

Last week we began to look at a second 'pair' of qualities, energy and concentration, and saw how the first of these is very much a requirement for our spiritual development. This week we turn our attention to concentration, which can be regarded as the **focused** application of the faculty of energy.

If we regard this type of concentration as effectively the same thing as meditation, we shall remember that it makes up a third of the all-important **Threefold Path**. However, there is quite a lot we can say specifically about concentration. One interesting observation Sangharakshita makes is that concentration can be seen as very closely related to happiness (that elusive state of mind that we wish for ourselves and others in the *mettā bhāvanā!*). He suggests that, when we are fully concentrated we are truly happy, and that only when we are happy can we achieve proper concentration. This implies that concentration is vitally important to our lives, and is certainly not just some technicality of Buddhist language.

The Sanskrit word for concentration is *samādhi*, which originally means the fixation of the mind on a single object. Technically, *samādhi* is seen as including both **recalling** our intended purpose and **continuity** of that purpose. However, it would be a big mistake to see this concentration coming about by forced effort. This is a point that is often misunderstood, so it needs stating clearly that *samādhi* simply can't be achieved by trying harder. In fact, it's probably more helpful to talk about 'being concentrated' than 'concentrating'. What is needed to achieve this has more to do with deep relaxation, perhaps we might even say 'surrender' to the meditation. Sometimes *samādhi* is translated as 'absorption', which perhaps better reflects this sense.

We can also say that, when our bodies and minds begin to calm during meditation, our various energies become more **integrated**. This is different from our normal psychological situation, in which our energies are markedly divided between the different 'compartments' that, in a sense, make up our lives. To give quite a strong example of this, you might imagine the experience of finding yourself, at your birthday party, with a random selection of people from quite different aspects of your life – for example, a family member, a neighbour and a colleague. We might recognise that, in this situation, we're used to behaving quite differently in these different contexts – almost, in a sense, being a number of different people. Although this division of our selves is very normal, it can also limit our happiness. For this reason, integration has a very important place in the Buddhist path – whether through practising meditations like the mindfulness of breathing, or by various practices outside of meditation with an integrating effect. These can include more open communication, taking the time to go on retreats, cultivating our connections with nature and the arts and, of course, studying the Dharma.

When the artificial divisions in our psychological makeup begin to break down in meditation, strong feelings of both physical and emotional pleasure can result. We might even have feelings of physical exhilaration like goose-pimples or hairs standing on end, or emotional experiences of mild euphoria or even ecstasy. In the Buddhist tradition these unusual experiences are not seen as important in their own right, or things that we should deliberately chase after – they're just a by-product of increasing integration. In fact, it sometimes happens that people who are new to meditation have such experiences early on (sometimes known as 'beginner's mind'), but before long these subside. However, this doesn't mean that meditation is no longer having an effect – in fact, it's likely that the work of integration is now going on at a deeper level.

According to Buddhist thinking, there are actually two types of integration. The first, known as **horizontal** integration, consists of the breaking down of divisions in our characters, as has already been described. Change of this type begins to loosen the effect of the hindrances (which we've already described last week). This involves a release of psychological tension, which is why we may have a strong experience of energy becoming newly available.

The second type of integration is known as **vertical** – this is because, as Kamalashila says in his book 'Meditation' (Windhorse Publishing), "we are getting into contact with our heights and our depths – we are discovering our heavens and our hells". People who experience this sort of change often describe long-forgotten experiences 'coming up' unexpectedly in their meditation. These experiences may be from much earlier in life, may be striking or apparently obscure, and may have a pleasurable, painful or simply neutral character. They may even sometimes be 'visionary' and feature images of mythical beings, like those described as 'archetypes' by the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung in the early 20th century.

Buddhists sometimes talk in terms of a relatively deep level of absorption called **access concentration**. (In some ways this is fairly unremarkable – it seems that anybody can enter it in favourable circumstances, in a variety of situations including meditation, but also through activities like the arts, dance, sport, yoga and others.) It's given this name because it's the point of access to those significantly deeper levels of consciousness that are often described by the Sanskrit word *dhyāna*. We can tell when we've entered access concentration because the hindrances seem to become noticeably weaker, and concentration therefore becomes noticeably easier. As Kamalashila says, "We will still experience some distractions, but these will not exert a strongly *emotional* pull, as do the five hindrances". This stage of meditation is important because the weakening of distraction makes available still more energy, which can be used to sharpen our awareness still further and move onto the *dhyānas* (for more about these, try chapter 4 of Kamalashila's book).

Of course, it's important to say that we can't just pursue concentration on its own. Rather, it needs to be balanced with its 'opposite' faculty, energy, in order to avoid just staying in a sort of blissful laziness, with no effort to develop our awareness.