Trust in Concentration

April 20, 2010

One of the standard ground rules for listening to a Dhamma talk while you’re meditating is not to listen. Focus your attention on the breath, on your object of meditation, and let the talk be in the background. You don’t want the talk to interrupt your meditation, to interfere with getting the mind to settle down. And the other part of the reason is that Dhamma talks are slippery things. Sometimes what one person needs to hear is the exact opposite of what another person needs to hear. So while you’re meditating, let the talk go past you. If anything’s really relevant to what you’re doing, it’ll appear very clearly in your range of awareness. As for everything else that seems irrelevant, well, let it stay irrelevant. Because what’s suitable for one person at one point in the path may not be suitable even for the same person at another point in the path. Part of the skill is learning how to look at yourself and to see if that particular Dhamma point applies to you right now. I learned this lesson in a very blatant way back when I was in Thailand. I was having trouble trusting my concentration, and after a long time of being very dubious about the powers of concentration and not wanting to trust the little bits and pieces of concentration that came up, I finally learned to overcome that sense of distrust, and realizing that that was the only way that the concentration was going to develop. I happened to come across a piece by Jhammahambhuva in which he was talking about how important it is not to trust your concentration. Of course, that’s for someone who’s really mastered the concentration and has learned to depend on it and has been able to use it in many circumstances to help give rise to insight, to help deal with pain, deal with confusion in the mind, to the point where it seems like the concentration can help you with anything and you don’t want to let it go. But if the concentration is still weak, still tentative, it’s important that you learn how to give it some trust. John Fuhrman once said, “There are two types of people who meditate. Those who think too much and those who don’t think enough.” Well, there’s another dichotomy. Those who trust their concentration too much and those who don’t trust it enough. So you’ve got to look at yourself to see which extreme you tend to fall into. By and large, here in the West, we don’t trust the concentration. Part of it’s because we’ve been told all kinds of bad things about concentration, that it’s dangerous to get stuck on it, that it’ll delay your progress in the path, and that concentration on its own is not going to lead to awakening. But that’s true of all the factors of the path. Vipassana on its own is not enough to lead to awakening. As the Buddha said, you have to balance it with tranquility. Mindfulness on its own is not enough. You have to develop other qualities as well. Alertness, ardency. Ardency means right effort, trying to give rise to skillful qualities, developing the desire to give rise to skillful qualities, and the desire to abandon unskillful qualities. That needs to develop into concentration if it’s going to have any impact on the mind. And then you look at the Buddha’s own warnings about concentration. There are only one or two passages in the Canon where he mentions warnings about concentration, and they’re all pretty mild. So getting stuck into concentration is like putting your hand on a branch that has sap. The hand will get stuck. It’s difficult to let go. In the same way, if you get stuck on concentration, it’s the last thing that’s going to prevent awakening. That’s pretty mild compared to, say, the drawbacks of sensuality, which the Buddha describes in a lot of detail. Lots of images, lots of stress, stories to drive home the message that when you’re stuck on sensuality, you can do all kinds of unskillful things. People kill and steal and cheat over sensuality. They suffer horribly over sensuality. So we compare that to the drawbacks of concentration and see that the drawbacks of concentration are minor indeed, very mild. And the concentration itself is protection from sensuality. After all, that’s part of the definition of the first jhanas, secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental qualities. Unskillful mental qualities here meaning the seven other wrong factors, meaning secluded from wrong views, wrong resolve, all the way up through wrong mindfulness. Again, when the mind gets centered in that way, you’re on the path to right concentration. And that’s your protection against sensuality. As the Buddha once said, even though you may understand the drawbacks of sensual passion, if you don’t have a sensual pleasure that’s higher than sensual pleasure, you won’t be able to let go of the sensual pleasures. So you need to show some respect for concentration. And even though it may seem weak in the beginning, well, lots of things in the world are weak in the beginning. Little seeds that eventually grow into trees. The seeds are pretty weak. You can step on them and smash them, and that’s the end of them. But if you nurture them, if you look after them, they grow. And ultimately they can give you shade, they can give you fruit. Sometimes the leaves are medicine. Sometimes the flowers are nice. In other words, don’t show disrespect. Stay for concentration, even though it may not seem like much to begin with. And learn to trust it. That state of mind that’s always looking for where is the next pain going to come from, where is the next problem going to come from, that itself is a pain, is a problem in the meditation. You have to give yourself to the sense of ease that comes from staying with the breath. And trust that you can nurture it. Trust that it’ll handle difficult situations. It requires some ingenuity sometimes to exactly see how the concentration is going to help, but it’s a huge help, a huge foundation for the mind. And once it’s grown and developed, it can give you something to hang on to when everything else seems to be turning on you, slipping away. So have some trust in those little spaces of ease. Little patches of ease in the different parts of the body where the energy seems okay, maybe nothing special to begin with. But allow it to stay okay. Don’t step on it and run away. Give it some space. Give it some time. Protect it. Trust that it’ll grow. Trust that the energy you put into it is going to be energy well spent. And when it begins to show itself, give it some more protection. Keep looking after it. Don’t be impatient. If you have trouble trusting it, remember, it’s like a shy person. Only if you show it some trust will it begin to show how trustworthy it is. So go a little out of your way for the concentration. It may not be the whole path, but it’s an important part.

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