Getting Familiar with Concentration

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The mind has its own rhythm, its own pace in the practice. And it’s not up to you to determine what that rhythm or pace is. All you can do is provide the right conditions for it to grow. And whether your mind is going to be a banana tree that grows so fast you can almost watch it grow, or whether it’s going to be an oak tree, that’s not up to you to decide. But what you can do is give it the right fertilizer. Give it the right soil. Plant it in the right location. Water it properly. And then it’ll grow. So that’s what we’re doing as we practice. We may be impatient to get the insights or the states of concentration that we’ve heard about. But impatience is not a factor of the path. What is a factor of the path? Desire is a factor of the path. There has to be the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities and to foster skillful ones. That much you can desire. But you can’t desire that it’s going to happen within an hour or within a day or within two weeks or whatever. You can just work on whatever comes up. Sometimes you find that the mind throws a lot of issues back at you, and sometimes it’s hardly anything at all. Sometimes it’s so easy to settle down that you wonder why you had problems before. And then during the next session, you’ll find that all the problems that were hiding out in the previous session come up all at once. And you’re dirty as simply to deal with whatever comes up. If a skillful quality hasn’t arisen yet, you try to give rise to it. Once it’s there, you try to foster it. Focus on the things that you can work on. In other words, you’re responsible for the causes. As for when the results will ripen, you can’t determine it ahead of time. All you know is that you’re fostering the causes that will help the desired results to come. So this is why we work with the breath. Staying with the breath. Keep returning to the breath. Getting to know the breath. Getting familiar with the breath. Getting on good terms with it. That’s planning the mind in the right place and giving it the soil and then fertilizer and the water it needs. Because if you’re going to see anything, you’re going to see it right here. All the insights that you need to know will come right here. But as for when the insight will come, you can’t determine that ahead of time. But you can determine that right now. You’re going to keep the mind right here, and if you find it wandering off, you’re going to bring it back. Learn to do skillful ways to keep bringing it back so it’s happy to come back, happy to stay. After all, the Buddha said that insight is insight into the process of fabrication and all the fabrications you need to know, right here, when you’re focused on the breath. The breath itself is the bodily fabrication. It’s the factor that keeps the body going. There’s verbal fabrication, the mind’s inner chatter, where it directs its thoughts to certain topics and then evaluates those topics. You’re directing your thoughts to the breath and you’re evaluating the breath. Then there’s mental fabrication, feelings and perceptions. There’s the feelings of ease or dis-ease, which are associated with the breath, and your perceptions, the labels you give to the breathing and the other sensations that arise up around the breathing. So everything you need to know is right here. It’s largely a matter of getting familiar with it. To be familiar with it, you have to stay with it again and again and again. Keep coming back. Keep keeping watch over it to see how these things move, to see how they behave. And then when you’re really familiar with their patterns, then you start noticing more subtle things that you would have missed otherwise. And the kind of knowledge that comes with familiarity, that’s really solid. I mean, you can read about things in books. It’s like, say you just wanted to be a sea captain. You could read about ships, you could read about the ocean, you could read about the weather. But that doesn’t necessarily mean you go down to the ship one morning and you look out across the ocean, you look at the sky, and you can tell whether it’s a good day to go out or not. But if you’ve done this for many years, after a while you begin to get a sense of what the clouds are telling you, what the color of the water is telling you about how that day is going to turn out. That’s the kind of knowledge that comes with familiarity. And this is what you want with your own mind. You want to be on good terms. You want to be familiar with all its moods. But that doesn’t mean you have to run after the moods. Simply that you’re familiar with staying at this vantage point right here at the breath and seeing how things look from this vantage point. This is why concentration is so important. It gives you a good, comfortable, solid place to stay so you can watch things for long periods of time. There are times when it may seem dull and unoriginal and you just keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath. What’s new or interesting about that? Well, you come back to the breath so you can get your stance, you can get your vantage point. Then once you’ve got your vantage point, then you start seeing things. You will learn some interesting things about the mind in the process of training it to stay still. So it’s not that you put practice concentration without any insight at all. As the Buddha said, tranquility and insight are both necessary to get the mind into good, solid concentration. In