Insight in Concentration

December 24, 2003

When there’s a Dhamma talk during the meditation, you don’t have to listen to the Dhamma talk. It’s here to act as a fence. If your mind wanders away from the breath, you run into the talk, which is here to remind you to go back to the breath. Otherwise, let the talk stay in the background, like you let your thoughts stay in the background, trying to bring them the breath up to the fore. Think of the breath as the energy filling the whole body, and open yourself up to the entire breath. The more you open yourself up to the breath, the less you have room for anything else in your awareness. One of the terms used for being aware of the breath is “with the body.” Being mindful of the body is mindfulness immersed in the body, kaya kathasati. So allow your awareness to be immersed in the breath. You’re surrounded by breath as it comes in. You’re surrounded by breath as it goes out. Even between the in-breath and the out-breath, there’s still a sort of undercurrent or background noise of the energy in the body. Allow your awareness to be surrounded by that, too. The ideal mental state you want is one that’s centered and solidly in the center, but it’s open in all the other directions. In other words, things can pass through, but they don’t affect the centeredness of your awareness. That’s solid. And as for the thoughts that you’ve carried in from the day, you can put them aside. In fact, the more you fill your awareness right now with the breath, the less room there is for thoughts of the day. That’s the whole point. Sometimes they get in the way, and if they do, take stock of your mind to see what direction it’s leaning right now. Then get a sense of the thoughts that you’re carrying in. Can you just put them down? If you can, just put them down and go to the breath. If they keep coming back, coming back, coming back, then you’ve got to do something about them. Look at them and see what kind of thoughts they are. Look at them from the outside, as someone else looking into your mind would look at them. Back when I was staying with Ajahn Phuong, I had a very strong sense that he could read my mind. I’d come down from meditation session and he’d immediately bring up the topic that had been the issue in that particular session. Of course, when you have someone looking into your mind like that, you get very careful about what you allow to occupy yourself. So ask yourself, “If someone were looking into my head right now, would I want them to see this particular thought? Would I like to have them see me fastened on this thought?” That’s one good way of getting a perspective on your thinking. Or if you were to die right now, is that the thought that you’d like to have your last moment of this lifetime? Obsessed with some slight that somebody did to you today? Some issue that you’re worried about tomorrow? In other words, step back from the thinking and get some perspective on it. Then see what needs to be done in order to counteract that thinking. If it’s lustful thinking, you can think about the parts of the body. Just take them out in your mind. Set them out on the floor in front of you. Do you realize that no matter how attractive somebody’s body may be, this is what they’ve got inside? Look at it from both the inside and the outside. Lust tends to get a lot less interesting at that point. Anger. Think about what you would do if you acted on the anger, and how harmful it would be both for yourself and for a lot of people around you. We often think of goodwill as the antidote to anger, but it’s one of several things. The Buddha oftentimes talks about just thinking about the anger as part of a cause-and-effect process. If you acted on your anger, he said, at one point you would be doing things to yourself that your enemy would be glad to see you do. You don’t look good when you’re angry. You say things that can destroy your relationships. You end up destroying property sometimes. If you’re just lazy, you can think about death, as I said before. Death could come at any time. The Buddha said at sunset, “Remind yourself that this might be your last sunset. Are you ready to go tonight?” If the answer is no, what unfinished business is there? Top of the list should be unfinished business in the mind. So whatever the obsessive thinking that you’re bringing into the meditation, there’s a cure for it. Learn to counteract it with a different way of thinking. Once you feel less and less inclined to follow through with that original obsessive thinking, then you can turn around and stay with the breath. This way you use your thought processes for the sake of stillness. Then you continue with the breath, exploring how the breath feels in the different parts of the body, how different rhythms of breathing feel, how much pressure you have to put on the body, put on the breath, your sense of the body right here, right now. To what extent do you have to hold things still? Or can you just simply hold your sense of the body as you’d hold a chick in your hand? Not too tight, not too loosely. If it’s too tight, it dies. If you hold it too loosely, it flies away. Try to surround your sense of the body with that close but unpressured awareness. It may take a while, but after a while you find that you can get there. Then the trick is to stay there, maintain that. This is where you run into a lot of interesting issues in the mind. People often think that you first do concentration, then when you really get good at concentration, then discernment comes. Well, a lot of discernment comes in the course of trying to keep the mind here in the present moment. Because, after a while, different ideas will come up in the mind. “You’re tired of the breath. You feel rested already. That’s enough. Let’s go on and do something else.” Or, “Here I’ve reached this stage. What’s next?” There’s an impatience that can get in the way. And you have to learn how to say, “No.” Don’t identify with the impatience. If there’s boredom, don’t identify with the boredom. Give yourself things to do to stay interested in the present moment. Ask questions about the breath until you feel even more inclined to settle down without having