

## Concentration

Tonight we'll be continuing our series on the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha's prescription for the end of suffering. Two weeks ago, Adeesha introduced us to the Path and enumerated its parts:

1. Right View
2. Right Intention
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

These eight factors are grouped into three sections. Last week, Chris talked about the morality part of the path, which includes Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. This week I'll be talking about the part of the path dealing with concentration, or meditative practice: Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

As has been mentioned before, the Eightfold Path is not a sequence. All of these factors should be developed in concert. Because of this, it's hard to know where to start in discussing the path, but we started last week with moral behavior. So I'll start tonight with a few notes on how the practice of meditation is related to moral behavior.

Meditative practice and moral behavior naturally reinforce each other. On the one hand, basic morality is a necessary prerequisite to having any degree of success in meditation. This is one reason that we started this series by talking about morality, even though it comes second in the traditional order. Moral behavior has the effect of simplifying our lives. Immorality complicates things. As a simple example, think about lying. It's a well-known fact that if you tell one lie, you'll probably have to tell another one. The lies pile up, complexity ensues, and the kind of mental stability that you will need for mental concentration becomes unlikely if not impossible. A few years ago, a co-worker of mine (*not* here at IC!) asked me to teach her how to meditate. At the time, she was married and was having an affair with another man, who was also married. This situation caused her so much difficulty and created so much chaos around her that meditation was effectively impossible. She couldn't get a meditation practice off the ground.

Once you establish a meditation practice, it has the natural consequence of strengthening your morality. This in turn strengthens your meditation practice,

creating a very powerful synergy. The specific mechanism by which this happens is called mindfulness, which is the first of the three meditative factors that I'd like to talk about tonight.

## Right Mindfulness

I'd like to quote a brief passage from a book by Bhante Gunaratana.

“Mindfulness is paying moment-to-moment attention to what is. A mindful mind is precise, penetrating, balanced, and uncluttered. It is like a mirror that reflects without distortion whatever stands before it.”<sup>1</sup>

Those of you who have practiced breath meditation, even a little, know that one of the benefits of the practice is a clarity about what is going on in the mind. It allows us to catch a glimpse of the stream of thought that goes by all the time, but that we usually don't see because we're being swept along with it. One aspect of mindfulness is this quality of attention to the present moment, to what is.

Last week, Chris taught us about body meditation. This is a practice that has its roots in the *Sattipatthana Sutta* (MN 10), or the *Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. This *sutta* provides instructions for cultivating mindfulness in four specific areas, the first being the body. Incidentally, the *sutta* includes mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati*) under this heading, so when you're practicing mindfulness of breathing, that is in itself a kind of body meditation.

When we sit in meditation, we try to be aware of what is happening in the present moment. We try not to get caught up in dreams, fantasies, memories, plans, &c. But mindfulness is not just for the meditation cushion.

Another quote from Bhante Gunaratana:

“[Mindfulness] means more than just staying clear about what the mind is doing while we are sitting in meditation; it means clearly understanding every single physical and mental movement we make throughout every waking hour of every day.”<sup>2</sup>

There's a story about a teacher who, when he met with each of his students first thing in the morning, would ask them whether they had fallen asleep the night before during an in-breath or an out-breath. *That* is perfect mindfulness.

Obviously, perfect, 24/7 mindfulness is not an immediately realistic goal for most of us, but it's very simple to incorporate aspects of mindfulness into your everyday life. As a beginning, notice some of the things that you tend to do on auto-pilot and make an effort to perform those tasks mindfully: driving to campus, brushing your teeth,

drinking your morning coffee. Simple activities like these can become powerful opportunities to develop mindfulness.

So, getting back to the relationship between meditation and morality, you can see that the practice of mindfulness will inevitably lead to fewer ethical slips. When Chris was talking last week about Right Speech, he mentioned the situation of being in a heated argument when your mind suddenly thinks up some really devastating statement to hurl at your opponent. Strong mindfulness is the quality that will allow you to not say it.

## Right Concentration

Another aspect of meditative practice is Right Concentration. While mindfulness is something that we should practice all the time regardless of what we're doing, concentration is primarily of interest in our formal practice. Concentration is the quality of having your mind focused on one thing and keeping it there. As you've probably noticed, that's not easy.

