

The Uses of Right Concentration

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It takes a fair amount of effort to get the mind into right concentration—so much so, that many of us don't want to hear that there's still more to be done. We'd rather stop right here and rest. But while it may be true that right concentration is the last factor of the path, that doesn't mean that right concentration by itself finishes the job. You have to bring the other factors of the path to bear on it again to carry things all the way through.

When the Buddha talks about right concentration and its seven requisites, part of the meaning of “requisite” is that you have to develop the first seven factors of the path, such as right view and right resolve, in order to get the mind into right concentration to begin with. But it also means that, once you've attained right concentration, you continue applying all seven factors to it: in particular, to further develop mindfulness and alertness, along with the right view that puts an end to all your defilements and actually gets you to the goal.

Remember that when the Buddha gave his first Dhamma talk, all he talked about in detail was right view. He mentioned the eight factors of the path but then focused just on the first factor, right view about suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. That was enough for Ven. Añña Kondañña to experience the Dhamma eye, the first level of awakening. We can assume that Añña Kondañña followed through from right view to develop the other factors of the path, too—because, after all, the Buddha said that you can't attain the first level of awakening without developing all eight factors. But Añña Kondañña's case shows how crucial right view can be.

Ven. Sariputta's was a similar one. He heard a very short verse that boiled right view down to its most basic terms—that whatever has a cause will end when the cause ends—and there he was: He experienced the deathless. We're not as sharp and as quick-witted as either of these two, so we have to put a lot more work into getting the mind into right concentration and then applying the other factors to that concentration to get the same kinds of results. That's why we have to learn about how to *use* concentration to complete the work.

The Buddha talks about the four proper uses of concentration, or in his terms, the four developments of concentration. Some people interpret this as meaning that you have to develop four different kinds of concentration, with jhana as only one of the four, but when you look at the passages in the Canon where the Buddha talks about working beyond concentration, in every case it's a matter of getting the mind into any one of the four jhanas and then working from there.

The first use for concentration is as a pleasant abiding. In other words, you get into jhana and you just stay there. You settle in. All too often at this point, when we know that there are steps beyond concentration, we get antsy and say: “Well, now that we've got the mind to settle down, what's next?” Here it's important to tell yourself, “This is what's next. Just keep on doing what you are doing so you get really familiar with it.”

One of the reasons for just staying here is that you can nourish the mind in this way. The mind often comes to the practice in a very frazzled state and needs to be soothed. It needs to be strengthened. Remember that concentration, as the Buddha said, is like food. So feed your

mind well because you need this nourishment to help you stick with the practice as a whole. Your ability to tap into a sense of wellbeing inside is what makes it easier to follow the precepts, easier to pull yourself out of sensual attachments, easier to do whatever is required.

So, as the Buddha often says: Settle in and *indulge* in the pleasure or the equanimity of that particular state of concentration. Learn to enjoy it. You'll find that this is something that you can really delight in. And you should try to notice that feeling of delight, because it's going to play an important role later when you use concentration to develop discernment. In the meantime, you use the delight to get good at your concentration. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, you have to be really crazy about the meditation in order to do it well. You have to be intrigued by the intricacies. Whatever gets in your way, tell yourself: "I want to figure out some way around this obstacle." Treat it as your sport, and be like someone who's really devoted to a sport, who wants to figure out and master all of the little problems and challenges, and finds that they are really engaging. You want to develop that same kind of engagement with your concentration.

The second use for concentration is for developing psychic powers. Now this, of the four uses, is the optional one—and you can't determine ahead of time that you're going to develop this power or that. These things may come, or they may not. As the Buddha says, they come when, after you've gotten the mind into concentration, there's an *opening* onto that particular power. It might be the ability to remember your previous lives, or to read other people's minds. Or the opening may never come. A number of the forest ajaans are famous for these abilities, whereas some of them seem to have had very few. As Ajaan Fuang says, Ajaan Lee had all of them except for the ability to levitate. This had a lot to do with his kamma: The kamma was what determined whether the opening came or not. The important thing is that if the opening comes for you, you have to ask yourself: What's the best use of this? Are you going to use the power to develop unskillful states of mind such as pride and conceit, or are you going to use it to develop dispassion?

This is where the other two uses for concentration come in. The first is to use the concentration to develop mindfulness and alertness, to see how physical and mental phenomena arise and pass away. The concentrated mind is a really good place to see the arising and passing away as it's happening. Sometimes this happens while you're staying in place. Sometimes it comes from simply moving from one level of concentration to another. You notice: "Oh, something changed here." The breath changed. Your perception changed. A feeling changed, from rapture to a more easeful pleasure, or from pleasure to equanimity.

As you get the mind in and out of concentration, try to notice these changes, because this skill enables you to notice how perceptions and feelings have an impact on your sense of your body and mind. They determine how you experience the breath, how you experience your body, how you experience yourself in the context of the world. So you want to be able to notice when these perceptions and feelings come, when they go, which particular perception or feeling has replaced an earlier one. Then you begin to notice other things about perceptions and feelings as well: When a particular perception is in your mind, what level of stress or disturbance accompanies it in the mind? Or in the body? When a particular feeling of pleasure comes, is it good for the mind or not?

When the Buddha talks about what he calls the entry into emptiness, you start out with a very normal state of mind: the mind that has left the village, has gone into the wilderness, and settles into a perception of "wilderness"—like what we're doing right now. We're sitting out

here, surrounded by the chaparral, surrounded by quiet. You can think back to when you were home, with your family and friends. The mind was a lot more disturbed then. Now you're here, away from them. What's the difference? If you wanted to, you could dig up the issues you've had with your family, you could still chew them over like a dog with a bone, but you don't. You can hold another perception in mind: that you're here, away from those things. They don't loom so large any more, and the mind is a lot lighter as a result. Right there you see the difference between the perception that tells you that you're among these people and that their issues are important, and the perception that you're away from them and the issues are not so important at all. These perceptions have a different impact on the level of disturbance in your mind.

