Balanced Concentration

October 21, 2005

The practice of concentration is an effort to get comfortable with the present moment, so you can stay here for long periods of time. In fact, so you can make this your home base. If you’re not comfortable here, you’re not going to stay. The mind’s going to keep running off, running away. And when you do make it stay, it’s forced, and there’s going to be an element of aversion. And as soon as your mindfulness slips a little bit, the aversion pops you out, anyplace else but here. So you want to be on good terms with the breath. You want to be on good terms with your awareness in the present moment. And this is going to take time. In some cases, other people find it pretty easy. Things are fairly comfortable in the present, they settle down, no problem. With other people, it takes a lot of effort and a lot of time, and a lot of ingenuity as well, because there’s so much imbalance and discomfort in the present that you just don’t want to stay here. But when you do try to stay here, things act up. So that requires patience. And that you be very observant. Use your ingenuity to figure out what’s going on here. Why is there this imbalance? And sometimes you have to sit with it for a while before you can figure it out. That’s where the patience comes in. It may be a physical issue that the elements in the body seem unbalanced, or maybe a mental issue. You’ve got certain thoughts lying in wait when you come to the present moment. Things you’ve done or said, or things that other people have done or said, sometimes long times ago. And it’s as if they’re lodged in the body, and as soon as you settle down, there they are. They come springing out. So you’ve got to learn how to work through them. John Mahamboa makes a comparison with two types of meditators. Those who find it pretty easy to settle down. All they have to do is just tell the mind to stay with one thing. It stays with one thing, and there’s no problem. There they are. Other people, though, have to figure things out before they can settle down. The analogy he gives is two different kinds of trees. If you have a tree out in the middle of a field and you want to cut it down, there’s no problem. No matter which side you cut it from, it’s going to go down without getting entangled in anything. The other kind of tree is the tree in the forest, with its branches entangled with the branches of other trees. There may be only one direction in which you can cut it down, and to get it to go down, first you have to go up and trim this branch, trim that branch, and then you can get the tree down. So that trimming of the branches is when you find that you’ve got lots of issues—physical issues, mental issues—that make it hard for the mind to settle down and just be very, very still. We can’t design ahead of time which kind of mind we’re going to have. We have been designing it willy-nilly, but when the time comes to meditate, we have to do it. You can’t put in a request, “Can I have a mind that settles down very quickly and very easily?” You’ve just got to deal with a mind you’ve got. So if there are thoughts that come popping up in the meditation, there are different ways of dealing with them. One is just a thought concerning somebody who has hurt you or somebody you’ve hurt. Just spread thoughts of goodwill to the person. There’s no need to get entangled in any issues. If that doesn’t work, say it’s something that you did and said that you really regret. Well, reflect on how you can’t change the past, and getting embroiled in remorse right now is going to get in the way of the meditation. So just remind yourself that the best thing a human being can do is to resolve not to make that mistake again. Recognize it as a mistake. Make up your mind, “Okay, that’s the last time I want to act in that way.” That makes it easier to settle down. Ask for things that other people did or said to you. Remind yourself that’s their karma. The fact that that incident happened, maybe you’ve done something like that way in the past and you don’t know about it. This is just your old karma coming back. Well, that particular bit of karma is now done and gone, unless you dig it up now and want to get it all embroiled again, which doesn’t serve any real purpose. In other words, point out to yourself the reasons why getting entangled in that thought really doesn’t add up. The reasons not to get entangled are the ones you want to side with. Then try to come back to the breath. This falls in line with what the Buddha had to say about meditation. Sometimes tranquility leads, sometimes insight leads, but they’re both qualities that you need in order to get the mind in a good, strong concentration. It’s not the case that concentration is just a matter of tranquility. You need both qualities to get the mind to settle down. You have to understand what’s going on. You have to have ingenuity. You have to have strategies to get the mind to settle down and stay down. Because even people who find it easy to get the mind to settle down have trouble staying there. The mind settles down because they’re not thinking about anything. As soon as something else comes up, they leave the meditation. They’ve got this duty that they have to do. All of a sudden, they find that meditation is gone. Concentration is gone. That’s also where you have to exercise ingenuity. Reminding yourself that the breath is still here. I still have my sensation of the body. It’s important to learn how not to block out that sensation of the body while you’re dealing with other things. This is a skill. This takes time. It’s not just a matter of determination. It’s a matter of understanding what’s going on. Checking to see when the mind leaves the present moment, where is it going? Why is it going there? What are the things that trigger it to jump out, leave the body and go streaming outside? John Lee talks about this habit of the mind to stream outside. He says that precisely as the word asava. It’s a Pali term. It means outflow or effluent. It also means fermentation. The mind goes fermenting outside. What’s the yeast? What’s the impetus that gets you flowing outside? If you don’t see that, you can’t stop it from happening. As Lampo Dun comments, the mind flowing outside is suffering. It’s because of your lack of mindfulness that allows it to go outside. It’s your lack of understanding of what’s happening. It is possible to stay centered in the body and know things outside. You’re aware of them. You can deal with them. But you’ve moved your center of operations inside where it’s more secure. Bringing the mind into the present moment and getting it to stay here is not just a matter of being comfortable and at ease with the object. That is one of the essential elements. But also it means understanding what the mind does, how the mind moves, how the mind moves out, how the mind moves back in, why it moves. So whatever issues you have in getting the mind to settle down or to stay down, remember, you’ve got to use both qualities, both tranquility and insight. Both a sense of calm and the ability to figure things out. This is why the mind causes suffering. We haven’t figured it out yet. To figure it out means, one, watching it, and two, asking the right questions. Buddha once said that the normal reaction to suffering is bewilderment. It comes in so many different ways, as we commented this afternoon. Sometimes there’s a physical pain and there’s not much question about the fact that that’s very painful. Other times there’s a more neutral message from the body, yet the mind can interpret it as pain for any number of reasons. What this means is that pain and suffering are very complex things. If they were easy and simple, all you have to do is meditate once or twice and that would be the end of the matter. But you’re going to discover that there’s lots of different ways the mind can create suffering, even out of fairly comfortable circumstances. Other times it can live in real difficulty and yet not be suffering at all. This is why pain is bewilderment. This is why it takes time to watch, to be patient, to see what’s going on, and to ask questions about what the mind is doing to fabricate this pain. How is it dressing it up? How is it dressing it down? It’s all a matter of stillness and insight, working together. Being brought into balance. So when issues come up in the meditation, remind yourself that these are the two things you’ve got to find the proper balance for. What is the proper balance for this particular issue? On the one hand, how can you keep the mind as calm as possible, as settled in as possible? And then what questions can you ask the mind? Understand things. Because if you get one without the other, the meditation is not going to go very far. It works best when you’ve got both.

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