Looking After Your Concentration

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Meditation is work. You have to be careful, you have to be alert. Anything that’s going to destroy your stillness of mind, first, of course, you have to get there. But once you’ve gotten there, then there’s the work in maintaining it, which I’m fooling at. The statement we read says there are three steps in meditating. One is learning how to do it, in other words, learning how to get the mind in a state of concentration. The second one is learning how to maintain it, and the third is learning how to put it to use. Each of these steps requires skill, and they’re different skills each time. First, just getting the mind to find a comfortable spot, creating a focus that’s steady but also relaxed. That in itself takes some doing, because most of us, when we focus on something, tend to tense up, either right at the point of focus or some other spot in the body. It’s part of our self-conscious or subconscious way of keeping the focus there, but it makes the focus unpleasant, makes it difficult to maintain. The trick is learning how to be focused without any of that tension at all. It’s possible to relax the focus, and then you stay with it for a while, and then you find the old tension creeping in. That’s where the second step comes in, learning how to maintain your focus, keeping it focused at the same time, relaxed, staying with the breath, having a comfortable breath, and not allowing little bits of tension to creep in with each in-breath or with each out-breath. You have to watch for this. This is the work of evaluation in the first jhana, keeping your eye out for it. You can’t assume that once you’ve relaxed a certain part of the body, it’s going to stay relaxed. You turn your back on it for just an instant, and there it goes, going back to its old way of tensing up. So you have to keep watch on it, trying to find out which parts of the body are your trigger points, the ones where the tension comes in most quickly. Then you can focus your attention right there on keeping them relaxed, catching each time that you’re tempted to tense them up, and keep reminding yourself, “Okay, relax, relax, relax.” Then finally, things will settle down, and that state of relaxed focus will begin to kick in so that you don’t have to keep reminding yourself. You don’t have to keep looking at it. That’s where you can drop the evaluation and go into a deeper level of concentration. But until you get there, it’s important that you be alert, because these things can creep up at any time. When you’re alert in this way, you find that the concentration gets really absorbing. You get locked in the sense of the body in a way that feels really good. As you allow yourself to stay there, then it grows stronger and stronger. Learn how to maintain that state. Learn how to keep it going. Watch for the stages as it gets stronger and stronger. It finally gets to the point where you can focus right in without having to worry about evaluating things or reminding yourself to stay with things. You’re just right there. There’s a heightened intensity both to the focus and to the sense of well-being that comes as you’re staying with the focus. Without this sense of well-being, the meditation gets dry. With it, you find yourself relating to the present moment, relating to your body in different ways than you had before. It’s almost as if there was a rapture switch that you’ve learned how to turn on. Totally independently of anything outside, it’s simply the way you relate to the breath. That’s what the different stages of concentration are. The way you relate to the breath changes. It gets more refined. It gets more solid. You can be totally still with the in-breath, totally still with the out-breath. Then you find that the sense of the body gets stiller and stiller in and of itself. The breath gets so refined that it’s like a vapor coming off of a condensation on a cold object. Then even that vapor stops, so everything’s just very still. This comes from learning how to look after your meditation object. The Chan Fu, I often use the Thai word “pakong,” which is the kind of word you use with a child learning how to walk. You walk behind the child, protect it, make sure it doesn’t fall as it’s just taking its first steps. It means you’re careful. You look after something. You don’t squeeze it, you don’t push it too much, but you’re there in case things falter. That’s the kind of attitude you want to have to your concentration, to the breath, to the mind with the breath. Without this ability to look after the concentration, it simply comes and goes and nothing much happens. It’s no big deal. People say, “Oh, I’ve had concentration. There have been moments in my mind when it was very still, but I learned how not to get attached to it and it wasn’t such a big deal. Anyhow, we’ve totally missed what concentration is all about. There’s work to be done. There are standards, and as you work toward those standards and you learn how to get more and more comfortable with them, you find that it really does make a big difference in the mind. So this element of looking after the mind, this element of looking after the breath, this element of taking care of the breath, is what really makes the concentration into a skill. It’s a habit you want to develop, even on the exterior level. Learn how to take care of your things. Look after them. The more you take care of them, the longer they last. Look after the things in your life with respect. After all, living here at the monastery, what do we have of things? It’s all the result of other people’s generosity. It’s something to be respected. The fact that we have a body functioning, able to practice, that’s the result of other people’s generosity as well. So make the best use of it. Look after it with respect. When concentration comes, look after it with respect. Make this attitude habitual. As you do this, the quality of your life changes. The quality of the mind, the quality of its relationship to the body. You’ve got a state of concentration that really can be put to use to gain insight into the causes and effects of the mind. The mind is in a state of stillness, so it can see things clearly. It’s in a state of well-being, so it doesn’t feel threatened by the insights that come. It’s almost in a state of play. Start taking things apart simply out of interest and curiosity, not out of desperation or desire or strong desire. There is an element of desire, of course, but it’s not the kind of desperate desire that most of us meditate with. Once you create this state of well-being, you’re interested in the events of the mind. It changes its perspective. It changes its tenor. Like the old scientists in the eighteenth century, many of them were wealthy people who just had a lot of time on their hands. Things were going well in their lives, and they could play with their scientific apparatuses. They learned a lot of things. When you’re not desperate for a particular result, then you learn a lot of things that you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. So, on the one hand, even though there should be a sense of urgency in our practice, there should also be a sense of play, a sense of curiosity. Looking into this, allowing yourself to ask questions you might normally not ask otherwise, because those are the ones that give you insight into the mind. The concentration that you learn how to maintain, that you learn how to develop, puts the mind in a position where it really can look at things. From the perspective that’s needed to see new things. This element of looking after the concentration, of constantly being watchful. For example, when you’re going to tense up, tense up, tense up, even though you told yourself to relax five minutes ago. You can’t assume just one order in the mind is going to change things. You have to keep looking after it, keep taking care of your concentration. The carefulness, the vigilance, the heedfulness that this requires is a good habit to have to develop discernment. At the same time, they put the mind in a position where it really is ready to develop discernment. So don’t be too quick to pass over this step of learning how to maintain, learning how to look after your concentration. Because it’s what makes all the difference in the world.

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