to think about things too much. Really burrow into the present moment. Then when you can maintain that sense of stillness or that sense of centeredness here in the present while you’re sitting here and meditating, try to maintain it as you get up and walk around. This becomes your measuring stick for you to see the movements of your mind. It’s like being in a train station. Otherwise, you’re sitting in one car and you look over at the other car and they’re moving relative to each other, but you’re not sure if you’re moving or they’re moving. There’s nothing that’s definitely connected to the ground that’s not moving for sure that you can measure your movement against. Only if you see yourself suddenly going past a post or something do you realize, “Oh, you’re in a car that’s moving.” It’s the same with the mind. If we don’t have a clear measuring stick like this, we can’t see the movements of the mind. Everything is just part of the flow. But once you assign yourself the measurement of the flow, you can’t see it. The task, you might say, of staying with the breath all the time, you begin to see the movements of your mind a lot more clearly as they slip off the breath to run after this, run after that, react to this, react to that. It’s in this way that insight grows from concentration practice. It doesn’t have to start out as the insight we’re told we’re supposed to get in terms of inconstancy and stress and not-self, but it’s there. You see the disturbances in the mind. And what are disturbances, if not things that are inconstant, things that are stressful? And you learn to drop them, not identify them, with them. That’s where the teaching on not-self comes in. So even when you’re not using those terms as part of your analysis, you can notice, when the mind is getting distracted by something, when the mind is disturbed, when it’s running out after something, there you are. There is your disturbance. There are the three characteristics right there. And as you learn to drop that, you find there’s a resistance in the mind. And that resistance is where you’re going to really gain insight as to why you want to hold on to things that are disturbances. What ideas, what values have you been carrying around that make you want to hold on to those things? How would you feel naked or exposed or unprotected if you let go of those things? In what way would you feel lost? After all, a lot of the meditation is learning how to undo old habits. It’s like giving up an addiction. Most people, when they give up an addiction, the main problem is the sense of feeling lost. They used to have patterns of behavior that they could depend on, or at least some satisfaction. And now those patterns are being taken away and they feel lost. So what you do is try to replace them with other patterns, other habits, like this practice of getting really absorbed in the breath, really learning how to enjoy the process of breathing, appreciate the process of breathing, opening yourself up to what it has to offer. Then you use this to wean yourself out. You wean yourself from your other addictions. Getting addicted to concentration is no big problem. As Ajahn Furing once said, it’s an easier addiction. It’s probably the easiest addiction to wean yourself away from, eventually. And of all the addictions we might have, it’s the most harmless. So allow yourself to get addicted to breathing. Become a connoisseur of your breathing. There’s an article in the New York Times a while back about how people now in New York are getting obsessed with fine chocolates, which is better than getting obsessed with wine and tobacco. But it’s amazing how much energy people can put into learning how to become connoisseurs of something that ultimately is pretty empty. I mean, who cares where your cocoa beans come from, or whether they have fruity aromas or wood aromas, as the rappers say. When you look at our addictions out in the world, a lot of them are just like that. A lot of fuss and bother over something that’s really pretty useless. But in addition to the breathing process, after all, we have to breathe in order to stay alive. Learning how to breathe well isn’t going to be important for the health of the mind and the health of the body. Right there you’ve got something that’s really helpful. And as you find it, it gets you more and more addicted to the sense of stillness. Some people say this is dangerous, that once you get that stillness you’re going to want to run away. Well, we learn how to take the stillness and bring it back out into our lives. That’s where we learn from it. So it’s a good addiction to have. Learn to be a connoisseur of your breathing. Explore other possibilities. And in doing this, you’ll learn an awful lot, not only about the breath, but also about the mind. Because as you create a greater and greater sense of well-being right here in the present moment, parts of the mind that used to be hidden and blocked off, begin to open up. These parts begin to open up in a way where you can handle whatever difficult issues they’ve got. So even though it’s an addiction, it’s a good one. The Buddha’s teachings on concentration, he talks about how you can bring the mind to more and more refined levels of concentration. He always says, “You delight in it. You let the mind settle in it, get absorbed, really appreciate that level of concentration.” And only at the very end do you let go. But until you’ve gotten to that point, you want to hold on. Because if you don’t hold on here, the mind’s going to hold on to other things that are of less value, that are less helpful, of less substance in your life. So as long as the mind has to hold on, give it something really good to hold on to. And here you are. It doesn’t cost anything. It simply takes time and dedication, but those are things that you can put together from your own mind. You don’t have to depend on anyone else. Even if they privatize water, you don’t have to privatize air. They’re not going to be able to privatize your mind. So it’s always there for you to draw on, to apply to the meditation and get the results that only meditation can give.

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