and all of fabrications you need to know are right here when you're focused on the breath.

The breath itself is the bodily fabrication. It's the factor that keeps the body going together. Then there's verbal fabrication, the mind's inner chatter, where it directs its thoughts to certain topics and then evaluate them. Here you're directing your thoughts to the breath and you're evaluating the breath. Then there's mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. There are feelings of ease or dis-ease, which are associated with the breath. Your perceptions: the labels you give to the breathing and the other sensations that arise up around the breathing.

So everything you need to know is right here, and it's largely a matter of getting familiar with it. To be familiar with it, you have to stay with it again and again and again. Play with it again and again. Keep coming back, keep watching over it to see how these things move, to see how they behave when you adjust them in different ways, and then when you're really familiar with the patterns, you start noticing subtler things that you would have missed otherwise.

The kind of knowledge that comes with familiarity is really solid. You can read about things in books. It's like saying you want to be a sea captain. You can read about ships, you can read about the ocean, you can read about the weather, but that doesn't necessarily mean that when you go down to the ship one morning and you look out across the ocean, you look at the sky, you'll be able to tell whether it's a good day to go out or not. But if you've sailed for many years, after a while you begin to get a sense of what the clouds are telling you, what the color of the water is telling you, about how that day is going to turn out.

That's the kind of knowledge that comes with familiarity, and that's what you want with your own mind. You want to be on good terms with it, you want to be familiar with all of its moods. That doesn't mean you have to run after the moods, simply that you're familiar with staying at this vantage point right here with the breath, and seeing how things look from this vantage point.

This is why concentration is so important. It gives you a good, comfortable, solid place to stay so that you can watch things for long periods of time.

There are times when it may seem dull and unoriginal. You just keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath. What's new or interesting about that? Well, you're back to the breath so you can take your stand and get your vantage point. Once you've got your vantage point, you start seeing things clearly. You'll learn some interesting things about the mind in the process of training it to stay still.

So it's not that you practice concentration without any insight at all. As the Buddha said, tranquility and insight are both necessary to get the mind into good

solid concentration. In this case, the insights will be insight into how to get the mind to settle down, and what different kinds of moods it'll have from day to day. Some days it'll be happy to settle down. Other days, it seems like the last thing on earth you want to do is be with the breath. What do you do on days like that? Do you simply give in to the aversion to the breath? Or do you probe it? Or do you try to distract it? Or do you try to override it? There are lots of ways you can deal with that reluctance to settle down. It's not that one way is intrinsically better than another, because you'll find that some tactics will work on Monday, yet they won't work on Tuesday or Wednesday, which is why you have to have lots of approaches. It's in using your ingenuity to get past these obstacles: That's when you begin to gain some real insight into how the mind works.

So as it said in the chant just now, we should have respect for concentration, the ability to get the mind settle on one object and to stay there, because the process of getting it centered gives you insight. Once it really stays here, you get even more refined insights, insights that are secure and solid because they come from familiarity, rather than from preconceived notions.

Sometimes you hear techniques where they say they can force-feed insights, they can guarantee insights within a certain amount of period of time. But like anything that's force-fed, like those beautiful strawberries they grow nowadays: They all come out nice, large, very red, and may look good in the store, but they don't taste nearly as good as the old ones that were allowed to grow naturally. They look like the real thing but they're not. You actually can put people into a kind of controlled neurosis with certain techniques, to the point where they have a neurotic breakthrough. It looks like insight, sounds like insight, but it's not insight.

Insight is something that, when it comes, makes a big difference in the mind, and the difference is lasting. Instead of being disorienting, it's extremely orienting. You see the mind's ability to create happiness simply through concentration, and you need that to get a perspective so that you can compare things when other insights come. Exactly what kind of ease, what kind of insight do they give to the mind that's another order from concentration? If you're not familiar with concentration, often these neurotic breakthroughs that simply get the mind to settle down and be still after going through a lot of work simply put you in a state of concentration that you're looking for something more radical.

This is another reason why concentration is so important. It gives you a measuring stick. The liberation that comes from genuine insight is something that you can't will. Concentration can be willed. As you get more and more familiar with the different levels of concentration, you see exactly how far you can will the

mind to be still, how far you can will the mind to be peaceful, and it goes a long way.

Finally, though, when genuine insight comes, you find it's of a radically different order. Only when the mind has been through good, solid concentration, are you really in a position to judge that this is something different—something unconstructed, unfabricated, because you've tested how far fabrication can go.

Sometimes it seems that when you practice concentration, you're going against all the principles of what you may hear insights are all about: i.e., inconstancy, stress, and not self. Here you are, trying to make the mind constant, give it a sense of ease, give yourself a sense of control over what the mind can do. Yet it's precisely because we're going against those three characteristics that we can recognize where they are true. If you just give up and say, everything is inconstant, stress, not self, before you try to push the limits, you don't know exactly what the Buddha's talking about. When you push to see how far you can make the mind constant, give it a sense of ease, give it a sense of control, then you run up against the limits of that project. That's when you're in a better position to appreciate genuine insight when it comes.

As we've often been told, the Buddha asks us to test his teachings. This means that we can't just go through a program in which we simply clone the insights he had. He says to do this process here, getting the mind concentrated, push it to see how far it can go, and then in the process of that, you run up against these principles of inconstancy, stress, and not self in your own actions, in your own quest for happiness. That gives you a totally different perspective from what you would get simply by reading about these things, because you've learned how to trust the sense of concentration that you've developed. It really does become your center, and you can use it to peel away your attachments to all other things. Only when you've got so that you're relying totally on this do you pull the rug out from under yourself.

That's when you're in the right position to benefit from the Buddha's teaching on insight in the ultimate sense. If you're looking at the inconstancy or the impermanence of mountains and trees and things like that, it doesn't really hit home. But when you learn to place all of your hopes for happiness on one state of mind and let go of everything else, then you can turn around and analyze that state of mind: That's when insight opens you up to something else totally other. That's when the insight really hits home, because you've first made that spot your home. So work on settling in.