The Bowl of Oil

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Chan Fung once said that there are three aspects to the meditation of getting the mind in concentration. The first is doing it, the second is maintaining it, and the third is putting it to use. But doing it is not all that hard. If you think about the breath, there it is. It’s simply a matter of making up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath. That’s the initial doing. Realizing it is a choice you’re making. And part of the maintaining, which is the difficult part, is sticking with that initial choice. Realizing that you’re going to have other choices coming up all throughout the meditation. In some cases you’ll be conscious of them, and in some cases you’ll be conscious of them, and in other cases not so conscious. You’re sitting here focusing on the breath, and all of a sudden you find yourself out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. That’s one of those cases where you didn’t realize you made a choice to be thinking out there someplace. Which means that you have to learn to be very, very sensitive to what’s going on, very quick. What this means also is that when you find yourself away from the breath, you come right back immediately, immediately, immediately. And learn to start looking for the restlessness or the dissatisfaction or anything that gives a sign that the mind is about to wander away. Because sometimes it’s with the breath, but it’s already casting around for where it’s going to go next. Learn how to watch for that. And then, once you notice it, you’ve got to deal with it. And part of it may simply be the fact that the breath is not that comfortable or it’s not that interesting. Or the mind may have a sense of, “I’ve got enough, now what’s next?” And you’ve got to remind yourself that what’s next is staying with the breath. Because you want to get really good at staying here. You need this place if you’re going to put it to use. You need this to be solid. Because even though the Buddha says we have to practice as though our heads were on fire, still we have to be very meticulous and very careful not to overlook the need to stay in concentration. There’s that passage on respect that we chant sometimes, where the Buddha talks about respect for the training, i.e., heightened virtue, heightened mind or concentration, and then heightened discernment. And then in the next line he also talks about respect for concentration. He has to mention it twice because it’s something we tend to overlook. There’s a footnote in one of the books we were reading this rains retreat. The passage talked about noble right concentration and its seven requisites or its seven supports, starting with right view all the way up through right mindfulness. And the note made a kind of almost sarcastic reference, as if concentration were more important than the others. But there is this tendency in the tradition to look down on concentration. Perhaps the Buddha sensed that. Because when concentration starts out, it seems so ordinary. Your mind is just sitting here, not doing anything else, just focused on one thing, nothing special. What makes it special is that you stay with it, with it, with it, with it. And it gets to grow, it gets to develop. And part of the mind says, “Well, when am I going to gain any insight?” Well, the insights come in the maintaining. Anything that comes along to knock you off, you’ve got to look into it. In some cases it’s simply a matter of noticing, “Okay, this has knocked me off. I can’t fall for it next time.” But if it consistently knocks you off the concentration, you’ve got to investigate it. Why is this particular attitude, why is this particular thought taking priority over the concentration? Sometimes that’s what it is. It’s a question of priorities. You’ve got to get your priorities straight. You want to get the mind still in anything that comes in the way. It has to be taken as an obstacle, it has to be taken as a challenge to overcome and to learn how to sidestep or untangle, whatever way you’re going to get past it. So in the maintaining, you’re already putting it to use, i.e., learning about the mind’s various defilements, how it slips a little greed in, how it slips a little anger in, in hopes that maybe it’ll grow to something else. Or even on the more skillful side, how you can get restless, impatient, wanting a particular insight to come, not realizing that there are opportunities for insights all around. And every time a distraction comes up, every time an impulse to leave the concentration comes up, you want to see, “Okay, why is this distraction, why does this impulse happen to appeal? Why would I give this priority over the concentration? What set of values underlie that?” And you can learn some very interesting things about how the mind governs itself. And then learn new ways of governing it. That’s a lot of the insight right there. So we need some respect for the concentration, and to understand that concentration does require some discernment, both to get there and to maintain it. And all the particular insights that come up or the understandings that come up may not be the ones that we originally set out to find. Anything that gives you an opportunity to see where you’ve got a little greed, a little anger, a little delusion, whatever form it may take, that’s a valuable practice. And the insight that frees you from those particular misunderstandings, those are important insights. And giving yourself a steady place to stay, knowing that that steady place can be easily overturned. The Buddha has the example of a man carrying a bowl filled to the brim with oil on his head. He’s walking between a crowd and a stage. On the stage is a beauty queen singing and dancing, and the crowd is really beside itself over the beauty queen singing and dancing. This man has a bowl of oil on his head, but there’s a man standing behind him, walking behind him, with a raised sword. He’s going to cut off his head if he spills so much as a drop of oil. So in a condition like that, that bowl of oil has top priority. He’s not going to let himself get distracted by the beauty queen or by the crowd. You want to have that same kind of dedication to your concentration. This is where the head-on-fire image applies. It’s not so much you’re hoping that the bowl of oil will quickly turn into something else. You’ve got to protect what you’ve got, maintain what you’ve got, see its value. Not only while you’re sitting here, but also in other situations as well. And any thought that comes up that would distract you, either in terms of the crowd or in terms of the beauty queen, you’ve got to be very quick in seeing through it and letting it fall away. So try to protect this bowl of oil. Give it respect. Give it top priority. Because that puts you in the position where you can understand a lot of things going on in the mind that you wouldn’t have understood before. Cut away a lot of the mind’s habitual ways of causing stress and suffering for itself that you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. This is why maintaining is such an important part of the concentration. John Lee gives the comparison with building a bridge across a river. It’s connected to this bank with the precepts and that bank with discernment. But he says those foundation posts in the middle of the river, those are the ones that are hard to get into position and require the most work. So be willing to put in a lot of effort in getting the mind in concentration. And keeping it there. Because once that’s in place, the connections on this side and the connections on the other side are going to be easy.

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