

Concentration

Concentration. You probably here us talk about that a lot. Well, why?

I would argue that concentration is, undeniably, the basis of all Buddhism. Although we like to talk about deep insights, the nature of suffering and the freedom of suffering, and all such things, these are vain insights if we are incapable of properly cultivating our understanding of them. The seeds of the Dharma, no matter how magnificent, won't grow into fruition unless they are planted in good soil. Concentration is the vibrant, fertile soil from which all things in our practice grow.

So, today we'll be talking about 1) What we define as concentration, and what we can do to concentrate, 2) The effects that concentration can have on us, and 3) How that concentration is useful for our practice beyond the cushion.

What is concentration? How do we concentrate?

1) The Majjhima Nikaya defines concentration as the “fixation of the mind to a single object—this is concentration.” Duh.

2) Most typically, we think of concentration as something we do while meditating.

3) A lot of people are intimidated by the idea of just sitting down and concentrating on something, and it seems like an impossibility to some—after all, we're the ADD generation, right?

i) However, we've all entered into deep stages of concentration before—we just may have not been trying to do so. Think of your favorite hobby, your favorite activity: how do we describe these things? I think the most common phrase people use is “I get lost in it.” In reality, we are not getting “lost” in our activity, but we're fully being present, we're fully being “here” during it. Very often, these activities require our full focus, or we cannot fully complete them.

ii) I now offer up the example of trail-running, one of my personal favorite hobbies. When I trail run, all thoughts dissolve into action, into movement: there is full focus on each step, and the placement of each step. Should I lose focus—should I get distracted—I get a rock through the foot; should I focus, I can fly. Concentration becomes your friend on trail runs.

iii) Modern psychology is starting to call this phenomena of being absorbed in our activities “Flow”—to seamlessly and thoughtlessly engage in an action to its fullest potential. However, Buddhists have seen and identified this for about 2,500 years: we call it Concentration. Or, more accurately, but less poetically: “a state present with Verbal Thought, Ruminating, Rapture, Happiness, and Concentration” (M. 43)

4) So, why aren't Buddhists running, or fly fishing, or playing Jenga all the time if those are moments of concentration too?

i) For a Buddhist, concentration is an expression of a spiritual and religious

belief; it is a practice done towards an ends of mindfulness and bliss.

ii) Although ALL things can be objects of concentration, it is important to know that formal practice still is useful. Some people want to throw aside sitting for more fun options of mindfulness. I often hear people say they like an activity because it's "meditative." Yet very few of these people actually enjoy meditating—weird, right? So, why do we push formal meditation?

iii) We are looking for spontaneous replication: we want to be able to concentrate everywhere, anywhere, at any time, all the time. When we build a foundation of this just sitting, eventually we can meditate everywhere.

What do we concentrate on?

1) Of course, there must be an object upon which we concentrate, right? Very often, we are encouraged to use our breath to learn to concentrate, just like we've all learned hear with the zazan-shamahta practice. We breath in, and we concentrate only on breathing in; we breath out, and we concentrate on only breathing out.

2) But, many of you have come up to me and said: "But can we concentrate on other things? Do we just have to sit and follow the breath?"

i) While I do encourage the breath, and personally like to follow the breath, there are countless things you can be mindful of and concentrate upon. In fact, everything can become an object of meditation:

"Here is a person who acts with clear attentiveness when going back or forth, when looking ahead or behind, when bending or stretching, when getting dressed. He acts with clear attentiveness when eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting...etc." (Culamulkyia Sutta)

3) So, you can use any moment to practice concentration, to practice mindfulness. You can use any sensation: the sound of your breathing, the sound of traffic or a fan; the sight of something before you, a candle, a shadow; the feeling of the carpet; the smell of the air; the aftertaste of coffee on your tongue. ALL these things can be used like the breath to meditate. In fact, you can be mindful of all these things at once.

So, what's all this concentrating do for us?

The concentrative skills we gain from meditating have numerous and clear benefits on us.

1)For starters, concentrating has an amazingly calming effect: this is why we call these practices calm-abiding. Why this happens, I don't really know—asking why may not be as important knowing that it can happen. A part of me thinks its some basic part of being human: that having concentration soothes us. It almost seems similar to how some breeds of dogs are only most content fulfilling certain functions.

2) In the day-to-day, concentration improves our performance and output. I've heard people discussing how high concentration can make us better writers, better runners, better test-takers and better love-makers etc...

3) ...but is that why we meditate and concentrate?

What concentration offers our practice

1) Sure, we all want to be the greatest writers, runners, and lovers, but we know that is not why the Buddha taught this.

2) Although concentration gives us these things, and although we can enjoy them, what is more important is that it gives us the tools to have a deep, fulfilling meditative practice.

3) Concentration enables us to be mindful, to be present; to see our thoughts and feelings. It gives us the calmness to face suffering and to apply the Dharma-salve to the wounds.

4) It gives us equanimity—it gives us contentment at all times, at all places, in all circumstances. With this calmness, we can look at all things from a clear, slow detached place; from here, our insights are stable, they are solid. Adeesha will be talking about the insight part of practice next week.

5) Whenever I think of the relation between concentration and insight, and the roles they play in our practice, I always think of that old British war-saying: "Keep calm and carry on."

i) Concentration lets us "Keep calm"—it grounds us, stabilizes us, makes us sane.

ii) Vipassana and insight is the wisdom which allows us to "Carry on" through all things.