Establishing Mindfulness & Concentration

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The Buddha always talks about mindfulness and concentration as being two very intimately connected factors of the path. The establishing of mindfulness are the themes of the concentration. For example, he says to be staying focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, satisfied, greed, and distress, with reference to the world. Those are meditation instructions. The body in and of itself would be, for example, the breath. The body not in and of itself would be thinking about your body in terms of the world. Are you strong enough to do the work you’re supposed to do? Are you good-looking enough to appeal to other people? Those kinds of issues. That’s the body in the world. But here we’re taking the body just as you’re experiencing it right here. So you stay with the breath as your topic. And then you try to bring these three qualities of being ardent, alert, and mindful. Mindful means you keep it in mind. If you find that the mind has wandered away from the breath, you just drop whatever it is that made it wander away and you come right back to the breath. Try to remember to stay here. That’s what mindfulness means. It’s a quality of memory. It’s your presence of mind. Remembering that you want to stay here and that there are other things you’ve got to do besides just staying here. Alert means watching what’s happening. And then ardent means that you try to do this well. That’s what you’ve got to keep in mind. In other words, you remember that if you’ve wandered away, you come back. While you’re here, you try to be very sensitive to the breath. In a way, that helps you to settle down. So you can develop good qualities like concentration and the discernment that you want. That’s going to help cut through the ignorance with which the mind hides itself from itself. Ardency means that when you’ve wandered off, you try to come back as quickly as possible. While you’re here, you try to be as sensitive as possible. Notice how you’re relating to it. Is the breath comfortable? If it’s not, you can change. That’s one of the reasons we use the breath as a topic. It’s one of the few processes in the body that you can exert some control over. You can make the breath longer or shorter, heavier, lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow—any combination of these parameters. Or you can simply pose a question to the mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” And allow your conception of the breath to expand. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. There’s a flow of energy in the body that allows the air to come in and allows it to go out. That’s what you want to focus on. And that flow of energy doesn’t have clear boundaries. It’s not located just at the nose or just in the chest. When you get really sensitive to it, you begin to see that it flows throughout the body. It flows throughout all the nerves. In some places it’s more pronounced than others. So in the beginning you want to focus there. But it’s good to expand your concept or your perception of the breath. Because eventually, once the breath starts getting comfortable, you want to be able to expand that sense of well-being so that it fills the whole body. It goes down the back, it goes down your legs, it goes down your arms. The more you can develop that sense of well-being, the easier it’s going to be to stay here. So those are the three qualities you want to bring to the breath—ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. The quality of ardency is the discernment factor here. In other words, realizing that to stay with the breath is not going to happen on its own. You have to do some things to stay with the breath. And you have to remind yourself why it’s important to stay here. Otherwise, the mind’s going to give up pretty quickly and find something else more interesting. So in terms of your motivation, in terms of your strategies, to do this skillfully, there’s got to be a certain amount of discernment. Mindfulness is basically keeping your head in the midst of all this. In other words, remembering that this is what you’ve got to do. When other thoughts come in, there may not be too many right now, but there will be times as you go through the day when suddenly you find yourself flooded with thoughts. And you want to have the presence of mind to remember that you don’t want to follow those thoughts. Because the techniques you’re learning in meditation are not meant just for when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. You want to bring them to everything you do. You want to have a sense of being centered inside. It gives you a sense of solidity as you go through the day. And to be on the lookout for any unskillful mind states that would force you to do or say or think things that would harm yourself or harm others. So these three qualities of being ardent, alert, and mindful help one another along and develop the mind so it settles down in concentration. Finally, there’s the factor of putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. If you find yourself pulled back to thoughts of what’s going on in your life, in your work, at home, things that happen today, things that might happen tomorrow, you have to be skilled at seeing that these are just thoughts right now. And there’s something about them that may seem really pressing and really important. And part of the mind will say, “Gee, you have a whole free hour here. You can think all about these things.” And you have to remind yourself that’s not going to accomplish anything. As long as the mind isn’t clear, as long as the mind isn’t settled and solid, it’s going to be hard to think clearly about those things. So you need to get the mind settled first. Then at the end of the meditation, if you want, you can take some extra time to sit and think about these things. But not right now. There’s other, more important work to be done. If thoughts of anger come up, try to develop some goodwill for yourself, realizing that right now, if you feed on the anger, it’s going to be like feeding on hot peppers. You’re the one who’s going to be suffering. If thoughts of lust come up, again, you’re suffering from the lust right now. Sometimes it helps to think about those objects that you feel lust for and realize that if you took the skin off, what would there be? It’s there all the time, whatever’s inside there. It’s certainly not attractive. In other words, learn how to see that the object of lust is nothing you want to get involved with right now. And don’t be afraid that this is going to spoil your relationships. The mind very quickly can find ways of developing lust for things in spite of these contemplations. But learn how to use them, at least for the time being, to give some space in