Maintaining Concentration

June 16, 2015

In the Sutta, Ajahn Fung used to say that there are three parts to concentration practice. The first is doing it. The second part is maintaining it. And the third part is putting it to use. Of the three, maintaining it is often the hardest. When you’re doing the concentration, there’s a sense of accomplishment. As you begin to see that the mind is actually settling down, the breath gets more comfortable, you get more immersed in the breath. As you’re able to drop this thought and that thought, there’s quite a sense of accomplishment then, when the mind finally does settle down, that you’ve done something really rewarding. Some people find it easier to settle down than others do, but for everybody it’s a really nice experience, just getting it down. You see thoughts coming up that otherwise would have snagged you, and they’re not snagging you right now. There’s often a sense that a weight has been lifted off the mind, and a lot of scurrying around. That can irritate the mind. That’s settled down. And then the question often is, “What next?” And the answer is, “This is what next. You just keep doing this.” And for those of us who haven’t mastered a physical or manual skill before, it can be difficult. There’s a sense of impatience. You want the results. You want to be able to put it to use. But to put it to use, you’ve first got to learn how to maintain it, because you’ve got to get to know it. So learn how to encourage yourself in this process of, once the mind has settled down, you’re going to keep it there, regardless of what comes up. And you may picture the task to yourself in different ways. Part of the task may be as a kind of a battle. You know that the complaints of the mind are going to come up, “This is boring,” “Nothing’s happening.” It’s like making scrambled eggs when you do it the right way over a very low heat. You stir and you stir and you stir, and for a long time it doesn’t seem like anything’s happening at all. So you have to learn how to encourage yourself, remind yourself, “This is the way it’s done.” And any thoughts that come up that you want to cut short, you have to remind yourself, “We get the results. They’re not going to come out as good as you’d like.” You often come up against, as we talked about today, the internal timer. If you’re used to sitting for forty-five minutes, well, forty-five minutes are up and it’s time to go. The members of the committee that have been nice and docile and obedient for forty-five minutes now suddenly begin to insist on their right. They want to think about this and worry about that and plan for this or remember that. And they’ll make changes in the body as these thoughts come up. You start feeling antsy, you start feeling ill at ease, you start feeling the need that you’ve got to get up and move around. Try to locate those sensations in the body that are sending you those messages and remind yourself you don’t have to interpret them in terms of those messages. You’ve interpreted them that way in the past, but that doesn’t have to be the meaning that you accept. Notice where the sensations come from. Are they in the legs? Are they in the arms? Are they in the torso? Is it in the head? Can you disperse them? If there’s a sense of energy that wants to move around, can you take that energy and devote it to moving into the next place? This is an important skill in a lot of different ways, because so many times the defilements in the mind—the greed, aversion, and delusion, particularly the ones we don’t like to admit to ourselves—work on the mind through the body. Sense where your blood flows. Create certain sensations in different parts of the body that you take as your trigger, “Oh, I’ve got to do something about this.” This is how a lot of addicts respond to different sensations in the body. There’s a pain here, or just a slight sense of displeasure there, or whatever, and they are all addiction. This is the way to deal with it. Whether it’s really helpful in the long term or not, that doesn’t matter at the time. This is the trigger. We all have triggers of this sort in one way or another. And you have to learn how to recognize them and learn how to untrigger them so they no longer mean that, they no longer lead to that particular reaction. So as soon as the thought comes in, “I’ve got to move, it’s time to get up,” ask yourself, “Okay, what’s going on in the body?” Look at it purely as a physical issue and see what can be done. The other way to keep yourself going, of course, is learning how to motivate yourself. If concentration comes only in forty-five minute segments, what are you going to do? Say, when you have a disease that lasts longer than forty-five minutes, you’re stuck in a place where you can’t go anywhere. There was an old man who was dying of cancer. He came to stay at the monastery one time. He’d been at the monastery for a couple months. His daughter was there with him. He began to complain of a toothache. Well, he went to see the doctor and it turned out it wasn’t a toothache, it was cancer. And the doctor said it had spread so far that there was nothing that could be done. So the old man came back to say goodbye to John Foon, to go home and die. He said, “You go home and die and all you’re going to do is hear your nieces and nephews arguing over your inheritance. Why don’t you stay here and die at the monastery?” Strange invitation. But the man took it. And so his daughter looked after him. She began to notice that he could stay with the pain for about two hours at a stretch. This was after he’d gotten to the point where he couldn’t talk. He’d start moving his head around back and forth, back and forth on the pillow. His daughter would repeat the meditation word in his ear and he would settle down again. So his concentration segments were two hours. And even then he needed help. If your concentration segment is only forty-five minutes and you’re stuck in a hospital where nobody knows anything about meditation, what are you going to do? See the ability to stay still for long periods of time as a skill worth mastering. And then learn to create little challenges for yourself. You can do this in a very quiet, undisturbed environment. Can you learn how to get into concentration and stay there in environments that are not so still, not so quiet? Or how about the work periods around here in the monastery? Can you maintain your center as you’re working? The body’s moving around. There’s not much that needs to be done in terms of conversation. Can you maintain your center? Take it as a challenge. And learn how to motivate yourself so you’re up for the challenge. Don’t simply see it as a disturbance or as a challenge. Somebody get through so you can get back to the real meditation. Real meditation is a skill that you want to be able to carry into all activities. This is the way it is with any skill. Once you’ve mastered it, you want to learn how to challenge yourself so you can keep improving and improving. Now, the improvements may not be all that visible. Many times, when you’re meditating, the progress seems quicker at the very beginning, and then you go through this plateau. Sometimes it actually seems like you’re backsliding. Well, it’s because your sensitivity is getting better, your standards are getting higher. John Fung’s analogy was cleaning your room every day. If you have a room and you don’t clean it every day, you don’t notice the dust that comes on to the floor, say, day after day. It’s just gathering dust and it’s already dusty. So a little bit of extra dust doesn’t attract your attention. If, however, you keep the floor very clean, then the slightest bit of dust coming on it is going to seem too much. So instead of getting upset by seeing the floor being cleaned every day, you take it as a sign that your mind is getting more quiet, more discerning. You’re learning how to question things that you used to accept. Your powers of judgment are getting more precise, more sensitive. But again, learn how to take it as a challenge. How can you deal with these new things that are coming up, or these old things that you didn’t see but now look new, and not get knocked off balance? When you bring the right attitude to the maintaining part of the meditation, you find that you have a tool that you really can put to use, a state of mind that is stable. It doesn’t react to things. So it can see things clearly and get a sense of what’s really right and what’s really wrong going on in the mind. Non-reactivity doesn’t mean you don’t judge things. You do judge things, but you want to be very, very still in order to judge them well. And so you’re creating a good, solid place to conduct your experiments in the mind. It’s like conducting any kind of experiment. If you’ve got equipment that’s very sensitive, measures very slight vibrations, you want to have it based on something that doesn’t move. Otherwise all you’re going to get are the movements, say, of the table or the movements of the building. And so whatever motions the instrument registers may have very little to do with the things you’re actually trying to measure, because the table is wobbly. But if the table is solid, then there’s a slight move of the needles. Okay, you know it’s measuring not the table, it’s measuring something else. So try to develop this stability in your mind, the stability that doesn’t get knocked over by the 45 minute timer that your defilement set. It doesn’t get knocked over by the thoughts of, “This is boring,” or thoughts of, “Nothing is happening,” or, “My mind is getting worse.” You just learn how to put those thoughts aside and see them as something you want to learn how not to react to and not to believe. So you can develop this more and more useful skill.

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