So the perceptions don't just come and vanish like lines drawn in the water. They have an impact. You want to see that, so that you get a sense of which perceptions are skillful and which perceptions are not, by watching their coming and going, along with the rise and fall in stress that results from their coming and going. This, the Buddha said, is what helps foster mindfulness and alertness.

The final use of concentration goes deeper than that: You use the concentration to put an end to the mental effluents of sensuality, becoming, and ignorance. To do that, you want to see the origination and the passing away of the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. On the surface this may sound like the same sort of thing as developing mindfulness and alertness, but the word "origination" here signals something different. It points not to the fact that things come and go, but to the fact that they come *because of a reason*. That's the meaning of "origination," and the origination of the aggregates is the delight you take in them. It's because we delight in form, for example—we want form, we want to have this experience of the body—that we take the potentials for form, coming from our past kamma, and turn them into an actual experience of form. Whatever potential there is to augment that experience and to verify it, we go for it. We turn it into an actual experience. The same with feelings: We want feelings. And perceptions: We want to have perceptions. We want to be able to label and identify things. And there's a certain delight in all of this. The delight is what drives us to fabricate these things again and again. This applies to all of the aggregates. We fashion them into real experiences because we delight in them and in the process of fashioning and fabrication that we use to make them into something.

Where do you see this most clearly? In your own state of concentration. It's the same concentration, the same jhana you've been practicing, but now you're looking at it from a different angle and with a different purpose. You're trying to figure out how you fabricate it so that you can find something that's even better than the jhana, something that provides a happiness that doesn't have to be fabricated. So you apply perceptions—such as the perception of inconstancy, stress, or not-self—that dig out the delight that you find in the various aggregates as they make up the concentration: the form of the body; the feeling of pleasure or equanimity; the perceptions that hold you with the breath, or with space, or whatever the object may be; whatever verbal fabrications there may be around that, commenting on the concentration; and the consciousness of all these things. You apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to question the delight that you take in these aggregates that you're fabricating into jhana. Are they really worth it?

Now if your concentration isn't strong enough, then when you use this analysis, your concentration will fall apart and you'll be back in an ordinary mind state. Or you may slip into

another level of concentration. But if your concentration *is* strong enough, things fall apart in a different way. You realize: There must be something other than these fabricated states. The mind then turns toward not creating anything new. You don't want to stay where you are, but you don't want to go anywhere else, either, because that would be fabricated, too. You see that whatever activity or place you're going to create for the mind to stay just ends up with more of these aggregates. So how about something that's not created? Is that possible? And if things come together right, if the opening happens, you find that, Yes, it is possible. Everything fabricated falls apart and fades away. The Buddha was right. There really is an unfabricated, unconditioned happiness.

Of the different uses for concentration, this last is the most important, because it's what actually takes this last factor of the path and moves it on to the goal. That was the Buddha's whole purpose in using this image of a "path": It leads to something beyond the path. It has a goal that's different from the path. Don't believe people who say that the path is the goal, or that the path leads to right view. When they say that, it's a sign that they haven't experienced the goal. We don't practice for the sake of right view, or for the sake of right concentration, or for no sake at all. We fabricate and use these things as steps toward a goal that lies beyond them: the deathless, total freedom from fabrication, from suffering and stress. This is what makes everything else in the path, all the effort that goes into fabricating and mastering all the factors, worthwhile.

The Buddha doesn't talk much about the goal. After all, it's not something you can create, so there's no point in describing it too much, for otherwise you might try to take the description and clone it, which doesn't work. He talks about the goal just enough to make you understand that it's worth pursuing: the ultimate happiness, the ultimate freedom, totally outside of any physical or mental location in space or time. As he says, if you hold to a perception that the goal might be accompanied by any kind of suffering or regret, drop that perception. Don't listen to it. The deathless is totally satisfying and ends all your hungers. Once your hungers are satisfied, that solves all your other problems as well.

That's where this path is going. And it's the right path. Right view is right view; right resolve is right resolve; all the factors are right all the way down the line. They're right, not because the Buddha said they were right, but because they actually work, in the same way that, if you want milk, squeezing a cow's udder is the right way to get milk out of the cow. It gives you the results you want. If you try to get milk by squeezing the cow's horn, it's wrong—because it doesn't work. Right and wrong are really two different things because they give different results.

And the path is really noble—because it takes you to a goal that's noble: something not touched by aging, illness, or death. As the Buddha said, there are two kinds of search. There's the search for happiness in things that can age, or grow ill, and die. That's the ignoble search. And then there's the noble search for the things that lie beyond aging, illness, and death. Because the goal is noble, it makes the search noble. The path that succeeds in taking you there is noble as well.

When you put all the factors together properly, you become a noble person. But at that point you don't really care whether you're a noble person or not, because you've found something that's even more valuable than trying to figure out who you are, or what you are, or how you rank with regard to other people. Ajaan Suwat had a nice comment about this. He said that the whole issue of self and not-self becomes totally irrelevant when the goal is reached. You use the perception of self skillfully to fabricate the path to find happiness. You use the

perception of not-self to develop the dispassion needed to remove any desire to keep on fabricating experiences, so that there can be an opening to the unfabricated. But once there's an opening to that deathless dimension, you drop all perceptions, and there's the ultimate happiness. At that point, you don't worry about whether or not there's a self experiencing it or no self experiencing it, because the experience is there. And that's all you need.