Balancing the Bases for Concentration

November 21, 2006

Spread thoughts of goodwill all around you. Remind yourself that you’re here for the sake of true happiness, and that your true happiness doesn’t take anything away from anyone else, because it comes from things you discover within, things you develop within. That means that your true happiness doesn’t conflict with anyone else’s true happiness. When you spread thoughts of goodwill all around, it means inside, too. It’s thoughts of goodwill to yourself, people you like, people you don’t like, because you don’t gain anything from anyone’s unhappiness, from anyone’s suffering, no matter how much you might dislike somebody. Their suffering can actually come back and make you suffer as well. So wish happiness for everyone. Remind yourself that you’re here for a special kind of happiness, a happiness that doesn’t have to depend on anything else, something that no one else can take away, something that you’re not taking away from anyone else. Now you have to look within. When you look within, what do you see? You’ve got the body sitting here breathing, and you’ve got the mind thinking and aware. So bring all those things together. Think about the breath. Don’t let yourself forget about it. Then watch the breath to see what it feels like as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Where do you notice the sensation of the breathing most clearly? It could be at the tip of the nose, or it could be the movement of the body that brings the air in and out of the lungs. Find whichever part of the body seems most natural to focus on and then let your awareness settle there. Breathe deep in and out for a while. See if deep breathing feels good. If it does, stay with deep breathing. If it starts feeling uncomfortable, you can switch to something else—shorter breathing, more shallow breathing, faster, slower. Just think to yourself, “What kind of breath would feel good right now?” and see how the body responds. Don’t try to force the breath in any way. But be very sensitive to how it feels. Once the spot you’re watching begins to feel comfortable, then you can think of that comfort spreading out to the body. Down the back, out the arms, out the legs, in all directions, all along the nervous system. You don’t have to follow it out. Just think. The comfort can spread out from where you are. Just maintain your focus. Maintain that sense of ease right at the spot where you’re focused. Just try not to build a shell around that spot. If you do, you’re going to get in the way of the smooth functioning of the body, and that’s going to make it difficult to meditate for long periods of time. So have a sense of porousness. If there’s going to be any sounds coming around you, just let them come around and go through you. You don’t have to catch them. You don’t have to build up a shell of resistance against them. Think of your body as a big net. The wind can go right through the spaces in the net. In the same way, the sounds can go right through it. Thoughts can go right through your mind. Think of your mind as a big net as well, a net that’s very poor at catching things. Most of us have a very fine sense of how to weave in our net. Anything comes by and we catch it. Then we complain that the things outside have disturbed us. John Cha, a famous meditation teacher in Thailand, once said, “The sounds aren’t disturbing you. You’re disturbing the sounds.” In other words, something comes by and you immediately have to comment on it and have to get involved with it. Of course, that means you’ve dropped your meditation and gone running off after something else. So have a sense of this focused awareness in the present as being something very precious, something you want to maintain, something that requires all your attention, like a bowl filled with oil. You don’t want to drip any of the oil. Again, don’t tense up around it. If you tense up around it, you’re going to spill the oil. Try to maintain a sense of ease and balance. This element of balance is really important in the meditation. The Buddha once said that there are four basic factors on which your concentration will be based. There’s desire, there’s effort, there’s intent, and then there’s the powers of analysis. A lot of these things are things we’ve been told that you don’t bring to the meditation, but he says they’re essential. If they’re out of balance, they can cause problems. If your desire is too sluggish, you don’t really care about what you’re doing. If it’s too strong, all you can think about is what you want out of the meditation, and you can’t really focus on what you’re actually doing to get there. So you have to balance your desire. Think of any skill that you’ve ever mastered in the past. It could be cooking or carpentry or a sport. How did you get good at it? You want it to be good, but if you’re still just sitting there thinking how much you would like to be a really good sportsperson, that didn’t accomplish anything. If you wanted to be a really good cook, sitting around thinking about how much you’d like to create great dishes, that didn’t accomplish anything either. You went into the kitchen and you found the ingredients. You got out a cookbook and you tried making something, and then you tasted it. The tasting is where the element of intent comes, and you have to really taste it to see what tastes right. Is it too salty or does it not have enough salt? Did you overcook it? Did you undercook it? If you pay careful attention, you can tell. There are people whose tongues are so finely trained, they can taste a dish and know immediately what the ingredients were, how hot the heat was, and over which the dish was cooked, simply because they’ve learned how to refine their sensation of taste. It’s a skill that can be developed. Here, as a meditator, you want to become very skilled at being more sensitive to the breath in the body and more sensitive to the movements of your mind. Again, that takes effort, and the effort, too, has to be balanced. If the effort is too sluggish, nothing much happens. If it’s too strong, you wear yourself out and get discouraged. So you try to maintain a balance in your effort, which doesn’t always mean a middling effort. Sometimes you really do have to try very hard when the mind is extremely rebellious. There are times when you have to come down strong on it. Other times, the effort is hardly an effort at all. You just watch what’s going on. The test here is essentially to try to see what works and what doesn’t work, and you learn from what you’ve done. How do you learn? One is by paying careful attention, and two is by learning how to analyze what you’re doing. Again, we’re often told that analysis is something you want to shy away from in your meditation. And it’s true. If you analyze things too much, you destroy the meditation because you’re thinking too much. But if you don’t think at all, don’t observe at all, and don’t ask questions, the meditation doesn’t go anywhere. So, try to be a connoisseur, try to be a master of your breath. If you control it too much, it’s going to get uncomfortable. But if you just let it do its own thing, that doesn’t accomplish much either. Try to figure out what kind of breathing would feel best right now. Pose the question in the mind and see how the body responds. Then, after a while, you begin to gain a sense of what works