

Conditions for Concentration

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The ajaans often talk about bringing the right attitude to the meditation. Ajaan Suwat would talk about bringing an attitude of confidence, glad that you're here, inspired by the fact that you have time to focus on your mind and do some inner work that's unrelated to the drudgery of the world. You can lift your mind above its ordinary concerns. Ajaan Lee, when he talks about settling down in concentration, has one point where he says that before you focus on the breath, you can contemplate the three perceptions, you can contemplate the body, all kinds of things to get the mind in the right mood. The right mood is one that's sober, but joyful.

Now, you may say, "I came to the meditation because I want the meditation to *make* me joyful," but there are ways you can bring joy to the meditation. In fact, the Buddha talks about how once there is a feeling of joy, it grows into rapture. The rapture grows into calm. The calm grows into concentration, right in line with the lineup in the factors for awakening.

So what comes before joy and rapture? Right effort. The Buddha talks about some of the conditions that can give rise to that kind of joy, and they basically come down to two things—the factors that he said are most useful for gaining awakening: the internal factor, which is appropriate attention; and the external factor, which is admirable friendship.

With the internal factor, you look into your mind and you see that there are unskillful things going on there and yet you don't give in to them. You're able to pull yourself out a little bit and remind yourself: "This is an unskillful habit here. And because it's unskillful, I don't have to do it." The mind may give you all kinds of reasons for why you've got to think in those unskillful ways: "You've been thinking in those ways for who knows how long, and that's the way your mind is." But one of the Buddha's most important discoveries is that the mind doesn't have to stick to its old habits or believe its old reasons.

We have an element of free choice here in the present moment. You can say, "I'm going to give that up. It may not be forever, but I'm going to give it up for now." This can apply to the hindrances, or to what they call the *upakkilesas*: things like greed, anger, antagonism, dismissiveness, stubbornness, deceit, intoxication, heedlessness. If you can identify any of these traits in your mind, you can say, "For the time being, I'm just going to drop that. I'm not going to go there." And you see that you can actually drop it.

I remember once overhearing Ajaan Fuang teaching some lay people. He'd have them meditate, and sometimes he'd actually engage them in conversation while they were meditating. He could see what was going on in their minds, and he would tell them what to do next. I was listening from the next room, and I kept hearing him say to this one woman, "Drop it." And she'd say, "I can't." He'd say, "Yes you can." "No I can't." "Yes you can." And so she dropped it. The next thing I knew, she was bowing down to him. I'd really like to know what she had dropped.

One of our biggest enemies is our attitude, "I can't drop this. It's such a deeply ingrained habit." But you don't have to drop it forever. Drop it right now, because if you believe that you can't drop it until you've rooted it out, you're never going to get to the root. Remind yourself that it's good even if you can just cut it off at ground level. It may sprout again, but at least for the time being your mind will be free from that weed, and you can enjoy the fact that it's gone. It may try to come back, but you say, "No, I don't need you." And that can give rise to a sense of joy. From the joy comes rapture, and then from rapture, calm and concentration. That's a case where appropriate attention can give rise to a sense of joy, and from that joy it leads naturally to getting the mind to settle down.

Then there's admirable friendship. The Buddha talks about how living in a community where people are harmonious is helpful for concentration. They get along. They treat one another with affection. In his words, "They mix together as milk and water." In a community like that, it's easy to feel a sense of joy. We're working on something together. Our values are together; our precepts are together. That can give rise to the joy that would then allow the mind to settle down into concentration.

In other places, he goes more into specifics. You get to discuss the Dhamma. You get to listen to the Dhamma. And again, listening to the Dhamma is like that exchange between Ajaan Fuang and the woman: You get to work directly on your mind.

The Buddha talks about qualities you can develop. You can be mindful and when you look in your mind, you can see, "Oh yeah, there's mindfulness." You can be alert. "Yeah, there's alertness." You can be ardent. "Yes, I'm trying hard." Okay, you've got what you need. So you work on maintaining those three things. As you work on them, there's a sense of joy, in that the Dhamma's pointing right at your mind. It's not pointing you far away. Even when the Buddha's talking about kamma and the way it plays itself over huge cycles of time, he ends his discussion by saying, "All these events come from kamma. And where is kamma being made? Right here, right now, in the choices you're making right here, right

now.” So even something as big as the course of the cosmos comes back to what you’re doing right now.

So you do it. You do it right. You don’t make it difficult for yourself. You don’t put up obstacles. You’re willing to go along with the Dhamma. And you start seeing results. The results give rise to joy. From joy there’s rapture, and so on down the line.

This, by the way, explains why some people can gain awakening while they’re listening to the Dhamma. You may know from what you’ve read that you need all eight factors of the path for there to be awakening. Some people say, “But how can you have right concentration when you’re listening to the Dhamma?” It’s precisely in this way. You listen to the Dhamma in a way that allows you to see how it applies to you. You’re applying appropriate attention at that same time that you’re enjoying the fruits of having admirable friendship. You’re seeing how the Dhamma applies to what you’re doing as you’re getting the mind to settle down.

And, as the Buddha said, the ideal state of mind to bring to a Dhamma talk is confidence. You don’t look down on the Dhamma. You don’t look down on the speaker. You don’t look down on yourself. You’re confident that you can do this. Then you gather your mind right there—make it *ekagga*, or gathered into one—and apply appropriate attention. When the Dhamma talk says to abandon unskillful qualities, you look to see—have you got anything unskillful in here? Yes. Well, you can abandon it. Just drop it. Don’t make a big deal out of it. Don’t make it hard. Then you can see that the mind is a lot more refreshed and open without that unskillful quality. When the talk mentions developing skillful qualities, okay, you work on those. You begin to see that they’re giving results. That, too, can give rise to joy.

As the mind settles down, you get into concentration. That multiplies the joy, deepens the concentration, makes it more and more the kind of concentration that’s appropriate for going deeper into the mind, developing the discernment that can go deeper. This is why some people are able to gain awakening while they listen to a Dhamma talk.

So remember, the Buddha didn’t just teach a technique. He never said, “Just do the technique, and that’ll take care of everything.” I don’t know how many times I hear people saying, “Well, just do this mindfulness technique, or this noting technique, or whatever. Just bring non-reactive awareness to everything in life, and you’ll be okay.” It doesn’t work that way. Those methods are concentration techniques, but you also need ways of thinking to develop discernment, ways of evaluating what’s going on in your mind. There’s a whole

teaching on kamma, in which the causal principle of kamma is not just causes coming in from the past, but also, and more importantly, the decisions you're making right now. If you really believe in that, you can make use of it. You focus on the decisions you're actually making. And, as you make use of it, you see the results right here, right now.

So remember these principles.

This is how you get the mind into concentration, not just doing the technique, but also having the right values, having the right assumptions, taking advantage of admirable friendship, trying to be an admirable friend, creating an atmosphere of harmony, in which people can discuss the Dhamma and feel a sense of joy from the discussion.

Then you can take the Dhamma and use it to chip, chip, chip away at each instance of an unskillful state coming up in the mind. You can appreciate how good it is to be able to do that. The more you appreciate the value of just saying No to something unskillful, and saying Yes to working with something skillful: The more you appreciate that, the greater the rewards are going to be.

So use these principles to bring the right attitude to the meditation. The meditation will develop, and it'll deepen your conviction in the right attitudes so that both the values and the technique will grow together.