

Balancing the Bases for Concentration

November 21, 2006

Spread thoughts of goodwill all around you. Remind yourself that you're here for the sake of true happiness, and that your true happiness doesn't take anything away from anyone else, because it comes from things you discover within, things you develop within. That means that your true happiness doesn't conflict with anyone else's true happiness. So when you spread thoughts of goodwill all around, that includes inside, too, thoughts of goodwill to yourself, people you like, people don't like, because you don't gain anything from anyone's unhappiness, from anyone's suffering. No matter how much you might dislike somebody, that person's suffering can actually come back and make you suffer as well.

So wish happiness for everyone. And remind yourself that you're here for a special kind of happiness, a happiness that doesn't have to depend on anything else, something that no one else can take away, something you're not taking away from anyone else.

Which means that now you have to look within.

When you look inward, what do you see? You've got the body sitting here breathing, and you've got the mind thinking and aware. So bring all those things together. Think about the breath. Don't let yourself forget it. Then watch the breath to see what it feels like as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Where do you notice the sensation of breathing most clearly? It could be at the tip of the nose, or it could be the movement of the body that brings the air in and out of the lungs. Find whichever part of the body seems most natural to focus on, and then let your awareness settle there. Breathe deeply in and out for a while and see if deep breathing feels good. If it does, stay with deep breathing. If it starts feeling uncomfortable, you can switch to something else: shorter breathing, more shallow breathing, faster, slower.

Just think to yourself: What kind of the breath would feel good right now? See how the body responds. Don't try to force the breath in any way, but be very sensitive to how it feels. Once the spot you're watching begins to feel comfortable, you can think of the comfort spreading out through the body: down the back, out the arms, out the legs, in all directions, all along the nervous system. You don't have to follow it out, just think of those comfortable sensations radiating out from where you are. You just maintain your focus, maintain that sense of ease right at the spot where you're focused. Make you don't try to build a shell around

it. If you do, you're going to get in the way of the smooth functioning of the body, and that's going to make it difficult to meditate for long periods of time.

So have a sense of porousness. If there are any sounds coming around you, just let them go right through you. You don't have to catch them. You don't have to build up a shell of resistance against them. Think of your body as a big net, and the wind can go right through interstices in the net. The same with the sound: It can go right through the net. Thoughts, too, can go right through your mind. Think of your mind as a big net as well, a net that's very poor at catching things.

Most of us have a very fine weave in our net. Anything comes by, and we catch it. Then we complain that the things outside have disturbed us. Ajaan Chah, a famous meditation teacher in Thailand, once said that the sounds aren't disturbing you. You're disturbing the sounds. In other words, something comes by, and you have to comment on it. You have to get involved with it. And of course, that means you've dropped your meditation and gone running off after something else.

So have a sense of this focused awareness in the present as being something very precious, something you want to maintain, something that requires all your attention, like a bowl filled with oil, and you don't want to drip any of the oil. Again, don't tense up around it. If you tense up around it, you're going to spill the oil for sure. Try to maintain a sense of ease and balance.

This element of balance is really important in the meditation. The Buddha once said that there are four basic factors on which your concentration will be based: desire, effort, intent, and your powers of analysis. Ironically, a lot of these factors are things we've been told *not* to bring to the meditation, yet the Buddha says they're essential. But if they're out of balance, that can cause problems.

If your desire is too sluggish, you don't really care about what you're doing. If it's too strong, all you can think about is what you want out of the meditation, and you can't really stay focused on what you're actually doing to get there. So you have to balance your desire. Think of any skill you've mastered in the past. It could be cooking or carpentry or a sport. How did you get good at it? You wanted to be good, but if you just sat there thinking about how much you'd like to be a really good sportsperson, that wouldn't have accomplished anything. Or if you wanted to be really good cook, sitting there thinking about how much you'd like to create great dishes wouldn't have accomplished anything, either. To become a good cook, you went into the kitchen and found some ingredients. You got out a cookbook, and you tried making something. Then you tasted it.

The tasting is where the element of intent comes in. You have to really taste it carefully, to see what taste is right. Is it too salty or does it not have enough salt?

Did you overcook it? Did you undercook it? If you pay careful attention, you can tell. There are people whose tongues are so finely trained that they can taste immediately what the ingredients were, how hot the heat was over which the dish was cooked, simply because they've learned how to refine their sensation of taste. And it's a skill that can be developed.

Here as a meditator, you want to become very skilled at being more sensitive to the breath in the body and more sensitive to the movements of your mind. Again, that takes effort, and the effort, too, has to be balanced. If your effort is too sluggish, nothing much happens. If it's too strong, you wear yourself out and get discouraged. So you try to maintain a balance in your effort, which doesn't always mean a middling effort. Sometimes you really do have to try very hard when the mind is extremely rebellious. There are times when you have to come down strong on it. Other times, the effort is hardly an effort at all. You just watch what's going on.

The test here is essentially that you try to see what works and what doesn't work, and then learn from what you've done. How do you learn? One, by paying careful attention, and two, by learning how to analyze what you're doing. Again, we're often told that analysis is something you want to shy away from during your meditation. And it's true that if you analyze things too much, you destroy the meditation because you're thinking too much. But if you don't think at all, don't observe at all, don't ask questions, the meditation doesn't go anywhere.

So try to be a connoisseur. Try to be a master of your breath. If you control it too much, it's going to get uncomfortable. But if you just let it just do its own thing, that doesn't accomplish much either. Try to figure out what kind of breathing would feel best right now. Pose that question in the mind and see how the body responds. After a while, you began to gain a sense of what works and what doesn't work. If nothing much seems to be happening, you can start consciously asking questions: How about longer breathing? Try longer breathing for a while. What about deeper breathing? See what deeper breathing does for a while.

