Developing Concentration

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One of the purposes of meditation is to catch ourselves in the act of creating suffering. One of the ways we do this is by realizing that the meditation is a doing. The Buddha once divided the path into two types of activities. One is letting go, and the other is developing. You let go of the causes of suffering. You let go of the things that get in the way of seeing clearly. But then you develop qualities of mind that enable you to see clearly. You can’t just do the letting go, and you can’t do just the developing. The two have to go together. So the Buddha says that our duty with regard to the path is to develop it. We try to develop right view all the way through right concentration. That’s our duty as we’re meditating. In particular, we have to work at right concentration, and it’s a good thing to work at. It’s the one part of the Four Noble Truths where the Buddha talks about pleasure, bliss, and rapture. These are important elements of the path. If you practice without those elements, everything gets very dry. Insight becomes threatening, alienating. Because, again, the insight is seeing just that—catching yourself in the act of causing suffering, something we usually don’t like to do. The practice of concentration, on the one hand, enables you to see yourself as you’re working at the concentration. You find that you work at concentration the same way you work at everything else in life. Whatever habits you have that are unskillful, you’re going to come up against them in the doing of the concentration. If you tend to be impatient, you’re going to be impatient in your concentration. If you tend to be lackadaisical, you’ll be lackadaisical in your work at concentration. If you tend to blow hot and cold, you’ll blow hot and cold in your practice of concentration, sometimes really avid and other times trying to run away from it. So one of the important lessons is just this—getting a sense of the way you approach things, the way you construct things. After all, your life is something that you’ve been constructing. The extent to which you want to see exactly what you’re doing as you construct your life, that’s going to be reflected in the way you practice concentration. Focus on the breath. Create a sense of ease in the breath. This is fabricated. The way you approach that sense of ease will teach you a lot about how you deal with pleasure. If you’re impatient, if you’re grabbing, that’ll come up in your concentration. If you force things too quickly, force things too much, that’ll show itself in the way you try to create a sense of ease with the breath. If you catch yourself, you can see that you’ve learned a lesson about how you cause yourself suffering, because the breath is remarkable in the way that it can show you immediately the state of your mind. Many times the process of cause and effect in our lives is difficult to trace down because sometimes causes lead to effects that are way down the line. But with the breath, it’s pretty immediate. You focus down too heavily on the breath and it’s going to do weird things to the breath energy in the body. If you try to direct it too forcefully, it’ll show up immediately. If you tend to be one-sided in the way you look at things, it’ll be one-sided in the way you look at the breath. And again, there’ll be a sense of dis-ease in the breath. So you have to stop and ask yourself, “What am I doing?” You’re getting immediate feedback. So learn how to read that feedback. When you focus on the breath, it’s not too heavily focused and it’s not too light. When it’s too heavy, you find that the breath energy gets bottled up in one part of the body or starts getting extreme in one way or another. So lighten your focus a little bit. Broaden your focus. And then if you find, however, that you’re beginning to slip away from the breath, it’s a sign that it’s too light. You’re in a place in the middle where it’s just right. You’re with the breath, but you’re not forcing it too much. And you’re able to maintain a fairly stable sense of well-being. And as you do that, you’ll find that it’s an important skill, because you’ve learned a sense of balance. We’re practicing the Middle Way, and one of the important aspects of the Middle Way is just this, learning how to develop a sense of balance. It’s an essential part of developing discernment. At the same time, as that sense of balance gets more steady, more reliable, you give yourself a good vantage point for looking at other things going on in the mind. When thoughts come into the mind, you can see them clearly because you have something to measure them against. It’s like looking at the clouds in the sky. If you’re lying on your back and there’s nothing but you in the sky, after a while you begin to lose sense of whether the clouds are going north or south or how fast, because there’s nothing to compare them to. It’s just one cloud. If the clouds are going in different directions, you don’t really know if any one cloud is still and the other clouds are moving, if everybody’s moving. But if you have something still on the ground in your range of vision—a telephone pole, the peak of a roof—you get a very clear sense of which clouds are going north, which ones are going west, how fast they’re going, because you have something relatively stable and still against which to measure them. It’s the same with the motions of the mind. You need something still against which to measure everything else, so that stillness is a still spot that you’re able to maintain, where there’s a sense of ease, wherever it is in the body. It provides you with just that vantage point. It also gives you the sense of well-being that keeps insight from being threatening, because, after all, what are you seeing? You’re seeing your own ignorance. The way the mind creates suffering for itself, even though it thinks it’s doing something else. Suffering, after all, is not that abstract a thing that we shouldn’t be able to notice. We’ve been willfully ignoring it for one reason or another. So it’s seeing just that. If the mind isn’t stable enough, isn’t still enough, it’s going to feel threatened. It’s not going to want to hear that message. But if the mind has been stable, been well-fed with that sense of ease, that sense of rapture, equanimity, then it can notice these things and realize, “Yes, that’s the truth.” And it can also see the alternative to acting in that way, because it’s not reacting with aversion or alienation or a sense of entrapment. Those old habits begin to fall from its grasp. In the same way that a ripe fruit drops from the tree, the tree doesn’t shake the fruit off. It doesn’t use one branch or two branches to form a pair of scissors to cut the stem of the fruit. The fruit ripens and it drops. Your insight into those old habits begins to ripen and the habits drop away. So when insight comes, it has to come in both terms of cause and effect. Simply seeing the impermanence of things, that they’re stressful, that they’re not self, that’s only half the side. The other half is, what are you doing to make those things? There’s a group in Singapore that one time got some of the Ajaan Lee translations, and so they wrote a letter to me asking some questions of Ajaan Phuong. One of the guys was saying that his meditation practice was to apply the three characteristics to everything he saw in life. I don’t know if Ajaan Phuong had any advice. His advice was, “Well, turn around and look and see what it is that’s saying ‘stressful,’ ‘impermanent,’ ‘not self.’ What’s that side of your awareness doing?” We tend to look at things outside without realizing what we’re doing to them and what our reactions are. Without that, the insight is only half-insight. Half-insight, of course, is not the whole picture. It maintains ignorance. You want to have an all-around insight, seeing both cause and effect. Your own contribution to this undertone of stress underlies everything we experience in the six sense media and the five khandhas. To be sensitive to that, you have to learn how to create at least a relative sense of ease and get more and more sensitive to that sense of ease. As you’re more sensitive to the ease, you become more sensitive to subtle levels of stress and, hopefully, subtle levels of action. The little intentions, the little choices you make from moment to moment, are only when you see the connection. You see it from a sense of equanimity, from a sense of maturity, of the fruit ripening. That’s when the letting go becomes natural, when it’s healthy letting go. So as we practice, we have our agendas. The agenda is to create a sense of well-being, even mindfulness. Many people think that mindfulness is totally non-reactive, totally passive, but it’s not. The foundations of mindfulness are a fairly active process, and they’re meant to develop, to yield in right concentration. You work at developing skillful qualities. You’re mindful and alert as you develop skillful qualities and let go of unskillful ones. This is how right mindfulness builds on right effort and leads into right concentration. There’s a doing, and as we work at it, we try to get more and more skillful in our doing. That’s what enables us to see the Four Noble Truths in action. When we see them, then the mind is ready for release, because it sees things all around from a very stable vantage point, one that we’ve worked hard at developing. It shows at that moment how worthwhile it is to develop this stable state, so that when insight comes, it isn’t disorienting, it’s actually orienting. It comes with even a greater sense of well-being. (crickets chirping)

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