

Wise Concentration

by Rebecca Dixon
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Tonight's talk is on Wise Concentration. This will be the last dharma talk in this series on the Eightfold Path, which many of you have followed as an 8-month course with practice guides and teacher support. I feel a little amazed to think we're really done, but of course we aren't. The Eightfold Path will continue to lead us to freedom, on a daily basis as well as toward an overall, potentially total Liberation from dukkha, or suffering.

Concentration is a necessary part of all forms of meditation. It enables us to control our attention, and so it's the means by which we cut off states of mind that torment us and cultivate those that deliver us to peace, joy and wisdom. As every-day as concentration is to practitioners, it can be very misunderstood. I cringe when I hear new students told to begin by "clearing their minds." It's like telling a very upset friend to "let it go." Only very rarely can anyone just jump into a clear mind, or having let something go. Both of these states are results of a process, and this instruction completely misconstrues that process.

We achieve concentration by *paying attention*. We do this during the day, either as part of our regular mindfulness meditation or daily life practice, or when something interests us. Interest is a wonderful fuel for concentration, so it should be encouraged. When we're mindful of doing some chore, we're focusing enough attention to identify what steps are involved in the task, and to execute those steps correctly. That's a form of concentration.

The kind of concentration which is the eighth part of the Path is different. It's concentration *practice*. It calls for deeper and more sustained concentration than is needed for mindfulness. This is the practice that clears the mind, but that isn't achieved by our *willing* that clarity into being. Instead, we take steps to create conditions that will cause the mind to clear. It's not magic, and it's also not something that happens just because we want it to.

This might be a good time to ask why we should concentrate. Another good time is after you've tried for half an hour and the mind is still jumping around like box full of rabbits. We do need to apply ourselves with enough energy and determination to outlast those hopping bunnies. But what for? Well, two reasons come to mind.

First, once achieved, concentration is wonderfully pleasant. It calms and clears the mind. This does for us what it did for the young Buddha-to-be when he accompanied his father on a business trip. While his father talked with some people, the boy sat relaxed and alert under a tree and just let go of any cares. That's the formula for concentration, being relaxed, alert, and letting go of clinging – at least in the moment. The young prince became so deeply concentrated, and felt such delightful peace, that the experience served as the guiding star of his practice. He knew it was possible to rest in such freedom and happiness, and he continued to work toward it until he achieved Nibanna – a permanent version of this state. The experience of deep concentration is a potent motivation to continue our practice. The second reason to practice concentration is that it can be a powerful tool cut out the root cause of *all our suffering*. Yeah. It's a big tool in the box.

There are two routes to end dukkha. There's the daily noticing of when dukkha arises, what it's like, what caused it and then, how it can be ended in the moment, rooting out layer by layer of harmful mental habits. We practiced this in the sixth part of the Path, Wise Effort. The other route uses very deep and sustained concentration to move the mind beyond its clinging to the delusion that we exist as a separate and continuous *thing*. I've used physics and English grammar to convey why that belief is a fallacy, by saying, "we are verbs, not nouns." In fact, though, this great truth defies any explanation. It helps to accept that it might be true, but to truly realize anatta, or not-self, it has to be experienced. Deep concentration can give rise to that experience.

In the Bāhiya Sutta, a highly respected, long-time practitioner went to the Buddha and asked how to be fully liberated. The Buddha tried to put him off till after the alms round was over, but Bahiya protested that he couldn't know how long he had to live, and felt the need to know at once. The Buddha instructed him, "When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress." Bāhiya got it, and was fully enlightened on the spot. As he walked away he was, indeed, killed by a cow, and the Buddha had the sangha honor Bāhiya as someone who was "totally unbound" – completely liberated from dukkha.

Now, Bāhiya had the best teacher ever, and enough practice and motivation to realize the truth behind the Buddha's words. Others of us need to soften the rigidity of our minds around the issue of anatta, and concentration can do that for us. I'll discuss more about how that's done in a little while.

Before I do that, let's look at how we *get* concentrated. It's a process, like training a puppy to settle down. You pick it up and physically sit it down, saying, "sit." Then you point to it and say, "stay." And you repeat this over and over until finally, the puppy stays. Then it gets up and you start over. This can be tedious and we're repeatedly tempted to declare the dog untrainable and give up. But we stay calm and patient and keep it up with "sit and stay."

In Pali, the word for telling the mind to sit is *vitakka*, and the word for stay is *vicara*. The mind, like the puppy, has to be told to "be here" on the breath. Sit the attention down on the breath. It takes determination to focus attention on the body breathing. Taking an *interest* in this breath that keeps us alive will help. So will the fact that focused attention is more *pleasant* than a jumpy mind. And finally we can use mental *exertion*. That's interest, pleasure and exertion. Once the mind is "sitting" on the breath, then it has to stay there. That means resisting any urges to move the attention elsewhere. Interest, pleasure and exertion will help in this effort, too. So that's *vitakka* – sit, and *vicara* – stay.

Let me note that there are many objects besides the breath to focus attention on. Bikkhu Bodhi mentions forty of them. Mostly I refer to holding attention on the sensations of *breathing*, but feel free to use what works for you.

