Concentration & Its Tools

October 5, 2013

The Buddha once said that concentration, or right concentration, is the central factor of the path. All the other factors are its supports to help make it right. Because after all, part of the definition of right concentration is that you abandon unskillful qualities, unskillful dhammas. And those unskillful dhammas are everything from wrong view all the way to wrong mindfulness. The right factors are there to help the concentration. So think of them as tools that are near at hand, but you’re not going to be holding on to them right now. You’re going to be holding on to the breath. Because that’s what the reality of the concentration is, when the mind can stay with one thing. So let the breath sweep through the body. I’ve talked many times about the breath being a full body process. John Lee talks about three levels of the breath. There’s the in-and-out breath. Then there are the breath sensations that flow through the bloodstream, flow through the nerves, out to the pores of the skin. And these are a more subtle form of moving breath. Then there are the spots in the body where there’s a still breath. He talks about the resting spots of the breath. Well, that’s what’s resting. The breath is still in those places, if you can tune into it. So focus on whichever level of breath energy you can tune into right now and see which one is most helpful, bringing the mind to balance, bringing the mind to a sense of belonging here. We spend so much of our time wandering around with our interest in the outside that we lose sight of the mind that’s doing the looking. One of the Jon Fuehring students once commented one evening that the evening sun was really golden that evening and was spreading out across the valley where the monastery was located. He commented on how really pretty it was there. And Jon Fuehring turned to him and said, “Well, don’t look at what’s pretty out there. Look at what’s saying that it’s pretty.” That’s why joys want to come back to is the mind that’s doing the looking, the mind that’s doing the listening. So when we’re concentrating the mind, you’re going to be focusing on the breath, but eventually you want to get to know the mind that’s doing the focusing. Without that focal point, though, it’s hard to see the mind. The mind is a combination of the quality of knowing, the quality of wanting, and the quality of thinking. And these things move around so much, and if they don’t have anything to run up against, you’re not going to be able to detect their movements. So run up against the breath and give all your attention to this. There’s a famous Zen master who said that the development of the path is the same thing as the realization of the cessation of suffering. What he meant is that you are not sitting here with one eye on the path and the other eye looking down the road, seeing when the result is going to come. You have to give your full attention to what you’re doing right now. Be totally immersed in the breath, totally immersed in the body right now. And as for the results, how they’re going to come, they’re going to appear right here. So you don’t have to look anywhere else. Just with the views and resolves and the mindfulness that go into the right factors of the path. Some of them are right here, right now. Right resolve, its highest expression, is getting the mind to settle down and be one. Because in doing that, you’re doing something harmless. You’re putting aside sensuality, putting aside ill will. Just bringing the mind right here. So right resolve is right here. Right mindfulness, you’re looking at the breath in and of itself. You’re not worried about anything outside the body right now. As for right views, you pick those up and you put them down when you need them. We’re talking about this today in class. There’s such a thing as right view. Some people resist that. They’d like to hear that there are many right views. But the Buddha said, “No, there’s right view and then there’s wrong view.” But you don’t take the rightness and wrongness to beat other people over the head, to show off that you’re better than they are or smarter than they are, which is what people tend to do with their views. You use the view for the proper purpose. In other words, think of the view as a kind of karma, holding to the view. When do you hold it? How do you hold it? When do you put it down? And right view as the sutta we chanted just said now, looking at things in terms of where there’s stress and what’s causing the stress, realizing that there is something you can do to put an end to that stress. Those are the questions you bring. In the beginning, the questions are simply related to the concentration. When you can’t settle down, what’s getting in the way? It’s like the princess and the pea. She lies down on many, many mattresses and she can detect, “Oh, there’s a pea down under the mattress.” That was proof she was a real princess. We’re not here to be princesses. We’re here to figure out, “Okay, where’s the pea in the mattress?” Get the pea out and you can settle down more easily. So you look through the breath. Any places where the breath seems to be blocked, think of the blockage over there. If the breath seems too weak to support the mind right now, breathe more strongly. If deep breathing is uncomfortable, try something shorter. In other words, learn how to bring things into balance so there’s a sense of ease staying here. In the very beginning, there’s a lot of willed effort going into just getting the mind to stay with the breath because it’s so inclined to wander around. But as it gets more and more at home with the breath, again with a sense of belonging here, then you can begin to put aside some of the strong willedness of being here and just let things be balanced. So you’re seeing that a lot of the stress that goes into the concentration in the beginning may be necessary, but as you get better at it, you find you can let some of that go. And you’re seeing that the stress in the experience does come from you. It comes from your craving. It comes from lack of skill in the mind. When the Buddha talks about one of the causes for suffering and stressing, he uses the word avijja, which is usually translated as ignorance. But vijja, the opposite of avijja, means both knowledge and skill. You’re trying to develop a skilled knowledge here. So again, the views about where there’s stress and what you can do to put it aside, those are meant to be part of this skill that you’re developing here. They focus you on the right questions and give you some ideas of where to look. When you use your views in that way, you’re using them properly. And then when things are getting really good, you can put them aside for the time being and just be with the breath. You don’t want to drag all your reading of the Dhamma in here, because that clutters up the concentration. It’s an important skill we’re learning here, how to stay still with something, how to adjust the breath so it feels like a place you want to stay. And then as you watch it and stick with it, you begin to notice, “Okay, what was good to stay with in the beginning may not be so good.” So, make some changes. Keep on top of this. Be alert. Anything unskillful comes up, remind yourself that you want to let go of it. That’s what right effort is about. As for skillful qualities, you try to keep them going. We’re not here just to watch things come and go and come and go. You see that they’re coming and you figure out, “Okay, what needs to be done here? What needs to be developed? What needs to be put aside?” These things all come together. There’s a phrase in time, “muksa mangi.” It comes from the Pali. I haven’t found it yet in the Canon, but it makes the point that everything comes together and becomes one. This is one path. Right in the center of the path is right concentration. That’s what you want to keep following, the ability to keep the mind centered. Because when it’s centered, it’s going to see things a lot more clearly than when it’s not. And as for the other factors, keep them right beside you. Pick them up when they’re needed, put them down when they’re not. Think of yourself as a cross person with tools. The cross person doesn’t hold all his tools in his hand all the time. He’s doing his work. He’s focused on what needs to be done right now. And he picks up and puts down the tools as necessary. So the work here is right concentration. The other factors? Those are tools. Learn how to use them wisely.

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