this case, it’s insights into how to get the mind to settle down and what different kinds of moods it will have from day to day. Some days it’ll be happy to settle down. Other days, it seems like the last thing on earth you want to do is be with the breath. Well, what do you do on days like that? Do you simply give in to the aversion to the breath? Or do you probe it? Or do you try to distract it? Or do you simply try to override it? There are lots of ways you can deal with that reluctance to settle down. It’s not that one way is intrinsically better than another, because you’ll find that some work on one day and they won’t work on another, which is why you have to have lots of approaches. It’s in using your ingenuity to get past these obstacles that you begin to gain some real insight into the mind and how the mind works. For concentration, the ability to get the mind centered on one object and to stay there. Because the process of getting it centered gives you insight. And then once it really stays there, you get even more refined insights. Insights that are secure and solid, because they come from familiarity. Rather than from preconceived notions. Sometimes you hear of techniques where they say they can force-feed insights. They can guarantee insights within a certain amount of period of time. It’s like anything that’s force-fed. Like those beautiful strawberries they grow nowadays. They all come out nice and large, very red. They look good in the store, but they don’t taste nearly as good as the old ones that were allowed to grow naturally. It looks like the real thing, but it’s not. You actually can put people into a kind of controlled neurosis. With certain techniques to the point where they have a neurotic breakthrough. And it looks like insight, sounds like insight, but it’s not insight. Insight is something that when it comes, it really does make a big difference in the mind. And the difference is lasting. And instead of being disoriented, it’s extremely orienting. You see the mind’s ability to create happiness simply through concentration. And you need that to get a perspective so that you can compare when other insights come. Exactly what kind of ease, what kind of insight do they give to the mind that’s of another order from concentration? If you’re not familiar with concentration, many times these neurotic breakthroughs that simply get the mind to settle down and be still after going through a lot of work, you mistake a state of concentration for something more radical. So this is another reason why concentration is so important. It gives you a measuring stick. As a liberation that comes from genuine insight, it’s something that can’t be willed. Concentration can be willed. As you get more and more familiar with the different levels of concentration, you see exactly how far you can will the mind to be still, how far you can will the mind to be peaceful. And it goes a long way. Finally, when genuine insight comes, you find it’s of a radically different order. Only when the mind has been through good, solid concentration are you in a position to judge that this is something different. This is something unconstructed, unfabricated, because you’ve tested how far fabrication can go. Sometimes it seems when you practice concentration, you’re going against all the principles of what you may hear that insight is all about. Insight is about inconstancy, stress, not self. Here we are trying to make the mind constant, give it a sense of ease, give yourself a sense of control over what the mind can do. What’s precisely because we’re going against those three characteristics that we can begin to recognize exactly where they’re true? If you just give up and say, “Well, everything is inconstant, stressful, not self,” before you run up against the limits, you don’t know exactly what the Buddha is talking about. When you push to see how far you can make the mind constant, give it a sense of ease, give it a sense of control, when you run up against the limits of that project, that’s when you’re more in a position to appreciate genuine insight when it comes. As we’ve often been told, the Buddha asks us to test his teachings. It doesn’t mean going through a program in which we simply try to clone the insights that he had. He says you do this process here of getting the mind concentrated. Push it to see how far it can go. Then, in the process of that, you’ll run up against this principle of inconstancy, stress, and not-self in your own actions, in your own quest for happiness. It’s a totally different perspective from what you get simply by reading about it, because you’ve learned how to trust this sense of concentration that you’ve developed. It really does become your center, and you’ll use it to build and peel away your attachments to all other things. Then, when you’ve gotten so that you’re relying totally on this, when you’ve pulled the rug out from under yourself, that’s when you’re in the right position to benefit from the Buddha’s teachings on insight, in the ultimate sense. Inconstancy, or the impermanence of mountains and trees and things like that, doesn’t really hit home. But when you’ve learned to place all of your hopes for happiness in one state of mind and let go of everything else, then you can turn around and analyze that state of mind. That’s when insight opens you up to something else, totally other. That’s when the insight really hits home, when you’ve made this spot your home. So, work on settling in.

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