It takes time and repeatedly coming back to the breath for the mind to finally just stay there. It also requires seclusion, away from interruptions, like on a retreat. This period of repeated sit-and-stay has been called the "surf zone." It's like we're trying to wade past an area of breaking waves that keep knocking us off balance. We try to stay focused and wham, another thought bumps our concentration off the breath. We put our attention back on the breath and settle back onto it. If we just keep doing this, eventually we get out deep enough that the waves weaken and stop. When we're past the surf zone, there are no more thoughts strong enough to interrupt the focus on the breath.

To get through the surf zone, a lot of people use will power and mental exertion, which is exhausting. It can also be counter-productive, keeping us too tense for the mind to settle

down, and wearing us out. Gil Fronsdal recommends we think about getting concentrated as a process of letting go of distractions, rather than forcing the mind to hold onto the breath. As we keep letting go, the mind gets lighter and lighter. We are relaxing into not thinking, resting on the breath.

I mentioned earlier that the formula for concentration practice was being “relaxed, alert, and letting go of clinging,” moment by moment. We’re settling into just being with the breath. This approach holds more relief, appeal and pleasure. This mental pleasure and the sense of well being are key ingredients in a sustained state of concentration. We can cultivate this mental pleasure by knowing it’s possible and noting when it arises. Like during a meteor shower, when we just stay alert for that instant of light zipping across the sky. It always pleases me to see that.

We can’t make meteors happen, and we can’t make the pleasure or contentment of concentration arise. But the more we notice when they do, the more they grow. They help bear us through the surf zone, and into a state of deep concentration. One such state is called Samadhi, which is very pleasant, very serene. In Samadhi, we’re no longer struggling to come back to the breath. Thoughts may arise but they don’t distract us. The hindrances may arise but they don’t break the peace. We’re like the young Buddha under that tree: happy in a way that requires nothing from the material world.

And there’s more! There are the jhanas. These are states of concentration that are self-sustaining and free of the hindrances. It may take quite a while wading through the surf zone to develop concentration to access the jhanas. For me, at first, it was a couple weeks of the surf zone before I experienced the first jhana. There are eight of them, arising as a process of refinement of the mind.

The first jhana includes some vitakka and vicara, and is accompanied by physical pleasure and happiness, in Pali piti and sukka. These elements sustain the jhana and unify the mind on the breathing, developing an unshakable confidence. The hindrances no longer arise and vitakka and vicara fall away.

We can then “enter and dwell” in the second jhana, filled with pleasure and happiness. For me piti, or rapture, is often so powerful that it can be pretty hard on my nervous system. In the third jhana the rapture drops off and the mind is just happy and equanimous. In the

fourth jhana the happiness blends into pure equanimity. So, as I said, these four jhanas get progressively refined.

There are some tremendous benefits to practicing with them. There's a kind of mythic air about the jhanas; when I started practicing Vipassana, Theravada teachers would barely talk about them and very few would lead students through them. Some serious, long time practitioners have never accessed the jhanas. But they are very real and more and more people are working with them. It's important to have guidance from a teacher because we can stray into delusion without it. With proper guidance, though, these deep states of mind can give rise to invaluable insights into the origins of our dukkha, and how to end it. These insights don't occur while we're in the jhanas but afterwards. Sometimes we may think the effects of our practice have worn off and not attribute the insights to it. Our new confidence in this practice, however, continues undiluted and without interruption.

There are four more jhanas, in which we practice refining the very way the mind perceives phenomena, and unifying awareness beyond ordinary modes of conceptualizing. That's a mouthful of big words meaning that we acquire very different ways of relating to... what is. This undercuts our clinging to the way we think of "I, me and mine." After this, we're still able to see "things" in the normal way, but we also know this other dimension of truth. And we're well on the way to liberation from all dukkha.

There's one more form of concentration I want to tell you about. So far we've covered:

- 1) those moments when the mind becomes concentrated during our daily meditation,
- 2) Samadhi, and
- 3) the jhanas.

This last form of concentration doesn't get mentioned often. It's a practice I've been doing as much as possible for several years now. Bikkhu Bodhi calls it "momentary concentration," and says it's a continuous, concentrated awareness of whatever enters the range of perception, clinging to nothing. Like the jhanas, this can lead to wisdom and "the last stage of the path." I intend to say more about that stage when I talk about Liberation on June 30.

There's so much more to learn about concentration. Very big books have been written by many people about it. I recommend that you learn by doing it. When I sought out Gil to be my main teacher and mentor, I told him that I wanted to develop concentration but I was being careful not to strive too hard. He suggested that I try just a little harder. ;-) So I applied

more energy to concentrating in my daily practice and went to longer retreats. Seclusion really is important for developing concentration. It can be at a retreat or in a camp in the woods, or a quiet room in your home or a daylong retreat. I have learned that the benefits of this practice are real, not just something written in a book by a scholar.

I have provided practice guidelines for the final part of the Eightfold Path, and they'll be available on line, too. You can add these exercises to your current practice to develop concentration, and use it to explore more deeply the truth of how things are.

Maybe practicing concentration in seclusion has no appeal to you, or it seems like a big investment in time to go on retreats. Mindfulness may be serving you well enough. That's fine. Really the best time to go on retreat to practice concentration is when you want to. Then you'll be ready. And on that day, I wish you the best the practice has to offer.

Thank you.