Guard Your Concentration

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Years back, when I was first learning meditation, I sat for a while with a Japanese Zen monk. He told the story of a meditating monk who had gotten into the meditation position, gotten his mind very still. So still that he didn’t realize that the river next to his hut was flooding. And the floodwaters rose and rose and rose and finally got to the point where it swept him out of the hut and he rode down the river, still in his meditation posture. He floated. You don’t believe the story, huh? Of course, the whole purpose of that story was to give you a sense of the dedication and the focus you should have in your concentration. Even if the world is swept away, you don’t want your mind to be swept away. And if you keep your mind focused, you can stay afloat. That’s the message of the story. Because the events of the world are very changeable, very uncertain. And you could sit and worry about them for days and days and days and actually sink, because the mind that can handle the changes of the world has to be a mind that’s focused, still, has a sense of its own well-being that’s apart from the world. And so you practice that attitude with the concentration. Even if the concentration itself doesn’t totally free you, it gives you a place where you can put down the burdens for a while. Even though the mind keeps telling you, “You’ve got to take them up, you’ve got to think about this, plan for that,” the plans just start spinning around and around. You’re like a little hamster in one of those cages that has a wheel for the hamster to run, run, run, run around. And you can run for hours and not get anywhere. Regardless of how much you may plan for different eventualities, you always find that there’s something you didn’t think of. There’s some surprise. And so given the fact that there are going to be surprises, the best way to deal with them is to put the mind in a position where it’s prepared for surprises, where it has the mindfulness and the alertness, the discernment, not to be caught off guard. And that requires that you learn how to get the mind still and drop all those issues for a while. The forested jhanas tell of a way of dealing with problems in life. If you’ve got some issue that’s weighing on your mind, pose a question in the mind and then get the mind really, really still. That helps in two ways. Often we go through life with very vaguely defined questions. And because the questions are not well-framed, we don’t come up with good answers. It’s hard to answer a vague question. And so whatever answers you have don’t seem to quite fit. So it’s good to pose the question to yourself and figure out what’s the best way to phrase the question, what really is the problem. This is a lot of what the Buddha’s quest for awakening was all about, was learning how to frame questions. Notice that he was doing something and it was not leading to happiness. And so the question would be, “Is there another way?” And that right there is a big part of the issue, seeing that the issue was in his own actions. He was doing something and the results were not the ones he wanted. What was a more skillful way to act? What possible alternatives might there be? And his quest for awakening was largely a more and more precise way of phrasing that question, focusing that question. So he got better and better results, better and better answers. So that’s the first step. Try to phrase the question in your mind, “What is the problem right now in your life?” And once you’ve got a question that you’re satisfied with, pose it in the mind and then put it aside. Give it some time and give the mind some time. Focus back on the breath and pretend that the question isn’t there, that there’s nothing there that you really need to pay attention to. It may sound irresponsible, but it’s not. You’re preparing the mind, which is the only thing you have that’s going to be able to solve the problem. You’re putting it in a position where it’s more able to solve it. And there’s no guarantee that whatever comes up at the end of the concentration, at the end of the meditation, is going to be the ideal answer. But it’s much more likely that it’s going to be more skillful, because you’ve allowed the mind to rest. And at the same time, you’ve kept the mind very alert to make sure it doesn’t wander off. This is part of the meditation practice we often don’t like. We want the mind to be quiet, we get it focused on the breath, and all of a sudden something comes up and you have to keep fending it off. It seems like you’re not getting any peace of mind at all. But that ability to fend things off is important. You learn how to say “no” to what’s coming up in the mind, and you learn how to say it more precisely, more effectively, so you don’t just run with whatever comes up. This is one of the important skills in meditation, learning how to just chop it off. Chop, chop, chop, chop, chop off every little sprout that comes up in the mind. “How about this? What about that? Shouldn’t you think about this?” All the little ingratiating ways the mind has of moving in on you. It’s like the roots of the Bodhi tree. It’s a very invasive tree. The roots start very small and they can move in between bricks and they can move in between cement blocks. After a while, once they’ve established themselves, then they grow and they can destroy whole walls. They’re very insinuating, very ingratiating. Greed, aversion, and delusion are just the same sort of thing. They can dress themselves up and say, “Hey, this is the responsible thing. You’ve got to think about this. You’ve got to worry about that.” And you have to keep saying, “No, no, no, no, no.” They can be stubborn. You can be stubborn, too. Then, with practice, you learn what’s the effective way of saying no. Sometimes you have to give a reason, but try to keep the reason as short and as to the jugular as possible so you’re not spending all your time just fending things off. At the same time, you are working with the breath, trying to make it as comfortable as possible. If there’s a little slip, notice it, stop the thought, whatever. It may be in whatever way is most effective. And then get right back to the breath. I know sometimes I’d ask questions of a John Fu, and he’d have an extremely quick and short answer. Then I’d go back and think about it for a while and realize, okay, his answer was right to the central point of that particular problem. And I’d realize he’d learned how to do that by working with his own problems, working with his own defilements, learning with time what can cut off each particular type of greed, aversion, and delusion that might arise in the mind. This is an important skill in meditation, learning how to protect your stillness, allowing that little inchworm of your attention to move off to another leaf. You see it waving around, ready to jump to another leaf. You’ve got to stop it, bring it back. Get the mind interested in the breath. Remind yourself that this is a really important part of keeping the body healthy, keeping the mind healthy, getting the body and mind prepared for whatever difficult issues may be coming up. The other day they’ve done some research showing that the part of the chromosome in your cells that has to do with regeneration, if you’ve been meditating, tends to regenerate more, or has a longer life, a longer span of its ability to regenerate. I forgot the name of the chemicals that are involved. So just remind yourself of that. Sitting here meditating, you’re lengthening the life of your cells in your brain, keeping them healthier. And at the same time, it’s not just the physical side that’s benefiting, the mental side is benefiting as well. The mind’s getting a chance to rest and to learn how to say “no” to any distractions that come up. Learning how to recognize whatever little things that may seem okay or seem inoffensive are really going to be causing problems. As you protect your stillness, you’re developing some important qualities in discernment, alertness, and mindfulness. Then at the end of the hour, if there’s an issue you want to think about, as you come out of the concentration, see if there’s any response to that question that you posed at the very beginning. Don’t try to anticipate it in the meditation. Don’t even think about it. If your thoughts head in the direction of that question, just cut them off. Wait until the appointed time, and then see what comes up. And as I said, there’s no guarantee that you’re going to come up with the perfect answer. But the answer you come up with is going to be a lot better than the one that comes from sitting and thrashing around over the problem. The mind has a lot more clarity, has a lot more precision, a lot more energy. A common analogy in the forest tradition is that you’re sharpening your knife when you keep the mind still. Even though you may be impatient, you’ve got some things that have to be cut. But if the knife is dull, you’ve got to stop and spend that time sharpening the knife so that when it’s sharp, you just one chop and there you are. You cut through things. And when you don’t need the knife, you bathe it in oil and put it back in a scabbard, put it back in its sheath. So now you’ve got the knife in the sheath, so that when you really need it, it’s prepared, it’s ready to cut through whatever you need to cut. So protect your concentration, because the practice of concentration provides you with the skills you’re going to need for however the world gets swept away.

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