and what doesn’t work. If nothing much seems to happen, you can start consciously asking questions. How about longer breathing? Then try longer breathing for a while. Deeper breathing. See what deeper breathing does for a while. Progress in the meditation depends on learning how to observe what you’ve done and make improvements. It requires that there are times when you simply stay with one task that you assign yourself, like being with the breath, and say, “For the time being, don’t ask too many questions. Just try to settle in.” Once you’ve settled in, then you can start asking questions. Does your concentration feel comfortable? Does it feel too strained? If it’s too strained, loosen your grip a bit. If you have trouble settling down, maybe you should be more strict with yourself and not allow yourself to wander off. There are people who come to meditation wanting to be told. Find a great master who will take one look at them and tell them precisely what they need to do to meditate, so they don’t have to think, so that they’re not responsible. But there’s no way that insight is going to develop that way. Insight comes from your ability to look at what you’ve done and to decide whether it’s skillful or not, or how it might be more skillful. Learn to balance the times when you simply focus on the breath without asking too many questions, aside from asking yourself what kind of breathing will feel good now. Then, after you’ve been able to settle in, you can start asking questions. It’s a combination of the doing and the asking questions that’s going to bring progress in the practice. You balance your desires so it’s not too strong, not too weak. Your effort is not too strong, not too weak. The intentness you bring to the practice, the way you analyze things, the way you come to understand them, try to find the right balance. You need to maintain that balance. As with any balancing act, you can expect the fact that you’re going to fall over. But you learn to pick yourself up and then try again. This is a skill we’re developing here. We’re not trying to clone anybody’s insights. The Buddha’s way of teaching was not to tell you what you are supposed to see. He has you ask questions and learn to look for yourself. There’s a problem. Sometimes we hear that Buddhist insight means that when you see that everything is impermanent or there is no self in the world, you force yourself to see things in that way. It’s as if someone told you, “If you see everything is impermanent, everything is blue, you’re going to be happy.” You can play these tricks on your mind and force yourself to see things as blue. But does that mean they’re really blue? That’s what happens when you try to clone other people’s insights. You can end up with distorted perceptions, even though it seems to fall right in line with the book’s saying. It can still be wrong. The Buddha’s way is to have you ask questions. It’s as if he were to say there’s a treasure hunt. There’s something really valuable over in the yard next door, and it has these general characteristics. This is how you can test. Say he says there’s gold over there. These are the tests for gold. And he gives you a few hints on how to look for it. Then in you go, and you look. And if you come across something that looks like gold, well, then you test it to make sure that it’s not fool’s gold. When you find that it passes the tests and it satisfies you, yes, it really is gold. Then you’ve got something special. It comes from learning to ask the right questions and to have the right standards for judgment. In this case, the Buddha says there is gold. It’s a deathless element in the mind, something that doesn’t change. So when you develop states of concentration in the mind, states of peace, states of well-being, first you learn to maintain them. And then you look at them and see, is it still totally without disturbance? Is there any hint of something inconstant, any hint of stress here, any hint of something that’s beyond your control? And if there is, it means you haven’t found the gold yet. So you look more carefully, try to find something that’s even more refined, more steady. Then you test it again. Keep asking these questions of putting the fool’s gold aside, and ultimately you find that there really is gold in here. And when you find it, you know. It’s not because you’ve cloned somebody else’s ideas. The Buddha calls this appropriate attention, looking at the right things, asking the right questions about them. He says this is the most important factor for awakening. So we start out with the breath, learning how to look at the breath, learning how to ask questions about the breath. Breathing becomes not just a simple physical process that does nothing much more than keep you alive. It becomes something that’s really refreshing. What kind of breathing would feel refreshing right now? What kind of breathing would feel blissful? Pose the question and see what happens. The more refreshing the breath, the more blissful the breath, the easier it’ll be for the mind to settle in. Then the concentration can start doing its work. Concentration is a really important part of the path that’s often overlooked. It’s the part of the path that heals the mind. Many times we come to meditation with a sense of being worn out, at our wits’ end, exhausted. So breathe in a refreshing way. Breathe in a comfortable way, in a nourishing way. After a while, the mind will settle in and both body and mind will begin to feel refreshed. When you’re nourished like this, then it’s a lot easier for the mind to look at things in an unbiased way, which means that sometimes the concentration takes time to do its work. So give it that time. Give it space. Don’t think you’re sitting around doing nothing. The fact that you can bring the mind to a state of ease means you’re beginning to gain some sense of insight already. The Buddha once said that there is no insight, there is no discernment, without strong concentration. There’s no strong concentration without discernment. In other words, you have to have some understanding about what’s going on in the mind before you can get it to settle down. The understanding comes from trial and error. So, focus on being with the breath. After a while, you begin to find that there’s a problem. The mind doesn’t settle down the way you want it to. Can I ask why? It might be something to do with the way you focus. You might change your focus to a different part of the body. It might have to do with the breath. Maybe the breath is being too much controlled, too much confined. Think of it differently. Instead of being more spacious, think of the whole body breathing in and out. The pores of your skin are like the pores of a sponge. As you breathe in, the breath comes in from all directions, down from the top, up from the bottom, around from all the sides. See what that does, if the body feels a greater sense of ease and well-being. If it does, keep that up. The more curious you get about the present moment, the more you’re going to learn and get curious about the process of breathing. There’s a lot to explore here, a lot to learn. So if you bring the right attitude, in other words, the willingness to watch what you’re doing, to make adjustments to see what’s causing stress and what’s not, that attitude will take you far.

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