

# Eightfold Path-Right Concentration (2 of 4)

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We will continue with the series of talks on right concentration as part of the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path ends with concentration. There are two more steps of the Eightfold Path that become in a sense, a ninth and tenth step. We will discuss these after finishing with right concentration.

Concentration is the quality or the state of mind that is ripe for a deep letting go. It is ripe for change and transformation. Part of the function of concentration, or developing Samādhi, is to tenderize the mind and the heart. It is to soften and relax the heart and mind so they are not so hard, brittle, defended, or tight and can't be released, freed, or deeply relaxed. Concentration prepares the mind so that it can have deep insight. It gives the mind a stillness or stability to see deeply.

Imagine that we are riding on a flatbed train. We are standing in the middle of the train - safe and nice. We have a big telescope in our hands. We are standing there at night as the train goes along the tracks trying to look at the moon. Chances are that the train is rattling so much that we can't hold the telescope still enough to be able to see the moon. We might occasionally scan by the moon but we can't focus on it.

If we put the same telescope on a tripod on solid ground, the telescope will be stable enough, and we can find the moon. We can zero in and look at it carefully. If the mind is rattled like riding on a train and shaking and bouncing, it doesn't have the stability to see deeply into the full moon of our hearts or minds. We won't have the stability. The function of concentration is for stability.

When people talk about concentration, or Samādhi, a powerful word, they often refer to or think about altered states. Concentration is sometimes called an altered state. The question is what is most altered? Is the everyday mind the altered mind? It can be frazzled, full of hindrances, and easily distracted and preoccupied. Maybe that is the altered mind.

Some people say that when we practice concentration, we return to the mind's natural state. We return to the natural state of the mind free of how it is altered by our attachments, preoccupations, fears, anger, and things like that.

The concentrated mind is quite different compared to the everyday mind. Sometimes we describe the concentrated mind using the word exalted. We describe this powerful state of mind as a concentrated mind with tremendous stillness, bliss, and peacefulness. It can seem very different from ordinary life. It can seem extraordinary and special. In a sense it is, but we don't want to get too caught up with that idea, pursue it too much, or think that is where we're supposed to be.

Today I would like to talk about concentration or Samādhi, practiced not so much in meditation, but in everyday life. The ability to live our mundane life in such a way that the ordinary activities of our life become extraordinary. The mundane becomes, in a sense, sacred. It is not like we are trying to get some different experience. It is more how we bring attention to the everyday experiences we are having. It is the Samādhi of washing dishes, the Samādhi of eating, cooking, or sweeping. It could be the Samādhi of driving.

Samādhi means that we are really here for this particular experience. We are not thinking about something else. We are not multitasking. We are not doing a task with our mind already ahead to the next task, or the next thing we have to do. The mind is not lingering in a conversation we had yesterday. The attention in our hearts and our minds is fully here for the activity we have.

Making a cup of tea is a time of Samādhi if we do it wholeheartedly, and completely. There is something in the alchemy of doing an activity with our full attention. It doesn't really change the tea making, but we are enveloping or meeting the teacup, or the tea that we're making, with a higher quality attention. A wholehearted presence begins to infuse the situation with some nice qualities of being.

This may not automatically happen at first. Samādhi has a lot to do with settling in. We are no longer restless, bouncing around, or going off in the mind and thinking about other things. We are really being here for what we're doing.

This can seem boring because our thoughts can be much more exciting. Our thoughts can be much more frightening. We tell ourselves frightening ideas, and we worry about the future. We might be thinking about what's going to happen. We want to trust, relax, and feel just the tea making for this moment. To learn to do that becomes a delight. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. It is like it comes alive. There is a vitality, a livingness, or a sense of intimacy and fullness with just this activity.

