

## *Take Care of Your Tools*

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The things we do in the practice—learning to be generous, virtuous, developing concentration, even developing discernment—are all tools, means to an end. One of our problems is that once we understand that they're tools, we tend not to take very good care of them. We think, "It's just a tool. I'm using it for the sake of something else," and you keep looking down the road for what's going to come next.

This is a cultural problem as much as anything else, because if you go to traditional societies, you find that people who work with tools take very good care of their tools. If you have a knife, you sharpen your knife, and keep it sharp. If you have a bow and arrow, you keep them clean. In fact, when people in ancient societies made their bows and arrows and all their other hunting tools, they put a lot of care into them, more than would be needed just to make them functional.

So we have to relearn some of those habits of really looking after our tools. Like the practice of concentration we're doing right now: We know it's a tool, we know it's not an end in and of itself, but because it is a tool on our way to true happiness, we should take good care of it.

The Buddha talks about finding an object that the mind can settle down with, one that you find congenial, and you direct your thoughts to it. You evaluate it, which means that you adjust it until it's just right. Then you settle in. In fact, he says you can indulge in the pleasure that comes from that concentration. In the case of the breath, this means working with the breath and developing a real interest in this breath energy in the body. That's something that in our culture we don't talk much about. You hear about *chi* or *prana*, and it sounds pretty exotic, but essentially it's the energy flow that you already feel in the body. It's something that's very direct. In fact, it's your immediate experience of the body.

It sounds exotic because our culture doesn't recognize it as energy. But that doesn't mean that it's something that you can't immediately experience. It's useful to take the Buddha's analysis of the body into four properties—earth, water, wind and fire—and not just dismiss them as being medieval chemistry or medieval physics. They're ways of describing how you experience the body from within. Try to get to know the body in those terms, because it's a very useful vocabulary to have.

Try to find a way of relating to the energy that feels good, feels refreshing, feels nourishing. And don't be afraid of getting attached to the concentration. As

Ajaan Fuang used to say, you have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well: looking for every chance to get in touch with the breath, looking for every chance to get the mind to settle down.

Whatever comes up in the course the concentration, there's nothing that can't be fixed or can't be solved. Strange sensations in the body? Step back and look to notice how you're breathing, notice where you're putting too much pressure on the breath. Images coming into the mind? Just because there's an image in the mind and it's coming in a way that's very uncanny doesn't mean it's true. If you find it unsettling or disturbing, breath deep down into the heart a couple of times and it'll go away.

If you suddenly find yourself outside of the body, just think about those four properties again. Start with breath and go through fire, water, earth. Fire is the warmth. Water is the sense of cool sensations of the body. Earth is the solidity. Do that, and you'll find yourself back in the body.

As for whatever conceit may come up around the practice, remember that there's healthy conceit and unhealthy conceit. As long as you're warned ahead of time, you have the tools for undoing the unhealthy conceit. Unhealthy conceit is thinking that you've made yourself better than other people because you've got this concentration, or because you have some form of knowledge—whatever's come up. The Buddha has you remind yourself that once you have that kind of thought, then the basis for the thought, the basis for your claim, has disappeared and turned into something else.

In other words, if you think, "I've got this great stage of concentration and I'm better than that person over there," just that thought, in and of itself, takes you out of the concentration. So you have to be careful about that.

The issue is not so much whether you're better than someone else as it is how good you are at overcoming your own defilements, how good you are at figuring out where you're still causing stress or suffering and what you can do about it. Those are the issues that are worthwhile to focus on.

So whatever comes up in the course of the concentration, there's always a cure for it. And it's not that difficult, especially if you stay with the breath. That's one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee focused on the breath in all his books, because it's the safest object of meditation you can find. It keeps you centered in the body with a balanced sense of ease and well-being. And that ease and well-being are your measuring stick. If things start feeling really strange and weird, or very uncomfortable, you step back for a bit and ask yourself, "Okay, where is the breath in here? How can I keep the breath easy?"

Some of the weird things may have to do with the sensations of rapture. Your

body feels very large or very small. Or your head may seem very large and your body small, or vice versa.

You just keep reminding yourself in states like that, “Okay, how is the breath?” If the breath feels okay, then these other sensations will pass pretty quickly. Just don’t leave the breath to go into the rapture, or leave the breath to go into whatever sense of ease comes up. The ease is there. You don’t deny it. In fact, you actually try to make use of it, and allow it to spread through the body. But your attention to the breath is what keeps that ease going. So you don’t want to lose touch with the breath.

So indulge yourself with the sense of well-being that comes with breathing well and staying focused on the breath. Ask yourself which part of the body seems to be starved of breath energy. Sometimes it’s in the throat. Sometimes it’s in down in the intestines, or maybe in your arms and legs. Even if you don’t feel much in terms of the breath energy, hold that image in mind: that the breath can go there. Simply holding that image in mind will change the way the breath actually is able to flow.

As you get more and more sensitive, you realize that there is breath energy there already. It’s simply that you hadn’t been labeling it properly. Then you can settle in and as the Buddha says, settle in, indulge. Don’t be afraid of what they call the dangers of concentration. There are other things in life that are a lot more dangerous. When you don’t have concentration, where are you going to look for happiness? You’re going to look for happiness in sensual pleasures. And there’s lots of danger there. All the unskillful things that people do around sensual pleasures are a lot more dangerous than the dangers of concentration.

At the other end of the spectrum, the big danger is believing you’ve reached awakening when you haven’t. Sometimes people mistake states of concentration or the ease that comes when the mind is feeling expansive as a foretaste of awakening. Concentration is part of the path, not a foretaste of the goal. But the danger there isn’t there with the concentration. The danger is with your interpretation of it. It gets even worse when you’ve got a teacher who tells you, “Oh, this is stream entry” or whatever. That’s a lot more damaging than the dangers that come from concentration. The dangers of concentration are way over-blown.

The real danger, as Ajaan Fuang used to say, is that you don’t really get into it.

So realize that it’s a tool, it’s not an end unto itself, but as any genuine craftsperson you want to take really good care of it. Take good care of your breath; take good care of the stillness of your mind.

Learn to appreciate the sense of well-being that comes with the concentration.

Don't be in a hurry to rush through it on your way to something you think might be better.

Sometimes you hear people say that the path is the goal. Of course, the Buddha never said that, but he did say that you really want to work on developing the path. It's in developing the path that you find the goal. So you don't look anywhere else. You look right here, at the mind developing concentration. Because the things you need to understand—the five aggregates, the processes of fabrication—are all happening right here. It's just a matter of getting more sensitive to them right here. And how are you going to do that? By taking very good care of your concentration right here.

If you look after your tools, your tools will look after you.