

Bojjhanga: Discernment Fosters Concentration

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When the Buddha taught meditation to his son, he taught him breath meditation. But even before he taught breath meditation, he taught him a few things to think about: how to think about inconstancy and about not-self.

This may be surprising. We tend to think of those themes as themes of discernment that you use after the mind has settled down. But there are times when you need to think before the mind can settle down. You've got to think in the right way. If you're thinking in the wrong way, you can't just put a stop to your thinking. In other words, if you're thinking in ways that tend to branch out and create more thoughts—and then, more thoughts based on that—you need some tools to put an end to the process. You need thoughts to counteract your thoughts.

That's what the teachings on inconstancy and not-self are for. As you're trying to get the mind settled down, whatever you're thinking about that's not related to the breath, you've got to realize it's not going to last. And you're not going to last. Sometimes you make plans for tomorrow, next week, or whatever, and who knows? You may not live to see tomorrow or next week, at least not in this body. And that, right there, can put a stop to things.

Or the things you plan and try to execute: You realize there are a lot of things that are beyond your control, which is what not-self essentially is all about. So why not work on things that *are* under your control? After all, you don't know what you'll need to do in order to prepare for next Monday or next Wednesday because there's no guarantee that your plans for next Monday or next Wednesday are going to come about. But you do know that whatever you're going to do, you need mindfulness. You need alertness. And you need qualities of ardency and discernment. Thinking about that brings you back to the breath, where you can develop those qualities.

This is one of the ways in which discernment leads to concentration. You see this in the different sets of the wings to awakening. In some of them, concentration comes before discernment. But in others, like the seven factors for awakening, you've got discernment first and then concentration. The discernment there is analysis of qualities. Now the analysis here doesn't have to be very elaborate, just the recognition that some qualities in the mind are skillful and others are not skillful, based on whether they give good results.

So this is another one of the ways you can analyze your thoughts to bring the mind into concentration. Just see where they're going. The Buddha describes this in one of his suttas when he says he got on to the path when he realized that instead of judging his thoughts in terms of their content, he tried to judge them in terms of what mental state was provoking them and where they were going to lead.

If they were provoked by sensual desire, ill will, or harmfulness, they were going to lead in a bad direction. If they were provoked by the opposite of these qualities—renunciation, goodwill, and compassion—then, at the very least, they wouldn't be harmful. But then he realized if you thought about good things like that for a long time it wouldn't cause any harm, but it would tire the mind out. And the recognition that the mind needs to rest after developing skillful thoughts is what brought him into concentration.

So analysis of qualities is basically that kind of analysis. When you step back from your thoughts, you say, "Where are they going?" Look at thinking as karma—not as pictures of the world as it really is, but as an activity of the mind thinking about the world. It gives you a different perspective on your thoughts. You can step back and see: Where do these lead? What are they useful for? Are they really useful?

Ajaan Chah has a nice comment in one of his talks. He says you want to look after yourself. And what does it mean to look after yourself? You keep watching yourself to see when you're lying to yourself, because you could lie your way into all kinds of conclusions. But it's when you take the attitude of really being serious about your thinking and earnest about wanting true happiness: That's when you can start catching some of the lies.

You say, "I've got to think about this. I've got to think about that. If I don't think about it now, I won't be dealing with things in time." For the time being, you've got to put that kind of thinking aside. I mean, there are times, of course, when you do have to get things done. There are deadlines, and you have to make sacrifices for them. But right now, as you're meditating, put that thinking aside. The only thinking that's useful is the thinking that puts a stop to the thoughts.

That's what right effort is, or the quality of persistence that builds on analysis of qualities. It's the persistence that gets the mind to begin to settle down. That's how you get to the qualities of rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. In other words, you get the mind to be willing to put its thoughts aside. And then you can be with the breath. And it's through working with the breath that you can create that sense of refreshment or rapture, which in some cases may be strong, and in other cases may be weaker. But it gives you a sense of "I'm here

where I belong and it feels good.” And there’s an energy that comes with that. After the energy has brought things into balance, then you can be calm and concentrated.

So if you find that you have trouble settling the mind down, maybe you need to do a little thinking first about the processes of thinking—the kind of thinking that puts an end to your thoughts, with the kind of discernment that brings you to concentration. These two processes, concentration and discernment, have to go together. You have to understand the mind to a certain extent to get it to settle down. And to see things really clearly, the mind needs to be still. So you use what discernment you’ve learned in the past or learned from Dhamma talks and apply it to stilling the mind. Then, once the mind is still, you can start seeing things for your own.

This point is made again and again in the teachings of the ajaans. Ajaan Maha Boowa devoted a whole book to the theme of discernment fostering concentration because that goes against the usual textbook explanation, which is that first you do virtue, then you do concentration, and only then you think about discernment. But as Ajaan Mun pointed out—and Ajaan Lee copies this down in *The Craft of the Heart*—all three of these qualities have to help one another along. Your virtue is not going to be pure until you’ve got some concentration and discernment. Concentration isn’t going to be solid unless there’s some discernment.

And even in the sets of the wings to awakening that put discernment at the end, discernment is what solidifies everything else. The Buddha’s image is of a roof under construction. You put the rafters up, and then you put the ridgepole on top of the rafters. And until the ridgepole is in place, the rafters—even though they’re there in place—are not all that secure. The ridgepole on top of them is what secures the rafters below. It’s the same with discernment. The type of discernment that comes after mindfulness and after concentration is what solidifies all the qualities of the practice.

So remember what discernment is. It’s the ability to see your mental processes *as* mental processes—to step out of the worlds of your thoughts and see the process of world-building in the mind—and then, developing a sense of dispassion for it.

You realize you’d be better off right now to get the mind still and drop those thoughts so that the mind can gain the benefits that come from being centered, having a sense of refreshment and calm inside, to heal the mind and to prepare it for even deeper insights.