I hope some of you have experienced this at some time in your life – the experience of being absorbed while doing some activity. I know that when I was younger, I used to read a lot of novels. I'd be absorbed in the novel, and I would feel so good. A sense of well-being would set in, partly because I wasn't thinking about all my worries anymore. I was just being pulled and absorbed in the novel. That focus and concentration brought me a very simple delight or joy. I think what I enjoyed about reading novels, was not necessarily the story I was reading, but rather the absorption I had. I was fully there for that thing.

There might be something else that does the same thing for you. Listening to music or being at a park and watching the kids play can create that absorption. We get absorbed in this world. Sitting and watching a river go by can be absorbing. The idea is to begin doing that in our everyday activities, the mundane world.

This is so the mundane world becomes sacred. This may not be exactly the right word because in Latin sacred implies something that's been separated. It is someplace outside of what is mundane or profane. In Buddhism, the whole world is sacred when the attention is really there for it. It is worthwhile to develop the capacity for mundane concentration.

It is worthwhile to develop a mundane wholeness of just being with what we're doing when we're doing it. This builds momentum. It builds a kind of familiarity. We eventually learn, "Wow, this is nice. It is great to be here with our experience while we're doing it." All the discussions about concentration apply to everyday life as well.

As I have said there are two versions of the Eightfold Path. One is the path to freedom, and one is the path of expanding the freedom that we have experienced. Concentration practice has both sides to it. We are developing and strengthening the mind by being wholeheartedly present for the mundane experience of breathing. It is like we would do for the tea, the dishes, or whatever else we do.

If the breathing doesn't work for you, try some other object or way of practicing mindfulness. There is a wholeheartedness just for that. We just come back and sustain the attention over and over again. We do this until the distracted mind begins to weaken and quiet. It becomes easier and easier to stay present.

There is a concentration muscle in the mind that gets stronger, and the muscle for distraction gets weaker. At some point, the concentration muscle is stronger than what is left of the distraction muscle. It is then easier and easier to stay concentrated.

As we do this, the mind begins to shift and change. When we have some degree of familiarity with freedom, we can recognize some of the qualities of a free mind. The mind is not 100% free. It may be a little sliver of the mind, but we recognize, "Oh, there is something that is a part of the mind that is soft, relaxed, open, and receptive." We begin using that as a reference point for developing the continuity of attention, which is concentration.

I have a book on the Eightfold Path called "The Steps to Liberation." I want to read a paragraph from this book.

"When we know how a concentrated mind is part of the Eightfold Path, we can use the possibility of the peaceful, expansive mind as a guidepost along the path. Rather than straining with striving and

expectations, we cultivate receptive readiness. We let go deeply so the mind can be free of tension. By understanding the value of a soft mind, we're less likely to get tense as we practice. When we remember the need to become free of the hindrances, we're less easily taken in by their authority. And when we understand the role of joy and mental brightness on the path, we will be quicker to recognize and support these states. When we understand the role of joy and mental brightness, we will be quicker to recognize these states when they're there."

This is not a big should or a big strain. It is not something big that we have to perfect. The path to the perfection of concentration is through being relaxed about the imperfection of how it's going. We are relaxed about how easily we are distracted or caught up. Regardless of how it is, we keep coming back. Perhaps we will come back with a delightful attention that we enjoy doing. We return with tender care, a lovely curiosity, or a soft wholeheartedness. Maybe it is love.

Somehow find a way to really be with your meditation, fully there. Be with the idea of absorption – being absorbed and fully in its domain. Be with your meditation with a soft mind, a joyful mind, a receptive mind, a ready mind, a malleable mind, and a mind not caught up in all its preoccupations. Developing that mind is one of the great tasks of meditation. It doesn't matter how long it takes. Mindfulness practice is moving in this direction. The more we practice mindfulness, concentration will follow in its wake. The more we cultivate concentration, mindfulness will keep opening.

Be very content with the mundane world of dishwashing and breathing. See if you can meet those things wholeheartedly as if each thing that you are doing is the most important thing of the moment.

We will continue with the topic of Samādhi tomorrow.  
Thank you.