

The Guarantee of Concentration

March 29, 2005

When you're trying to listen to a piece of music and get all the subtleties, you want things to be very quiet. And it's the same with the mind. If you want to see the subtleties of the mind, you want everything to be very quiet both inside and out.

In the beginning, it's especially important to have things quiet outside. But eventually you develop the ability not to get distracted by the outside disturbances, because you've found that the real issue is being quiet inside. All the voices of greed, anger, and delusion can sneak in on the mind because there's a background noise or there are background noises. The only way you get to see them when they're still small, when they're just getting started, is to make sure the inner background noise gets as quiet as possible.

This is why concentration practice is so important. You can't see anything in the mind unless the mind is very still. You can see some things, but you see only the blatant things, and even those you see in bits and pieces. But if you want to really hear the voices in your mind—what they're saying, when they begin to collude with greed or anger or delusion—you've got to get things very, very still. This is the foundation. All the skills of meditation depend on good solid concentration.

And it's the case that you practice it for a while and then, when you move on to insight practice, you can drop the concentration. You're providing the foundation for insight, you're providing the context, the environment for insight to happen when you get the mind to stay still. And then you've got to maintain that environment for the insights to keep coming.

Look at this as a means of creating a home for the mind. In the beginning it may seem difficult because the mind is used to wandering around. It's used to chattering to itself all the time and believing its chatter. I saw a bumper sticker one time that said, "Don't believe everything you think." And that's an important maxim for your meditation. Just because there's a voice chattering in the mind doesn't mean you have to believe it or to identify with it, saying, "This is my voice, I've got to listen to it," or, "I've got to straighten it out if it's not the way I like it." You've got to learn how to look at these things with a certain amount of detachment.

And the commentary that the mind runs all the time: You have to learn how to be a little bit leery of it. The mind is so quick to make comments on things.

When you're getting the mind into a state of concentration you're stepping back a bit, you're not singing along with the voices in the mind. You're just listening, you're just watching. And the more stable your position of watching can be, the more you see their movements, the more you see their tricks.

This requires not just stillness, but also the quality of patience. That has to develop in the concentration, too. When the mind creates a comment, you have to say, "Wait and see, wait and see, wait and see." For those of us who want things instantly packaged and instantly explained, it's frustrating to be told, "Just go back to your breath, go back to your breath." But the going back to the breath is important. It's part of that quality of developing patience. Wait and see. Don't be too quick to jump to conclusions. Don't believe everything you think, even if the thought comes bubbling out of your concentration.

As you learn how to wait, the place where you're waiting has to become your home. This is the trick to being patient. If you're constantly in a state of tension and unrest, patience is difficult because you're having to maintain a mental position that's not very stable and requires a lot of energy. But when you get this sense of being at home with the stillness, at home with the breath, patience becomes a lot easier. The mind isn't so excitable.

Because one of *the* big lessons in meditation is that you shouldn't believe the first thing that comes into your mind. First thought is not always best thought. Something happens and you say, "Wow! This is great! This must be really good." Well, how do you know? You have to watch it for a while to see what the long-term results are.

All too often *the* big mistake in meditation is thinking that you've attained a certain level of awakening and then you build up an identity around being an awakened person, or being a person who's attained jhana or whatever. And then, because your identity is built up around that idea, it feels very threatened when the idea's called into question. But if your stance is, "Wait and see," then you're safe.

So the concentration not only enables you to see things but also enables you to see them long-term, to see the connection between cause and effect in the mind and to evaluate what's happening. After all, evaluation is one of the important elements of meditation, and it's worthwhile only when you give it time.

So do your best to get comfortable in the present moment, because it's a place you want to stay. Even the Buddha maintained mindfulness, maintained concentration as his dwelling-places. A passage in the Canon talks about four establishings of mindfulness and the four jhanas as places where arahants like to hang out as pleasant abidings, as places where they can see clearly what's going on

in the mind. If any of them have psychic powers, this is where they have to access those powers: through the concentration.

So don't think of concentration as a step you have to rush through. It's a place where you're going to settle down. And the more familiar you get with it, the more you *want* to stay here, too. There's a shift in the center of gravity that makes the mind more stable, less agitated, able to see things more clearly—to adopt that attitude of wait and see, really able to wait and really able to see, so that the insights you gain are reliable.

Sometimes you hear of people who've gained awakening without strong powers of concentration. Well, how do they know? I must admit I'm always leery of these accounts. A little bit of concentration develops and they're told, "Let it go, don't get attached to it." Well, that's not what the Buddha taught. Concentration is part of the path, and the path is something to be developed, maintained, nurtured, a place you want to stay.

Then, when you're there, you're really in a position where you can evaluate what's coming up in the mind: to see whether it really is good or not, to see whether it really is what you think it is or not, over the long term.

So solid concentration is a large part of the guarantee of what you learn as you meditate.