Cooking Your Concentration

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The Buddha once compared being a good meditator to being a good cook. In this case, it was a cook for a king or king’s minister. And the observant cook was the one who would notice what his master liked that day. Did he reach for the sweet curry, or the salty curry, or the sour curry, or the alkaline curry, and even had alkaline food in those days. Then, of course, he would make more of that kind of food and would gain a reward. The foolish, incompetent cook would be the one who wouldn’t notice. The same principle applies to your meditation. You’ve got to notice what works and what doesn’t work when things are going well. When you leave the meditation, always take the time to ask yourself, “What were you doing so that they went well? How were you breathing? Where were you focused? What were you doing up to that point?” This is why mindfulness is not just being aware of the present moment, but also being able to remember things, what you did, and the results you got. So you’re alert in the present moment, but you’re mindful over time. And then you try to apply that in the next time around. And then, as so often happens, either you weren’t observing all that carefully so it doesn’t quite work. But that doesn’t mean you give up. You just try to observe more carefully the next time. Or you run into the fact that the mind is complex. Maybe there are more things going on than you thought. This is when you have to look at your life as you go through the day. What were you doing before you meditated? What kind of things were you thinking about? What kind of things were you allowing the mind to wallow in? It so often happens that we’re very strict with ourselves while we’re sitting here with our eyes closed, and then the mind is taken off its leash and gets to run all over the neighborhood. You’re lucky if you can call it back. And even when you can’t call it back, you don’t know what the mind has been up to, what it is carrying back with it. So as you go through the day, you have to be very careful about what you’re thinking about. Thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, all the hindrances. They’re not hindrances only while you’re sitting or trying to meditate. They get in the way of the practice as you go through the day. Thoughts of sensuality come up, you’ve got to learn how to counteract them right away. The same with thoughts of ill will and anger. You can’t let them take root in the mind. Restlessness and anxiety, you’ve got to work against them even while you’re not sitting or meditating. Otherwise they have an impact on the mind and they have their trace that then get carried into the meditation. So if you find that you’re having trouble getting the mind to settle down, ask yourself, “Well, where have you been allowing it to wander in the course of the day?” And maybe you should restrict its wanderings. And remember that you can stay with the breath. Sometimes it’s hard in the midst of some activities to stay with the in-and-out breath, but at least try to have a sense of how the breath energy is feeling in the body. What’s the tone of the energy? Is it tense? Is it not tense? When it does tense up, try to loosen it up. Dissolve the tension as quickly as you can. Make that your knee-jerk reaction. So you’re quick to sense the tension and quick to get it to dissolve. That way you go through the day without stress. Squirreling up a lot of burdens, stashing away a lot of tension inside that you then have to work through when you sit down. You want to be in the spot where you’re ready to sit down and the mind can settle down with the breath, the breath feels good, and there you are. And then you can maintain that. Then you can look at your assumptions about sitting and meditating. Some people plan the hour subconsciously. They’re afraid that if they get the mind settled too quickly, they won’t be able to maintain it. So they gradually glide down and give themselves ten minutes of concentration at the end. There’s no reason why you can’t settle down right away and then learn the skills to maintain that concentration. Because we’re so used to having our time filled up with things, there’s a sense of being lost when things are very, very still in the mind. So you have to look and see what part of the mind feels threatened by the stillness or uncomfortable around the stillness. Then you ask yourself, “Why identify with that?” You want the stillness, you want the concentration to be your default mode. We’re going to learn how to be comfortable here. The Buddha talks about learning how to appreciate the concentration, to indulge in it. Sometimes that requires just thinking to yourself, reminding yourself that the mind is much better off with this quietness than it is with all kinds of interesting thoughts. Because this is your place of strength. Interesting thoughts are never your place of strength. Strength is a mind that can live with itself, be quiet with itself. Because if you face things like aging, illness, and death, the tendency for the mind to want to think things through and worry about them will take over if you haven’t trained it to be at ease with being still. Because sometimes that’s your best protection in a situation like that, just being very, very still. If the body’s going to do its thing, it’s going to do its thing. And you’re going to have to learn how not to react and how not to get stirred up by it. So stillness should be your default mode. So whatever it takes to appreciate that, whatever it takes to learn how to maintain that, that’s all you want to work at. Don’t be too quick to jump to insights. We all know what the insights are supposed to be, and sometimes the mind will spring those on us when we’re not really ready for them. Everything is inconstant, everything is stressful, everything is not-self. You’ve got some people sitting and meditating, and everything’s very quiet, and suddenly the thought comes to mind, “Oh, this is it. There’s no self here.” That’s not what the Buddha taught. A lot of the insights we’ve heard about Buddhism are really distortions of his message. So you have to be a little bit dubious about your insights when they come. Ask yourself, “Okay, where is this insight useful and where is it not?” And sometimes you have to realize even those insights are a threat to your stillness. So maintain the stillness. Get really solid with the stillness. And then you’ll be in a better position to evaluate things as they come up in the midst of that. First, you want to be good at zapping any thought that comes up, no matter how interesting or insightful or whatever it seems. You sense it as a little ball of tension someplace. It’s neither physical or mental. It seems to be halfway between, but there’s this little knot of tension or a snarl of tension in the breath energy. And you want to be on the lookout for that because that’s where thoughts can begin to form. So breathe through it. Breathe through it. Again, the skill of breathing through tension is going to be a huge help in all kinds of ways. And then be very alert. It’s like being a spider on a web. The spider stays in one corner and is very still with the web and is sensitive to any movement in the web at all. If there’s a little bit of movement, it’ll run out and check and see what insect has gotten there. If it finds the insect, it deals with it and then goes back to its corner. That’s how you maintain your stillness. It’s like being a hunter. You have to be alert and still at the same time, ready to move to deal with any problems at any moment, but poised in the stillness in the meantime. They talk about anthropologists who, when they study a tribe or a peasant village, want to get into the life of the village by learning all the different skills that the people in the village or the tribe have. And they found that there’s one skill that constantly eludes the anthropologist, and that’s the skill of hunting, because it requires a lot of concentration and an ability to be very still and very sensitive, and to maintain that stillness and sensitivity and not go drifting off into drowsiness or getting fidgety. So here’s your opportunity to learn that skill. Learn how to be a hunter of incipient thoughts, thoughts that are just beginning to form, and then you zap them. That way you maintain your stillness and you get more and more alert and more mindful. Your ardency gets more effective. All the skills you need to keep the mind in good shape, they get developed by maintaining the stillness. So learn how to watch the mind. What does it like to settle down with, and then once it’s settled down, how do you keep it there? These are the things you want to try to observe. So you can cook up good concentration any time you want it. Keep the mind well-fed all through the day so it doesn’t go sneaking off and looking into the garbage pails or trying to steal somebody else’s food. You’ve got potential for good food right here. Learn how to fix it well.

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