What You Learn from Concentration

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Bring your attention to the breath. When you breathe in, notice where you feel the breath. When you breathe out, notice where you feel it. Notice what the feeling is like. Does it feel refreshing? You might want to try a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Think of the breath energy suffusing the whole body. Does it energize you where you’re tired? Dissolving away any sense of blockage or tightness in the body? Keep that up as long as it feels good. And stay with the breathing. Other thoughts may come in, probably will come in, but you don’t have to pay them any attention. Stay with the breath. You’re trying to give yourself a good foundation in here for several reasons. One, letting the mind settle down gives it strength. Especially when you settle down with a sense of well-being, that feeling of ease, of fullness, nourishing for the body and nourishing for the mind. So each time you’re tempted to wander off to something else, just remind yourself, “This place is better. If it’s not better yet, you can make it better.” Give the breath a chance. We’ve spent our time thinking about this, thinking about that, for who knows how long. So when a new thought comes in, it’s not really all that new. That’s what the mind has been doing all along. What you want is a place where you can step back and watch the processes in the mind. When a thought comes in, how does it come in? What are the stages? At what point does it become a problem? You need a place where you can step out of the processes so that you can see them. And that’s what the breath provides. Staying here in the present moment, not getting lost in your thought worlds. Because it is a problem when you get lost in those worlds. That’s what the Buddha calls “becoming.” He says all the types of craving that give rise to suffering involve becoming, lead to becoming. So you want to know how that happens. That’s what we’re here to learn about. It’s not just to accept whatever comes up is going to come up and be okay about that. Because a lot of the stuff that comes up can be really harmful to the mind. And once it takes root in the mind, you can start acting on it and speaking under its power. Then it becomes harmful to other people. So you want to be responsible. Look after your mind. Understand what it’s doing that causes suffering, causes stress, causes unskillful behavior. The Buddha started his teaching by talking about the problem of suffering and stress. He started out with things that we’re all familiar with—birth, aging, illness, death, not getting what you want, being with people you don’t like or things you don’t like, not being with people or things that you do like. Those are all familiar. But then he goes on to boil things down to what the essence of stress is in all of these things. That’s something that’s not all that familiar. He calls it the five clinging aggregates. What are the five clinging aggregates? They’re the way you put your experience together. It’s an activity that you do. There’s a sense of the form of the body, which the Buddha even identified as a verb—the way you inhabit the body. There are feelings of pleasure, pain—neither pleasure nor pain. There are your perceptions, the labels you put on things, identifying this, identifying that. What’s this? What’s that? What’s the name of this? What images do you have that you use to label things? There’s fabrication, where you put all these things together into coherent thoughts—or sometimes not very coherent thoughts, but at least they’re thoughts. And then there’s consciousness. Consciousness is aware of all these things, and we cling to these things. And that’s what the suffering is. They’re very familiar kinds of behavior. The names may not be familiar, but the activities are. Say, when you eat, you’ve got the form of the body and you’ve got the form of the food. There’s a feeling of hunger, dis-eating, ease in the body that you want to put an end to by filling yourself up with the food so you feel pleasant instead. Then there’s your perception. You identify what kind of hunger is this. Is it hunger for something salty or something sweet? Then you go out and try to identify what out there can assuage your hunger. That’s perception. Then fabrication is all the intentions that have to go into getting that food. So it’s edible and it’s in you. And then there’s consciousness that’s aware of all these things. We engage in these activities all the time. They’re the activities that are involved in feeding, and then we feed on them on a second level. And that’s what causes us to suffer. That’s what the suffering is. How are you going to see that unless you can watch your own mind in action? So we’re not here to gain psychic powers and we’re not here just to accept what’s coming along. We’re trying to learn how to watch our own minds. And that requires first that you put yourself in a good position to do the watching. That’s why we concentrate on one thing and why we concentrate on the breath. Because it’s very close to the mind, and yet it’s not part of the mind. It’s a physical phenomenon which allows you to stay with the sense of the body and have an ability to look at the mind. And the breath is what anchors you in the present moment. Because you can’t watch a past breath, you can’t watch a future breath. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present moment. And that’s the foundation that helps keep you from getting sucked into the different thought worlds that the mind otherwise feeds on. And it’s going to be part of the process. So it’s pretty normal that you suddenly find yourself in one of those worlds. You thought you were going to stay here with the breath for a whole hour, and whoops, there you go. Don’t get discouraged. Just come back to the breath. Just drop whatever that thought world was and come back to the breath and make up your mind you’re going to watch the stages next time. Because it is going to happen again. You will wander off again. But you want to learn about the process, because it’s in watching yourself wander off and begin to realize there are stages where you can actually decide not to wander off if you’re really alert, if you’re really mindful. That’s how you gain insight into the way the mind causes suffering. So the concentration is for giving yourself a sense of strength, giving you a vantage point here in the present moment, and giving you the steadiness that you need in order to see these slight movements in the mind. Because otherwise, they start off small and then they get bigger and bigger. One of the images in the canon is of a vine that has very soft downy tendrils, and it seems so soft and weak. You let the vine grow, and after a while it can pull down whole trees. So you have to watch out for these little movements in the mind. The point where the mind says, “How about this? Let’s go there. Wouldn’t this be interesting? I want some of this. I’ve got to have some of this.” There are all those little voices in the mind that, if you follow them, are going to end up leading to stress and suffering. You want to be able to step back from them so you’re in a position where you can decide, “Is this thought a useful thought, really? Or is it just going to be useless suffering?” Because the Buddha’s not saying you don’t want to think at all. You want to train the mind so that if you think when you need to think and you don’t have to think when you don’t, that way the mind can put more energy into its useful thoughts and not waste it on all the stuff that it usually churns out. You can’t really learn how to think effectively until you’ve learned how not to think. And conversely, you can’t learn how not to think unless you think about the breath. Think about getting the mind in a good position where it can see these processes as they’re happening. It’s like watching a play from behind the scenes. If you’re out in the audience, all you see is the part of the play they want to show you. But if you’re behind the scenes, you begin to realize, “This is how they do that. This is how they create that effect.” You see the actors when they’re behind scenes, too. They’re totally out of character. And you learn an awful lot more about the process of how plays get put on and how they create their illusions. It’s the same with the mind. The mind creates illusions for itself, and then you fall for them and can often suffer because of that. So this is how you learn to pull yourself out from under the power, out from under the spell of the way the mind normally creates worlds for itself. It creates thoughts for itself, tries to feed on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—whatever raw material it catches. These are some of the things you can learn, that you can discover, by staying right here and learning to watch what’s going on. And this is how the Buddha learned how to put an end to suffering—by watching what was going on in his mind. And he knew it wasn’t going to be enough just to tell us, “Well, this is what he discovered.” He also taught us a skill—how he discovered it—so we can discover it for ourselves. That way, the suffering in each human heart can be lessened. And if you really get into the practice, you find that large areas of suffering can be eased, that you can end for good. In fact, all the ones, eventually, that weigh in any way on the mind, they can be gone. So learn how to get good at staying right here, developing this foundation of concentration. It’s going to take some effort, but it’s going to be worth it. And it can be frustrating at times. You might be tempted to say, “Well, how about that just-accepting-whatever-comes-up kind of thinking?” But then you’re going to have to accept an awful lot of suffering that comes up because you don’t understand it. It’s better to bite the bullet and get to work, because this work actually leads to something beyond what you’ve ever known before. The Buddha and all the noble disciples guarantee it. So you want to put yourself in a position where you can see whether or not they’re right.

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