Three Levels of Concentration, The

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The commentaries talk about three levels of concentration, and they have their ways of explaining it. But my favorite way of explaining the three levels is something I heard in a Dhamma talk in Thailand one time. The first level, momentary concentration, is the kind of concentration that can’t be able to withstand pain. It runs into pain and then jumps off and goes someplace else. The second level, threshold or neighborhood concentration, can withstand pain, but it gets lost in pleasure and begins to blur out. Fixed penetration is a level of concentration that can withstand both pleasure and pain and not be swayed by either one. That’s where aiming and concentration practice is together. When pain comes, it doesn’t dislodge the mind. When pleasure comes, it doesn’t make you blur out. So keep that in the back of your mind. The pleasure and pain are the big issues we’ve got to deal with in learning how to get the mind to settle down. Make sure you understand the difference between the two. We had that chant just now, “Those who don’t discern suffering.” On the face of it, it would sound kind of strange. Everybody is experienced with suffering at one time or another, but we don’t distinguish the difference between pain and suffering. So we don’t really discern where the actual suffering lies. We have a very strange relationship with pain, which is what makes us suffer. On the one hand, we’re high on pain. We’re hardwired to notice it. As soon as there’s the slightest pain in any part of the body, the mind goes running right there. Then it runs into the pain and it jumps off because it doesn’t like being with the pain. So it’s dancing back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. If we could take a video of the mind, that’s what we could see. It’s dancing back and forth. If there wasn’t so much suffering involved, it would be comical. We don’t like it, and yet we keep going back. Once we hit there, we have to jump off again. The way to deal with it is first to learn to stay away from it. Give yourself something else to focus on. This is one of the typical techniques of the world. If something is really bothering you and you don’t know what to do about it, you distract yourself. Although it may seem like an ostrich with its head in the sand approach to pain, it’s actually the first step. The first step that you’ve got to learn as you’re sitting here is how not to focus on the pain. Focus on the breath instead. Give yourself a pep talk on how important it is to be with the breath, how much you can learn about the energy flow in the body, and how good it’s going to be. Eventually you’re going to use the breath as one of the tools for dealing with the pain. Remind yourself of how important it is to have a good, solid basis when you’re going to look at the pain. It’s a good place to retreat to if dealing with the pain starts getting too difficult. So there are lots of good reasons for you to be with the breath. Then you can confirm that reasoning by actually exploring what the breath can do for you. Look at it. Try to be as sensitive as possible to what the breathing can do for you, the different ways you feel the breath energy in the body. The different rhythms of breathing have an effect on the body. The difference in depth, what does that do to your experience of the body? There’s lots to explore here. The less you think about simply forcing yourself to be with the breath and think more in terms of exploring the breath, the easier you’ll find it to become absorbed simply in this process of breathing so that you don’t have to jump to the pain. If you have another place to go, a counterbalance or weight that you can hold onto that keeps you from getting sucked into that black hole of the pain, the longer and longer and longer you find you can stay away from the pain. At the same time, you’re exploring the breath and learning to soften up the feelings of tension in different parts of the body. There comes a point where you can finally turn that breath and spread it to the pain. The best way to do this is to stay focused on your center for the breathing and just think of the relaxing, dissolving energy of the breath spreading out in that direction of the pain. Don’t go running to the pain just yet. Stay with your center. And as you dissolve the tension in this part of the body, that part of the body, you get so you can dissolve the tension around the pain. Go past the pain. Because that begins to soften up the pain. And you find that many times it takes care of a lot of the pain right there. And what’s left after that is something else you’ve got to look into more deeply. But the first step is to loosen up your tightness and tension around the pain. One of the reasons that pain seems to be so solid and imposing is that we put up a solid wall around it. And so when we jump to the pain, that’s what we run into. We run into that solid wall. So the pain itself seems solid. But when we learn to soften up around the pain, loosen up around the pain, when the time comes to actually look at the pain, you begin to see more clearly the actual nature of the pain. You begin to discern the pain for what it is. In other words, it’s constantly moving around, constantly shifting, constantly changing. Changing shape, changing intensity. If you were to look at the one point where the pain is most intense, you would find that it jumps around. That teaches you some important lessons about the pain. That it’s not the solid thing you thought it was. This is one of our big problems in life, is that we don’t really understand pleasure and pain. We have lots of preconceived notions about it, and we live in terms of our preconceived notions. Yet the actual experience of pleasure and pain is something very different from our conceptions, our caricatures. And seeing through those caricatures allows us to deal more effectively with the pain. You find that the pain becomes a lot less threatening. You can look at it from a position of strength, a position of equanimity. Because after all, you’ve got that comfortable breathing you can go back to at any time. And you’ve worked through the pain as much as you can. That’s what brings you from the first