Progress in the meditation depends on learning how to observe what you've done and make adjustments. This requires that there will be times when you simply stay with one task that you assign yourself, like being with the breath for the time being. Don't ask too many questions. Just try to settle in. Then, when you've settled in, you can start asking questions. Does your concentration feel comfortable? Doesn't feel too strained? If it's too strained, loosen your grip a bit. If you have trouble settling down, maybe you should be stricter with yourself and not allow yourself to wander off.

There are people who come to meditation wanting simply to be told what to do. They want to find a great master who will take one look at them and tell them precisely what they need to do to meditate, so they don't have to think. They're not responsible. But there's no way that insight is going to develop that way. Insight comes from your ability to look at what you've done and to decide whether it's skillful or not—or, if it's somewhat skillful, how it might be more skillful.

So learn to balance the times when you simply focus on the breath without asking too many questions, aside from asking yourself what kind of breathing would feel good now, and then after you've able to settle in, you can start asking questions. It's a combination of the doing and the asking questions that's going to bring progress in the practice. You balance your desire so that it's not too strong, not too weak. You balance your effort so that it's not too strong, not too weak. The same with the intentness you bring to the practice and the way you analyze things so that you come to understand them. Try to find the right balance and then maintain that balance. As with any balancing act, you can expect to fall over every now and then. But you just learn to pick yourself up and then try once more.

This is a skill we're developing here. We're not trying to clone anybody's insights. The Buddha's way of teaching was not to tell you what you're supposed to see. He has you ask questions and learn to look for yourself.

There is a problem. Sometimes we hear that the Buddha's insight means seeing that everything is impermanent or that there is no self in the world, so you force yourself to see things in that way. It's as if someone told you that if you see everything as blue, you're going to be happy. So you can play these tricks on your mind and force yourself to see everything as blue. But does that mean those things are really blue? No. That's what happens when you try to clone other people's insights. You can end up with distorted perceptions. Even though they seem to fall right in line with what the books say, they can still be wrong.

The Buddha's way is to have you ask questions. It's as if he were organizing a treasure hunt, saying that there's something really valuable over in the yard next door, and it has these general characteristics. This is how you can test it. Suppose he says there's gold over there, and these are the tests for gold. He gives you a few hints on how to look for it. Then you go and you look. If you come across something that looks like gold, you test it to make sure it's not fool's gold. When it passes the test and satisfies you that it really is gold, then you've got something special. It comes from learning to ask the right questions and to have the right standards for judgment.

In this case, the Buddha says there is a deathless element in the mind, something that doesn't change. When you develop states of concentration, mind states of peace, states of well-being, first you learn to maintain them and then you look at them, to see: Is this still totally without disturbance? Is there any hint of something inconstant? Any hint of stress, or any hint of something that's beyond your control? If there is, it means you haven't found the gold yet.

So you look more carefully. Try to find something that's even more refined, more steady, then you test it again. Keep asking these questions and putting the fool's gold aside, and ultimately you find that there really is gold in here. And when you find it, you know. It's not because you cloned somebody else's ideas, simply that you knew where to look, how to look well, how to look carefully, and how to ask the right questions. The Buddha calls this appropriate attention: looking at the right things and asking the right questions about them. He says that this is the most important factor for awakening.

So we start out with the breath, learning how to look at the breath, learning how to ask questions about the breath, so that the process of breathing becomes more than a simple physical processes keeping you alive. It becomes something that's really refreshing. What kind of breathing would feel refreshing right now? What kind of breathing would feel blissful? Pose the question and see what happens. The more refreshing the breath, the more blissful the breath, then the easier it will be for the mind to settle in, and the concentration can start doing its work. Concentration is a really important part of the path that's often overlooked. It's the part of the path that heals the mind.

Many times you come to meditation with a sense of being worn out, at your wit's end, frazzled, exhausted. So breathe in a refreshing way, breathe in a comfortable way, in a nourishing way. After a while, the mind will settle in, and both body and mind will begin to feel refreshed. When you're refreshed and nourished like this, it's a lot easier for the mind to look at things in an unbiased way.

The concentration is necessary, but sometimes it takes time to do its work. So give it that time, give it space. Don't think that you're sitting around doing nothing. The fact that you can bring the mind to a state of ease means you're beginning to gain some insight already.

The Buddha once said there's no discernment without strong concentration, and there is no strong concentration without discernment. In other words, you need to have some understanding of what's going on in the mind before you can get it to settle down. And the understanding comes from trial and error.

So focus on being with the breath. After a while, you may find that there's a problem. The mind doesn't settle down the way you want it to. Okay, ask: Why is it? It might have to do with the way you focus. So you can try changing your focus to a different part of the body. It might have to do with the breath. Maybe the breath is too much controlled, too much confined. Think of it as being more spacious. Think of the whole body breathing in and out. The pores of your skin are like the pores of a sponge. As you breathe in, the breath comes in from all directions, down from the top, up from the bottom, around from all sides. See what that does, if the body feels a greater sense of ease and well-being. If it does, then keep that up. The more curious you get about the present moment, the more you can learn. Get curious about the process of breathing. There's a lot to explore here, a lot to learn.

So if you bring the right attitude—in other words, the willingness to watch what you're doing, to make adjustments to see what's causing stress and what's not—that attitude will take you far.