Trust in Concentration for Now

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For some people, concentration comes easily, and for most of us it doesn’t. Sometimes we hear that there comes a point down the line where you have to abandon your concentration or get rid of your attachment to concentration. You wonder, “Can I just take the shortcut and let go of any attachment to concentration before I’ve done it?” It doesn’t work that way, of course. We have to put work into it. We have to learn how to trust it, that this really is a good place to be. Even in the very beginning stages, where there’s not that much pleasure, you have to have the confidence that if you stay here long enough and the mind gets to settle down and gets familiar enough with the breath, that things will get more and more pleasurable, more and more comfortable, and that that pleasure will be more and more satisfying. Without this element of trust, it’s very hard to really give yourself to the meditation. You’re always pulling back a little bit and saying, “Well, is this good enough yet? Well, it’s not good enough.” And then you throw it away. Try something else. If that doesn’t work, throw that away. Dogan had an interesting comment. He said, “Right where you’re developing the path is where you will be realizing awakening, realizing the end of suffering.” So you stay focused on the path and not so much thinking about looking down the road and seeing, “Well, am I getting there yet? Am I getting anywhere near?” Just have faith in the breath. Have faith in whatever your concentration object is. Stick with it. Have in the back of the mind the idea that you want to be on friendly terms with it. And trust it enough. So you can give yourself to it. Don’t hold anything back. Just be totally in the body, be totally with the breath, as much as you can. There will come a point where you have to pull yourself away. But in the meantime, you want to regard everything that’s a disturbance in the concentration as something you want to let go of. It’s an element of suffering, it’s an element of the mind that has some craving. So look for that. What is the craving? What’s causing that added stress? Especially if it’s a clear disturbance, a clear wandering way of the mind. You want to do everything that you can to cut it off. And you can’t do that. Any clear distraction that comes up, you ask yourself, “Why would I want to go with that?” In the beginning, you don’t want to ask too many questions. Just say, “Back to the breath.” And there will come a point where the mind begins to rebel. It really wants to think about that other thing. That’s when you have to ask, “Okay, what is it about this that’s brand new, that’s interesting?” Because a lot of our thoughts are the same old things, hashed over and over and over again. What new little pieces of pleasure are you planning to find there? What are you expecting to find there? Think about the drawbacks of allowing yourself to think about those thoughts all the time. See if that’s enough to pull you away, loosen the attraction. You can decide that you’re simply going to ignore the thought, “That’s enough. I don’t want to think about it anymore.” You’re not staying with the breath. You’re running around after them, pushing them out. So you want to stay right here. And as you stay right here, you begin to realize that those thoughts contain an element of stress. And that can be more relaxing not even to think them. In other words, you use various techniques in protecting your concentration, even when it doesn’t seem like much. That’s, of course, when you need to give it the most protection, when it’s still very small and tender. The pleasure is just very gentle, not too much. Just protect that spot that you’ve got. Because there’s nowhere else the concentration is going to arise. It’s going to have to arise right here. Give it your trust. Now, this doesn’t mean you have to trust everything that comes up in the mind when it is quiet. That’s one of the big mistakes that meditators make. We tend to think that the feelings and intuitions we have when we’re concentrated are reliable. We read the stories about the Ajahns, their visions. We read about the Buddha and the night of his awakening, all the things he learned. But in every case, they had to be very skeptical about what came up in their meditation. Think about Ajahn Mun off there in the forest alone, visions of devas, visions of all kinds of beings. If he put his trust in those visions, he would have gone crazy. So he made it a rule for himself that whatever the being was that he saw, no matter how authoritative or how wise or whatever it seemed, he had to ask himself, “What is the Dharma lesson in this? What is a practical lesson I can take out of this?” Question number one. Question number two. Will it survive the test? If you put it into practice, what are the actual results? Just because someone comes and says to do something, or you have an urge inside, or you have this intuitive feeling inside, doesn’t mean you can trust it. Some people give too much credence to their logic. Other people give too much credence to their feelings. You have to learn to be a little bit skeptical about both sides, but not so skeptical that you reject things. As I mentioned in the canon of the person looking for a bull elephant, he goes into the forest and he sees big footprints. Because he’s an expert, he doesn’t immediately jump to the conclusion that that’s a bull elephant, because, after all, there are, the sutta says, dwarf females with big feet. It might be them. What he needs for his work, though, is a big bull elephant. But he doesn’t say, “I can’t trust these traces. I’ll just go someplace else.” He says, “Well, these look likely,” and follows them along. After a while, he looks up in the trees and sees scratch marks way high in the trees. He doesn’t immediately come to the conclusion that those were the scratch marks of the bull elephant’s tusks, because, after all, there are females with tusks and some of them are very tall. But still, they can’t do the work that a bull elephant can. Nevertheless, he sees that these scratch marks are likely, so he follows them through. He follows along and finally sees the big bull elephant there in the clearing. The Buddha draws from this is that you’re looking for awakening, you’re looking for a good path. You don’t really know that this is a really good path. You’ve actually had your first taste of awakening. Up to that point, it’s all on faith. But the quality of faith, the quality of trust, is necessary. But you’re not asked to have total, unquestioning faith. There’s enough of you held in reserve to say, “This may be the path and it looks likely, but I’m not going to put my one hundred percent stamp of approval on it.” Because you really can’t until you’ve seen something that’s really out of the ordinary. And even then, you have to test it. It just comes down to learning how to read your mind. It’s sticking with the path, seeing what comes up, learning how to question it. This requires that you become very reliable to yourself. In other words, that you are very truthful to yourself. You don’t let yourself be swayed by your moods. When a mood comes up, you ask yourself, “Is this something I can rely on? What’s going into this mood? What’s going into this feeling? What’s going into this emotion? What’s going into this emotion?” Messages that the mind sends to itself. You’d think that if it were one mind, it wouldn’t have to send messages to itself. It would immediately know all the way around. Every part of it would know. But the mind has so many parts, and they have to send messages. This is this, and that’s that. It has its code. And you want to learn how to break the code. So you ask yourself, “In this particular mood, what goes into it?” And part of the mind would be, “What’s this I’m willing to do?” Especially when you’re tired. You say, “Well, if I’m tired, then I can’t believe anything that’s coming up here.” Wait until you have some more energy, and then you can probe in. It asks, “How can I recreate a mood that’s more reliable, that has more energy, and the willingness to question things?” So you learn how to take these things away. You learn how to break them apart. Try to get what you can out of them in terms of good Dhamma lessons. Remember, not everything that comes up in the mind, whether it’s the rational mind or the feeling mind or anything, can be totally trusted. As I said, the concentration eventually, someday, is something you will put aside, because you’ll find that it, too, is fabricated. But it is your resting point right now. It’s the place where the mind can gather its energies and do its best. We’d like to have 100 percent guarantee that everything that comes up in a concentrated mind is totally reliable, but that guarantee is actually something that can’t be relied on. So we have to learn how to make ourselves more and more reliable. We don’t just go with whatever comes up. We test things, watch for results, feeling our way. Because, after all, where are we coming from? We’re coming from ignorance. But within that ignorance, there are some little bits and pieces of knowledge. We try to stitch those together and learn how to recognize what’s knowledge and what’s not. It’s a process of discovery. This is one of the reasons why it is a gradual path. Some things happen suddenly, but you need the gradually developing discernment that allows you to judge these sudden things as to how reliable they are and how much trust you can put in them. This way, as Ajahn Lee says, we become a person with two eyes. This is just one. Look at things from all sides. That’s how we can find something that really is safe.

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