Concentration, like everything, is a conditioned phenomenon. There are ways in which we can prepare the mind for meditation. We've heard Chris talk about the posture of meditation. Because our body and mind are tightly coupled, taking this posture is one way that we prepare our minds.

In addition to the physical posture, there are certain mental states that are conducive to good concentration. Some of these fall under the heading of Right Intention, which Adeesha will be discussing next week. But, very quickly, there are two states that are especially helpful: loving-kindness and contentment. So when you sit down to meditate, begin by thinking kind thoughts, both about yourself and others: "May I be happy and free from suffering. May all sentient beings be happy and free from suffering." This practice can be an entire meditation in itself, but in this context I'm just talking about a quick statement to yourself. This helps you to let go of any feelings of anger or hatred, which are deadly to concentration. The other mental state to cultivate is contentment. Briefly remind yourself that for the moment, there's nothing else that you need to have, do, or be. You're *here* now. We all have lots of stuff to do, but tonight you decided that you could afford an hour or so to devote to learning Dhamma and practicing meditation. Remind yourself that you can compose your grocery list, review the Calvin cycle, and figure out what to get your mom for her birthday later on. For now, just be here. This cultivates a feeling of contentment with your present situation counteracts feelings of greed or craving which are powerful hindrances to meditation.

In a few minutes, we'll have a second period of mediation and I'll teach you a slight refinement on the breath meditation that we have been doing that will help to increase concentration. But first I'd like to say a few words about the third meditative factor of the Path: Right Effort.

## Right Effort

There are lots of practices out there labeled as “meditation” that have little in common with Buddhist meditation. Many of these, especially the more secular ones, have relaxation as a primary goal or benefit. Consequently, when we see the word “effort” associated with meditation, we might be a little confused. We’re supposed to *try really hard* to relax?

In Buddhist meditation, relaxation is a desirable and necessary preliminary, but it is not the end goal. The end goal is something much more difficult: the total eradication of suffering. This is something that requires effort. But it must be Right Effort: effort that is balanced by common sense and a mindful awareness of one’s own capabilities.

Every now and then you hear about a meditator, often a new meditator, who decides that he will follow the Buddha’s example and sit down and refuse to get up until he has attained enlightenment. This rarely ends well. It is *not* Right Effort.

We *should* exert ourselves. Buddhist meditation is not a bubble bath. During meditation, if you find yourself in a warm, happy, drowsy, dreamy state, you have taken a wrong turn. A little more effort (and a straighter back) is probably in order. Remember that the goal is awareness, not forgetfulness.

There is a *sutta* in which a monk named Sona was frustrated with his progress in meditation, even though he had done walking meditation until his feet bled. He was thinking about leaving the *sangha* when the Buddha came to him. The Buddha knew that Sona had formerly played the vina, an Indian stringed instrument.

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too taut, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too loose, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned to be right on pitch, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"Yes, lord."

"In the same way, Sona, over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence, attune the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there pick up your theme."

"Yes, lord," Ven. Sona answered the Blessed One.

[ ... ]

So after that, Ven. Sona determined the right pitch for his persistence, attuned the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there picked up his theme. Dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute, he in no long time reached & remained in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for himself in the here & now. He knew: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world." And thus Ven. Sona became another one of the arahants. (AN 6.55)

This metaphor of a properly tuned stringed instrument has become a traditional way of describing the appropriate level of effort for meditative practice.

## The Meditation

Chris has taught us how to do a basic meditation in which we count the in- and out-breaths. I'd like to mention here a way that we can sharpen the focus of our meditation just a bit more, thereby strengthening concentration. I'd like everyone to inhale ... and now exhale sharply. When you do the sharp exhale, notice the feeling of the breath against the rims of the nostrils and the upper lip. Try to pinpoint where you feel the sensation most strongly. Peoples' faces are different, so not everyone feels this at the same place. Now take a few normal breaths and try to keep feeling the physical sensation of the breath in that same place. With normal breathing, it won't be as strong, but you should still be able to feel it. As you meditate, you can try to keep your attention focused on this physical sensation. You can still count the breaths if you like, or, if you feel like your concentration is strong enough, you can try letting go of the counting. Of course, if you find that this practice isn't working out for you, just go back to basic breath counting as Chris has explained it.

1. Gunaratana, H. (2001). *Eight mindful steps to happiness: walking the Buddha's path*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
2. *ibid.*