the mind. Say, you want to rise above those kinds of thoughts. So that’s the instruction for how to get into concentration. Keep the breath in mind. Be ardent, alert, mindful, and put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. As for what will happen, the Buddha maps out various levels of what he calls jhana, which is related to a verb, jhāyati, which means to burn with a steady flame. You want your mind to be steadily with the breath. Well, those maps are there for you to think about after you’ve left. They don’t tell you how to get into the concentration. The instructions on mindfulness tell you how to get in. The map of the various layers of concentration tell you what can happen. So when you come out, you can reflect on it. And if you’re not sure, well, put a post-it note. The other use for those descriptions of the layers of concentration is when you find yourself in a layer of concentration. You can think about what’s there. What’s the disturbance here? Don’t think about it too quickly. Learn how to be there for long periods of time before you start analyzing it. Otherwise you destroy it. But once you’re there solidly, then you can start to analyze what’s going on here. And the descriptions of the various layers help you to identify what’s going on in the mind and what you might want to let go of to reduce the level of stress in the mind, or what the Buddha calls the level of disturbance. And whether it’s the first jhana or the fifteenth jhana or the twenty-third jhana, it doesn’t matter. What matters is your ability to look at your mind and understand what’s going on. This is how you develop discernment. Or you could analyze the mind. If you notice that it’s in one layer of concentration or one level of concentration, all of a sudden something changes and the concentration intensifies. Or it changes in the other direction and it gets weaker. You can ask yourself, “What changed? What happened?” There was something that weakened your concentration. How can you go back to where you were before? The whole purpose of this is to get a sense of what’s going on in your mind so you get more and more control over it. Again, you’re not there to measure your progress and say, “I’ve got this level. The people around me don’t have this level. I’m a better meditator than they are.” That’s not the purpose of the maps. The maps are to give you some idea of how the mind creates its mental states and how it feeds on them, and how, even in the subtle pleasure and the subtle stillness of the concentration, there can still be a level of disturbance. The purpose of all this is to sensitize yourself to what’s going on, so you can sense when you’re thinking in ways that add more stress. Learn how to stop. If you haven’t sorted things out this way, you don’t know where the stress in the mind is coming from or why. But when things are really quiet like this, you can begin to see, “Oh, now the level of stress has gone up, and now it’s gone down.” That kind of insight is really useful. Because, as the Buddha said, we shape our experience in ways that cause suffering and that are totally unnecessary. And yet for us, they’re necessary because we can’t think of any other way to shape our experience. We’re just creatures of habit. “This is my way of doing things. This is my way of thinking. This is my way of feeling. These are my feelings.” When you have those attitudes, everything is all glommed together in the mind. When you simply view the state of the mind and ask yourself, “Where is the stress here?” That takes the “me” and the mind out of it for a while. So you can simply look at what’s going on and tease out all the different kinds of activities the mind is employing. Feelings, like feelings of pleasure or pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. Perceptions, the labels you put on things. Fabrication, the intentional element that goes into shaping things. And your consciousness, the basic awareness of all this. These are separate activities, but we glom them all together. So when we’re suffering, we can’t figure out what’s the problem. It’s like having a disease and not knowing what the cause is because you don’t know anything about how the body functions. You have to go running to a doctor and he can sort things out, or she can sort things out. But with the mind, you can’t go running to somebody else and have them look in the mind. They might be able to look with MRIs, but all they can see is just brain wave functions and mental activity. They don’t know exactly what it feels like for you from the inside. And this is how we cure things. We don’t cure things from the outside, we cure them from the inside. And to do that cure, you have to get very sensitive to all the different things going on in the mind, the different kinds of processes, so you can tease out exactly what in here is the problem and learn how to let it go, i.e., stop repeating that unskillful mind process. So this is how you put mindfulness, concentration, and discernment all together, so they can really have a beneficial effect on the mind. And when the mind benefits, the benefits don’t stop there. They spread out into your thoughts and your words and your deeds. This is one of the reasons why meditation is not a selfish activity at all. If you’re more skillful in keeping your mind under control, you’re not going to knock out people out of balance. So when your thoughts start wandering away from the breath, remind yourself that you’re not going to see anything new by wandering away, but you will learn a lot of new things about the mind if you look very carefully here. Ardent, alert, mindful, keeping the breath in mind, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Those are the instructions. We tend to overlook them all the time, thinking that there’s some magic pill that’ll get the mind to settle down, or some esoteric teaching that the Ajaan hasn’t told you yet because he’s holding it back. That’s not the case. It’s all laid out very clearly. Our problem, though, is that we focus our desires on the goal at the end of the path and don’t look very carefully at where we’re stepping. So of course we step off the path and we step on things and into things. That’s slower progress. So look very carefully at what you’re doing right here, right now. Because that’ll shape the next step, and the next step, and the next. And if you’ll focus on the steps along the path, they’re bound to get you where you want to go without you having to anticipate or pin any pictures in your mind about what it’s going to be like. Just enough to encourage you, but you don’t have to anticipate things before they happen. They’ll happen in line with causes and effects. So you make sure the causes are good and the effects will take care of themselves.

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