Firm Intention

February, 2003

The Thai translation for the term that we translate as “concentration,” or “samadhi,” is to have a firm intent. “Dang jai man” is the term. To have a firm intention. In this case, we focus on the breath. And our intention is to stay with the breath. Not to go wandering off, not to get distracted, not to lose our frame of reference and start thinking about something else. Once you’ve made that intention, the next step is to keep it firm. You have to protect that intention. It’s so easy for it to get lost. Simply think of something else and the intention is gone. You have to use your mindfulness and alertness to make sure that that intention stays firm, that you really do stay with the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out. No matter what else may come along, you’re not interested. If it happens that you do wander off, then you try to establish that intention again. The term “establishing” is important. In Pali, when they talk about the object of concentration, they use the word “support” or “foundation,” something that you stay on top of. It becomes the base of everything else, the base of your awareness. So if you’ve fallen off the topic, then you bring the mind back and establish it there again. You’ve got to use your ingenuity as you do it. If you simply depend on brute willpower, it doesn’t go very far. You want to make the object something that’s easy to stay with, clear enough so you can maintain focus, comfortable enough so that you like being here. Use a sense of comfort, which the Buddha said is a sense of well-being or a sense of ease with no drawbacks. You make it your path. Remember that the Four Noble Truths aren’t only about stress and suffering. Tucked away in the Fourth Truth is right concentration, which has as one of its factors ease. Another factor is rapture. In the first jhana, they’re both based on seclusion. In other words, you seclude the mind from other intentions and other thoughts. Seclude it from thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future. You protect it. Keep it right here in the present. So as you’re beginning to settle down with the breath, this activity of protection is very important. You have to be on the lookout for the slightest sign that the mind is beginning to wander off, beginning to lose interest, beginning to get bored, beginning to get distracted. You watch for that, and you keep it from happening, either by changing the way you breathe, changing your focus, whatever you have to do in order to maintain that intention to stay with the breath. This is a level of practice where you protect your object of meditation, your object of meditation, and you protect your intention. And as you protect it, it grows stronger. It’s like lighting a fire in the wind. You have to protect that small flame that you start out with, or else the wind will blow it out. So you cup your hands around it. When it catches, then you can let go of that element of protection, and you begin to find that the concentration itself begins to protect you. In other words, as the flame spreads through your pile of fuel there, it gets warm enough so that it gives you warmth. As you maintain your focus on the breath and allow your awareness to spread through the body, it has an effect on the energy patterns in the body. Instead of running every rich way, they begin to get connected. They begin to have a coherence. They work together instead of at cross-purposes. As they work together, they develop a strength. They reinforce one another. It’s almost as if they have an energy field around them. As the flow of these currents of the body grows more steady, that energy field surrounds the body and begins to protect you. The image they give in the canon is of a solid door made out of hardwood. If you threw a ball of yarn or a ball of string at it, it wouldn’t make any impression in the door at all. It would just bounce right off, unlike the minds of ordinary people. You throw a stone into the clay and it makes a huge impression. What you’re trying to develop here is a state of awareness that’s solid, so that things outside bounce off. They don’t penetrate in as easily as they used to. This is when you can let go of that activity of directed thought and evaluation. Just settle in on the oneness of the mind or the breath. The energy flow in the body has gotten as good as you can make it, so there’s no need for much more evaluation. The breath has reached a level where you don’t have to worry about it so much. You can just be with it and not have to evaluate it. You don’t have to keep reminding yourself to stay. The mind is firmly implanted in the breath at this point. Then it’s simply a matter of maintaining that oneness, that focus, that unity of awareness. Once things are unified like this for a long time, they begin to separate out on their own. In the past, when you tried to distinguish the mind from the body, it was usually in line with your preconceived notions. But when you stay with this oneness of the mind and the breath for a while, it begins to separate out on its own in a natural way. John Lee has an image. He said it’s like smelting the ore in a rock. If you tried to chip the ore out of the rock, you wouldn’t get anywhere because it’s so firmly embedded in the rock. But if you smelt it, you reach the point where the ore melts. It’ll flow out of the rock on its own. So the ore will be in one spot, the rock will be in another. Not because you chipped at it, but because it naturally reached a separation. It’s the same with the state of awareness itself and its relationship to the object. They have to stay together for a long time with this penetrating effort that you’ve got here to maintain that sense of oneness. That, in and of itself, is enough for you to begin to see where the separation lies. So you’re going to have a sense of, here’s the awareness, there’s the object. They’re two separate things. Until you reach that point, though, you don’t have to do much analysis. Just try to maintain this sense of oneness, this sense of unity throughout the whole body, throughout your whole range of awareness. That gives you the foundation that you need. So many times in meditation we try to skip over the foundation, rush through the various levels so we can get to the nuggets of gold that we want, the insights. As a result, we lose our foundation. Without a foundation, we never get what we want. So we have to learn the patience. And the persistence. And all the other mental skills that are required for staying with one activity for a long period of time. Alert, steady, and still. When Chan Kham Dee, one of the four Ajahns, compares it to being a hunter, the hunter has to be very still but very alert. All the time. Anthropologists say that when they go into primitive societies and try to learn the skills of the various members of the society, the hardest one to learn is hunting, because it requires a special kind of awareness. It’s not so much knowing how to throw a spear, say, or knowing how to shoot an arrow. It’s the awareness that you can stay out there and sense where the object is. What the animals are. What they’re about to do. At the same time, not moving in any way that would scare them off. In other words, to be a good hunter, you have to be in a good state of concentration. Mindful and alert at all times. Which is precisely why it’s so hard a skill to develop. Well, that’s the skill we’re working on here. Unfortunately, we’re not using it to hunt rabbits or whatever. We’re using it to hunt down our defilements. But this is why it’s so difficult. That steadiness, that stillness, that alertness, all at the same time. These are not skills that we develop in modern society. In fact, if anything, the tendency of modern society is to destroy these skills. So we have to learn not only the skills, but also the proper attitude towards developing skills. Particularly this type of skillful awareness fills the body. The body fills your awareness. They’re there together, and they’re one. And then you just stay there and use the sense of well-being that comes from staying there to ward off any other distracting thoughts, ward off anything else outside that would pull you away, that would cause the awareness to shrink, that would destroy its quality. When you can do this, you’re on the right track. After all, the Buddha said that right concentration is the heart of the Eightfold Path. The other factors are its requisites. The right view, the right resolve, and so on. These are the factors that make the concentration right. But the concentration itself is the heart. So make sure that the heart keeps beating. And that’s what keeps the practice alive.

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