level of concentration into the second one, where you’re able to just be there with the pain and not feel so threatened by it. The problem here sometimes, though, is that once things start getting comfortable, you begin to blur out with that sense of comfort. This is called not being skilled with regard to the body. The body here is our focus, the breath. Not only the in-and-out breath, but the breath sensations running throughout the body. Many times when those bodily sensations start giving rise to feelings of pleasure, we drop the focus on the body and focus instead on the pleasure, which is a pretty blurry thing. So once you do get to this point where you feel relatively at ease with the pain, you have to be very, very mindful of the body. Keep your attention focused on the breath. See that the breathing sensations and the flickering sensations of pleasure around the breath are two separate things. Then you can maximize the pleasure. You can spread the pleasure throughout the body. But don’t lose your focus on the breath. There are various ways of doing this. You can focus on the breath in the different parts of the body. Try to get as precise as possible. The breath in the first joint of your little toe. The breath in the first joint of your second toe. Just go through the body very, very precisely that way. Or just simply ask yourself, “Where is my head right now? Where are my hands? Where are my arms?” Try to connect everything. So that mindfulness stays properly established, stays firmly focused on the body. And the funny thing is that in doing this, you actually get a lot more pleasure out of it. If you could just go jumping for that first little bit of pleasure and you blur out, it’s not that intense, it’s not all that satisfying. You come out of a meditation session like that and say, “Where was I?” You’ve been in delusion concentration. But if you stay focused on the breath, the really precise sensations of the breathing, you find that the pleasure grows and grows and grows. Sometimes it gets to the point where the rapture that comes from this is so intense it gets unpleasant. That’s when you focus in on a more refined level, just to stay with the pleasure without getting involved in the rapture. But it’s that focus on the breath that protects you, that keeps your concentration more and more solid. After all, pleasure, rapture, these are things that come and go. It’s like the wind. If you don’t want to get blown away by the wind, you’ve got to hold on tight. So you hold on to the sensation of the body. Again, not with a sense of tensing up to hold, but simply keeping your mindfulness very well focused. Keeping your alertness very well focused there on the sensation of the body, the sensation of the breath, the warmth, the coolness, the heaviness, the movement in the body. Stay focused on those things without losing your focus and moving off to the sense of pleasure. This way, ultimately, as you work through the sensation of breathing, as it gets more and more refined, it finally gets to a point where it’s filling the body and then it stops. It’s not that you stop breathing, but there’s a sense of stillness in the breath energy that fills the whole body. You’re getting all the oxygen you need coming in and out the skin. As your brain activities have begun to settle down, you’re using a lot less oxygen. That’s our big oxygen user in the body, the brain. This allows you to finally get to that point of fixed penetration where you’re not swayed by the pain, you’re not deluded by the pleasure or led astray by the pleasure. You can withstand them both in this good state of equanimity. That’s when your concentration is really strong. Notice that it’s not just a question of stilling, stilling, stilling the mind. You’re forcing the mind down. You’re bringing it to a state of balance through understanding. In addition to the effort to making it still, you’re also trying to understand the breath, understand the pain, understand the pleasure, understand the signals the body is giving you when it’s letting you know that you need to breathe less and less and less. There’s a lot to read here in the present moment. There’s a lot to explore. As the Buddha said, getting the mind to settle down in a good state of absorption requires both tranquility and clear seeing or insight. The two of them go together, bringing the mind to a state of balance. Once the mind is in that state, then it can see things more clearly. It can go back and look at that pain again, see it more precisely. You have lots of choices when the mind is in this state once you’ve got it solid. Remember, your primary focus is the breath, it’s the body, it’s what gets you past the pain, it’s what gets you past the pleasure. It’s simply a matter of learning how to relate to these different sensations properly. Once you learn how to relate to them properly, the pain itself causes less and less suffering. The pleasure causes less and less delusion. Because you’ve explored what you’ve got right here in the present moment, you begin to see the potential of a mind focused on the breath, what it can do for you. It’s one of the amazing things about the practice. The breath doesn’t cost anything. It’s something you have with you all the time. It’s the only meditation accessory that you really need. It’s the cheapest one there is. It’s simply a question of getting to know it really well, getting to master it really well. As John Lee once said, “The sign of real wisdom and discernment is your ability to take anything at all and squeeze as much use out of it.” Not in the sense of forcing, but in the sense of really learning how to master it, seeing what it can do for you, not overlooking the things that are right here. After all, that’s what the Buddha did. He focused on his breath. It took him all the way to awakening. What’s the difference between his breath and your breath? The breath itself is the same. It’s the clarity with which he was able to see things. The understanding, the discernment, the mindfulness and alertness that he brought to the breath, those are things that we all have, too. It’s simply a question of bringing them all together and keeping them together and seeing what you learn as a result.

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