

## *Beyond Duality*

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Practicing concentration is a process of making the mind one. You focus on a single object, and the longer you stay with it, the more the object and the mind seem to blend into one.

Take the breath for example. When you begin, it seems that you're in one part of the body watching the breath in another part of the body. But as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, and the longer you stay with it, then the more you have a sense that the breath is surrounding you, that you're plunged into the breath. Then the oneness gets even stronger as you allow your awareness to fill the whole body. So you've got the breath filling the whole body, you've got your awareness filling the whole body, and everything seems to be one.

But in order to get to that oneness, you have to see things in pairs: pairs of cause and effect, pairs of skillful and unskillful. You see this in the Buddha's teachings on the factors for awakening. The second factor, analysis of qualities, precedes concentration practice. And exactly what qualities do you analyze? The Buddha says to bring appropriate attention to the issue of what's skillful and what's unskillful, as it appears in the mind. When you're practicing concentration, the immediate issue of skillful and unskillful deals with what ways of focusing the mind, and what objects of focusing the mind on, are conducive to getting the mind to settle down and which ones are not. You have to be very clear about this. Otherwise, you may focus on things that aren't helpful, or in ways that are not helpful. Instead of bringing the mind to a state of oneness, you bring it to a state of tenness, a hundredness, a thousandness.

It all depends on what you do, where you focus, how you focus, how you bring the mind to the object, how you let it stay with the object. You're constantly faced with choices. But they're very simple choices, between actions that lead you to a sense of peace and well-being, and actions that lead you away from a sense of peace and well-being. It doesn't require much more analysis than that. This is why these dichotomies don't really disturb the mind. They're actually useful tools in getting the mind to settle down.

So try to be very selective as you focus on the body. Select the parts of the body that feel good. In the beginning, they may feel good only during one part of the breathing cycle, say, just while you're breathing in, or just while you're breathing out. Learn how to get them to feel good both with the in-breath and the out-

breath, to maintain that sense of ease all the way throughout the breath cycle—and then into the next breath cycle, and the next one.

That means not only focusing on the right sensations, but also knowing *how* to focus on them, because all too often, when you focus on a part of the body, you tense it up. You immediately ruin whatever it is you're trying to focus on.

So you have to learn how to focus in a way that keeps things relaxed, keeps things open up at the point of focus. It's another basic dichotomy that's useful for getting the mind to be one.

Then you find that once the mind begins to settle down, some of the things you have to do in order to get it to settle down become unnecessary. They actually become a burden to the meditation, a burden to the concentration. As Ajaan Fuang once said, there's one skill in getting the mind to settle down, and then another skill in getting it to stay there. It's a different kind of skill. It's subtler and requires a steadier hand. Again, the only way you're going to learn this is by noticing what works and what doesn't work. In other words, what does bring the mind a sense of well-being? What keeps it in a sense of well-being and what starts to destroy that sense of well-being? You've got to see these dichotomies.

It's in this way that the practice of concentration leads to the practice of insight and discernment. There's a passage in Luang Puu Dune where he says, once the mind settles down and is still, to start contemplating things in pairs. This is precisely the Buddha's advice: Look at things in pairs, but not just as any old pair. Pairs of cause and effect, directly related to the issue of skillful and unskillful.

There's a passage where the Buddha goes through the different factors of dependent co-arising, and pairs each one up with suffering or stress. For example, mental fabrication: You contemplate mental fabrication paired up with stress to see the connection between them, to see how the process of fabrication does lead to more stress, and then to see what you can do to let go or stop that process of fabrication. See what happens to the stress then. You can do the same thing with consciousness, contact, feeling, craving, or clinging. In other words, you learn to see these mental events as just that—as events, as actions—and then you apply that question of skillful and unskillful to those events. What kind of fabrication leads to more stress? What kind of fabrication leads to less stress? What happens if you can stop fabrication entirely?

The same with clinging; the same with craving: In other words, you take the basic approach of learning to see the distinction between what's skillful and what's not, and you apply it to events right in the mind—and not just any events, events that have a cause-and-effect relationship. You begin to see how fabrication

feeds stress, or how clinging feeds stress. Then you see what you can do to starve them.

There's another passage where Ven. Sariputta is teaching and takes a similar approach. In his case, he goes down the links of dependent co-arising. In each case, he says to focus on the relationship between one link and the next one in the chain. Once you get a sense of how they're connected, then watch to see what you can do to starve the unhealthy or unpleasant connections. Again, you see the processes of cause and effect, then you approach them from the question of what's skillful and what's not skillful: the same old question that brought the mind to oneness.

What you're doing is that once the mind has become one like this, you begin to see whether there still are pairs operating in the mind in order to maintain that oneness. Whatever pairing up seems congenial, that's obvious to see, you focus on that one. As the texts say, that's all you really need: Find one pairing that's clear to you, that really interests you, and when you gain insight into that, you'll gain insight into the whole chain of cause and effect as it operates in the mind—and particularly the whole issue of how ignorance gives rise to stress and suffering, and how if you replace that ignorance with knowledge, with clear knowing right here in the present moment, you can stop that whole process of stress and suffering.

So when the Buddha teaches analysis of qualities, he means this both as a way of getting the mind to settle down and be still, and then, once it's still, as a way of bringing the mind to true release. It's simply a matter of getting more and more skilled, more subtle, more precise in detecting these differences in the mind, detecting the issue of cause and effect, and how you can manipulate the causal process to put an end to suffering.

You hear a lot about how bad and limited and small-minded dualistic thinking is. But that's not what the Buddha taught. He said that you can take advantage of dualities. And this is the most important duality: this issue of what's skillful and what's not. You see it all over the world in everything you do. You do a job skillfully and you do it unskillfully, and the results are obviously different. It's not a matter of forcing dualistic thinking on a non-dualistic reality. Reality itself has its dualities, its dichotomies. What you're learning how to do is to take advantage of those dichotomies by learning to really understand them. It's only when you understand them, and learn how to master them, that you can go beyond them.