

Respect for Concentration

July, 2001 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

We just chanted about having respect for concentration. This is an important principle to keep in mind because all too often the stillness of our minds is something we step on. An idea pops into our heads and we go running after it. We leave our home base very quickly and then find it hard to get back. We've got to learn how to make concentration our normal state of mind: centered, present, alert to the body, alert to things going on. It's not that you don't sense other things when you're concentrated, or that you don't register them with your senses at all. Simply that the mind doesn't move out after them. The mind stays firmly based in the breath, its home base, and from there it protects that sense of being centered, looks after it, maintains it. This is the only way that concentration can grow, can develop the real stability we need to withstand whatever comes up.

Too many times I've heard people say, "Now that my mind is calm, what do I do next?" They're in a great hurry to jump to the next step, to run off into insight. But before the mind can gain any liberating insight, it has to overcome its impatience to move. You need to get it very solid, very secure, because when you start working on the issues of insight — trying to understand why greed, anger, and delusion take over the mind — you're going to find yourself running up against all kinds of storms. If your concentration isn't really solid and settled, you'll just get blown away.

So you have to respect this part of the path. After all, it's the heart of the path. The Buddha once said that right concentration forms the heart of the noble eightfold path, while all the other factors of the path are simply requisites, supports for the right concentration, to keep it right, to keep it on track.

So have some respect for this quality of mind. Look after it. Sometimes it seems like we're going against the Buddha's teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not self when we focus on putting the mind in a state that's constant, easeful, and ours. We get really absorbed in this sense of oneness and we come to identify with it, both with the stillness and with the object of the stillness as well. It all becomes one. So it seems like we're running counter to what insight is supposed to tell us. But what we're actually doing is testing the limits of

human effort. We're taking the *khandhas* — these aggregates of body, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness — and instead of identifying with them, we use them as tools. And as part of the process of mastering them as tools, there will have to be a sense of identification. You identify with the state of concentration, whatever sense of the body is present in the concentration, whatever feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, and consciousness are there. That's why you become so devoted to them. They all turn into a oneness. But instead of simply identifying with them, you're also treating them as the path. That makes all the difference.

You bring things together and, once they're brought together, you can sort them out for what they are. If everything is scattered all over the place it's hard to see how things interact, it's hard to see where the connections are, and where the lines are drawn between them. But when you get them all right here, gathered into one, then once they've been staying together for long while they begin to separate out.

Ajaan Lee has a nice image of taking a rock and putting it in a fire. When the various elements in the rock reach their melting point, they melt out of the rock, one at a time. That's how they separate. The same holds true with all the things you're going to try to understand and gain insight into. Once they've been together a long period of time, gathered here in a sense of oneness, they begin to separate out. And all you have to do is ask the question, "What's this? Is this the same as that?" And then you just watch. You begin to see that there's a natural dividing line between these things. But until you've brought the mind to oneness in concentration, you can't really see that. All the dividing lines you see are the ones imposed by words and ideas, by preconceived notions.

Put those preconceived notions aside and just focus on getting the mind centered. You're sitting here in concentration, trying to get the concentration as refined and as solid as possible. When you get up to leave, don't drop it. Try to maintain it. An image they use in the Canon is of a person carrying a bowl on his head, filled to the brim with oil. Try to develop that same sense of balance, care, and mindfulness. As you get up from concentration and go to wherever you're spending the night, try to maintain that sense of being centered and poised. Don't let it spill. This is one aspect of having respect for concentration: trying to maintain it throughout the course of the day, not letting yourself get distracted outside. Again, you'll be aware of outside things: people to talk to, work to be done, the sounds of the birds, the wind in the trees. These things will all be present to your awareness, but you won't send your attention out after them. Try to keep your center here inside.

As you develop this continuity, it becomes your habitual center of awareness, your habitual point of reference. The movement of other things in relation to that center becomes very clear. In other words, the impulse to go out and see something: You'll see it exactly as that — a current or a physical sensation in certain parts of the body that runs or flows out after things. If you can catch sight of it, you'll see: "Oh, that's what happens when the mind focuses its attention outside." There's both a mental and a physical side to that change of reference. When your sense of clear awareness is still enough, you can see these things as they move. The more still your frame of reference, the more refined the movements you can notice in the mind. So this element of stillness is very important. Without it, insight is just words, ideas, things you picked up from books. But with it, insight is seeing things as they actually happen, as they actually move.

So this is the basis from which insight comes, the insight that leads to release. You begin to observe the movements you used to ride on, because now you're not riding on them any more. You see these movements of the mind as they flash out, but you don't go flashing with them. That's what makes all the difference. If you ride out with them, that's just the way of the normal mind. But if there's a sense of being centered inside, you can see the movements of the mind as they go out, as thoughts go out, as perceptions go out, latching onto things. You see them as they actually happen. You begin to wonder, "Why would I ever want to identify with that?"

That's when the possibility of release comes. But this can happen only when you're really, really still. And to be still you'll need a sense of wellbeing here in the present moment. Otherwise, the mind won't stay. For the concentration to stay solid and unforced, you want to feel good being right here. You work with the breath in whatever way will help you to settle down, to stay clear and centered. As you use the breath to work through pain in the body, you'll find that some pains you can deal with and some pains you can't, but the only way you'll know is by experimenting. If there are pains you can't disperse by adjusting the breath, you learn to live with them. You learn not to identify with them. You're aware of them, but there's a sense of separation between the sense of awareness and the pain. That makes it bearable.

If you're going to identify with certain parts of the body, identify with the good ones. Find the parts of the body where you can maintain a sense of wellbeing through the breathing. Focus on those. Those become your center, your point of reference in the midst of this moving world.