Attached to Concentration

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Sometimes you hear in meditation instructions, “Concentration is okay as long as you don’t get attached to it.” But that begs the question, how are you going to develop concentration unless you have some attachment, unless you enjoy it? There’s a refrain in the Canon where the Buddha says, that once you find an object that you like, you take pleasure in it, find satisfaction in it, settle in and indulge in your object, the activity of the concentration. Which means that you’ve got to find it interesting. You’ve got to find it something you really enjoy. And to get good at it, you really have to be attached to it. You have to take delight in it. This is why the way each person’s mind is going to settle down is something very personal, very individual. In the forest tradition, you’ll notice that there’s no one technique that’s supposed to work for everyone. There’s no one size that fits all. John Mann himself would teach many different kinds of meditation techniques for the sake of concentration. The breath, contemplation of the body, repeating the word bhutto, dhammo or sankho. In fact, pretty much all 40 of the classic meditation techniques that are classified in the commentaries and can be found in the Canon are fair game. And on top of that, the Canon and the commentaries tell of other ways that people’s minds settle down. There’s a story of a nun whose mind was just all over the place. There was one day she contemplated the fact that there are people who work hard for their living and they’re able to do it. Here I am with something easy like this. I still can’t do it. She felt ashamed. She didn’t know what to do. Then she went back to her hut. As she was washing her feet, she just started watching the water as it flowed off her feet and down onto the ground. And that became the object of her meditation. It calmed her mind down. There’s a story they tell of a monk who had trouble memorizing any kind of meditation word at all. So the Buddha gave him a piece of cloth. He said, “Just rub the piece of cloth and watch it.” And as the monk rubbed the piece of cloth back and forth, the sweat on his hands got into the cloth. He began to notice that the more he rubbed it, the dirtier it got. And something in that just hit home with him. His mind was able to settle down. So there’s no one right way to meditate. And even though you’ll see many, many meditation instructions, they’re meant to be sort of general guidelines, point-out possibilities, which you’ve got to explore on your own if you’re going to find out what captures your mind, what captures your imagination. The word citta in Pali means mind, but it also seems to mean interest as well. And it’s one of the factors of any good state of concentration. There’s got to be interest in the object. If you simply tie the mind down to the object without giving it any sense of satisfaction, it’s going to try to break loose. And when it breaks loose, it’s not going to come back easily. So even though you’re putting a tether on the mind, you’re trying to give it something to be interested in, so it doesn’t mind staying in one place. It actually enjoys it. For instance, with the breath. John Lee gives some fairly detailed guidelines on where you can focus on the breath and the different ways the breath can flow in the body. But if you look at his Dhamma talks, you’ll see he played with the breath in lots of different ways himself. He was always coming up with new ways of conceiving the breath. And in John Fuang, we’re talking about other ways of conceiving the breath. One is there’s this sort of line of energy running down the middle of your body. And the breath comes in and out of that line of energy. You’re trying to keep that line of energy stoked. In other words, keep it full. Not squeeze it out, but think of it being full all the time, even when the breath is out. That energy is still there. It’s still kind of glowing inside the body. It’s still flowing from the head on down to the base of the spine. You can try that and see if that perception of the breath helps. Just kind of wander around your body. See what parts of the body need breath energy or seem to be tangled in one way or another. Try to work out the tangles. A few general principles. One, you want to make sure that your feet and your hands are relaxed. That seems to improve the breath energy throughout the body. You’re opening up exit channels to make sure that stagnant breath doesn’t build up. Keep things flowing all the way down through your feet, all the way down through your hands. And check out this sort of center core of the body. Every now and then make sure it’s okay. Make sure your posture is okay. And then from there, see what needs to be done. What captures your imagination? Kind of follow your nose around the body. See what’s interesting. Is there a particular pain you’d like to work with right now? Or a sense of tension or tightness that you found maybe in your feet or in your lower back, maybe in one of your hips or shoulder? In other words, instead of dutifully following what’s in the book, see what captures your imagination right now, what captures your interest right now. It’s like learning how to play the guitar. You can buy a book that will teach you all the different chord progressions that are pretty basic. But there comes a time when you have to put the book aside and just kind of explore what different chords can you make on the guitar, what different sounds can you get out of it. The guitar playing doesn’t become your own until you’ve done that. Just play around. A lot of times you’ll find sounds that don’t sound very good, and other times you may run into something very unexpected that you like. It’s the quality of exploring in and of itself that becomes enthralling, because you have to remember, when the Buddha is talking about attachment and delight, he’s not talking about simply liking an object. You like an activity. We’re more attached to certain activities than we are to particular objects. We like to desire. We like to learn new things. It doesn’t really matter so much what the object of the desire is or the new thing we’ve learned. The activity of desiring things, the activity of learning new things, that’s what we’re attached to. So you learn how to use those attachments to your advantage. We all want pleasure. We’re trying different ways all the time to find the pleasure, some that we’re kind of attached to because at some point in the past we found pleasure out of them, but that’s no guarantee that we’re going to keep on finding pleasure out of them. But it’s the activity of looking for the pleasure that we enjoy, finding something new, learning something new. So explore. Look around. See what captures your interest and your sense of the body right now. It doesn’t have to follow the instructions in the books. You don’t have to be a good little boy or little girl and not get attached to it. You’ve got to be attached. As the Chan Fung used to say, you’ve got to be crazy about the meditation. Really like it. Always looking for opportunities to learn new things about the energy in the body and how your awareness relates to that energy. In that way, the meditation becomes your own. And you do it not because you’re supposed to do it, but because you like to do it. And as for the stage when you give up your attachment to it, it’s like a child playing with dolls and playing with little toy trucks. You enjoy it and you get everything you can out of that little doll or that little toy truck, but there will come a time when you outgrow it. That’s when you let it go. Because the activity of playing with that no longer enthralls you. And it’s the same with the meditation. There will come a point where you’ve had enough of playing around with the meditation and you want to look for something better. But you’re not going to get to that point until you’ve played around pretty thoroughly. So the statement you sometimes hear is, “Well, I’m not attached to meditation. I tried it and I’m no longer attached because I wasn’t very good at it.” That’s not the kind of letting go that the Buddha talked about. Throughout the practice, it’s a matter of mastering a skill before you’ve explored the full range of possibilities that that skill can offer. That’s when you let it go. So this skill of exploring the present moment, what enthralls the mind in the present moment, sometimes you may find a meditation where it gets interesting. So stay with that. You’re analyzing the different parts of the body, thinking about the breath energy, say, in your bones. There’s lots to play with here in the present moment. So follow your nose. See what captures your interest. And the mind will settle down and find something to take pleasure in, satisfaction. And settle in and indulge in. And the concentration will be an enjoyment and not just a chore.

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