The Uses of Concentration

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Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing. You realize you don’t just feel the air coming in and out through the nose, but you also feel the movement of the body, which is exactly what allows the air to come in and out into wherever it’s easiest to focus on. The sensation of breathing focuses there. Think of the breath not only as air coming in and out through the nose, but also that movement of energy, which, when you get really sensitive, you realize is all through the body. And if it’s not all through the body, if it’s blocked, well, think of things opening up. Relax around the breathing process. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change the rhythm. Long in-and-out short, short in-out long, in-short out-short. There are lots of gradations of long and short, just as there are gradations of fast and slow, heavy and light, deep or shallow. Try to notice what kind of breathing feels good for the body right now. And if the needs of the body change, allow the breath to change along with it. If you can make the breath interesting in this way, it’s a lot easier to stay with it. We’re trying to give the mind a place to settle down. This is going to know itself a lot better when it settles down and it gets rest. While the mind can settle down, you can do lots of things with your concentration. A really important one is having a good place for the mind to stay, a place where it can rest and recuperate from the day. Soothe any sense of roughness inside the body or roughness inside the mind. The Buddha calls it a pleasant abiding. That’s one use for concentration. Another is that you try to carry it into the day so you can see more clearly what’s going on in your mind as you deal with issues outside. You can see thoughts arising and passing away, and you begin to notice which kinds of thoughts are the ones you want to follow and which ones you don’t want to follow, which intentions you want to follow. It’s your intentions that are very important. We had that chant just now about aging, illness, death, and separation. But then we also had the chant on wanting to find happiness. Well, it’s the intention, that fifth contemplation. That’s what allows us to find happiness, if we do it skillfully. If not, it can cause a lot of suffering, which leads to the third use for concentration, which is to figure out how the mind is creating a lot of unnecessary suffering for itself. This is something you really want to understand, because aging, illness, and death are there in the world. Separation is there in the world. If we haven’t trained the mind, we’re going to suffer from these things again and again and again. And so when you’ve gained a sense of well-being from the concentration, you’ve become more alert to what’s actually going on in the mind. You see that the best use of the concentration is this last one, the one where you can figure out where you’re causing unnecessary stress. In some cases, it’s pretty blatant. It’s in your actions, the way you deal with the world. In other cases, it’s a lot more subtle. It’s simply how you deal with, say, pain in the body, or how you deal with the fact that as you get older, the body starts missing a few of its parts, it seems. Things you used to be able to do, you can’t do anymore. Or things you used to be able to do easily take a lot more effort, and there’s a general slide in that direction. How are you going to face this so that you don’t suffer from it? And there’s the facts of death and separation. How are you going to deal with those so you don’t suffer from them? Years back, when I was in Thailand, I would stay at a monastery in Bangkok. They had a lot of funerals there. And a tradition among the funerals in Thailand is that people will print books to distribute at the funeral, because often the cremation takes place a long time after the death. And so it gives them time to go down to a publishing house and say, “What kind of books are good to hand out that are related to what the person liked, or something they may have written themselves?” And they’d always have a little biography at the beginning, of the person who passed away. And there was a common pattern. They grew up, got married, had a job, and began to notice a little problem, say, with their kidneys, or their lungs, or their heart. At first the doctor was able to take care of it easily, but then the condition got heavier and heavier and finally got to the point where the doctors couldn’t do anything at all. When you think about that, there will come a point in your life when doctors can’t do anything for you, and you’re left on your own. How are you going to handle that? Well, if you’ve trained the mind, you can handle it well. Because you’ve learned to see which of your thoughts create unnecessary suffering. The thoughts of identifying with a body, thoughts of identifying with your memories, thoughts of identifying with your feelings of pleasure and pain, thoughts of identifying with your thoughts. As long as you have that sense of identification with these things, that you find that there’s something that you gain out of identifying with them. Because this is a choice we make. We’re not often conscious of this fact. We identify with a lot of things, and our identity changes as we go through the day, sometimes many times. Because you first identify with this desire, then you identify with that one, then this intention, then that feeling. Your sense of who you are changes shape, like an amoeba. And wherever you latch on, those things are going to change, which is why you can’t stay with any one sense of who you are for very long. But there are some underlying ones, particularly the identification with the body. When that starts going, you’re going to find that this identification, which was useful as long as the body was healthy and young and strong, starts becoming a problem. One of the techniques that comes from meditation is that you learn how to change the focus of your identity. You start identifying with your discernment, your mindfulness, the good qualities in mind, the ones that are always willing to learn, and the ones that are willing to see where you’re making a mistake and doing something unskillful, causing suffering for yourself or others, and you’re willing to let go. That’s a good identity to hold on to for the time being. That allows you to let go of a lot of other identities that come in and are going to cause trouble. This is one of the reasons why we have that second use of concentration, which is seeing thoughts as they come and go, because you’re beginning to see how fluid the mind can be and how fluid your sense of self can be. When you see these things coming and going, you can also look at the level of stress that either rises or falls as they come and go. Then you can begin to look at the choices you’re making, because often a whole throng of thoughts will come into the mind, and you choose one or two to run with and the others get left aside. And you ask yourself, “Why did you make that choice?” And it usually comes down to where you think you’re going to get something out of it. There’s a part of the mind that’s calculating, “If I do this, it’s going to require that much energy, and what are the results I expect?” And if you decide that the results are worth the energy you put into it, you’re going to go with it, if you can. In other cases, where the calculation is, “Well, it’s too much effort and it’s not enough reward,” you put those things aside. And so when you’re using the concentration to understand the problem of suffering, you want to see exactly where the mind is lying to itself in those calculations. Sometimes it is just mal-misinterpreting the problem, and other times it should know better. But it distorts the facts of the case so that you run with something that deep down inside you know is going to cause long-term trouble, but you’re going to get a short-term reward. When the mind has a sense of well-being, which is that first use of concentration, it’s less likely to run for that short-term reward. So it puts you in a better position to step back from that particular habit. And you can see, “I like to say these things, I like to do these things, but it’s really bad for me. So maybe I should learn some other habits.” At the very least, when something that you know is unskillful comes up in the mind, you say, “I don’t have to touch that.” It’s like your mind is holding a committee meeting, and different members of the committee are recommending different courses of action. And as the mind gets concentrated, you can strengthen the more skillful members of the committee so that shabby proposals don’t take the floor, don’t get the majority. So concentration has a lot of uses, but these three in particular are the really useful ones, giving the mind a place to rest. Allowing it to be mindful and alert to what’s actually going on inside the mind. And then three, to understand what it is that causes the mind to create suffering for itself. We all want happiness, however we define it. And we act because we think that our actions will bring us well-being. Yet all too often they bring a short-term well-being, or sometimes even nothing at all, but a lot of stress and a lot of suffering. Why is that? It’s because of ignorance. The concentration puts us in a position where we can look at the mind to see through that ignorance, so the mind doesn’t have to weigh itself down unnecessarily anymore. And as you train the mind in this direction, you find that the things in the world that weigh it down don’t really weigh it down. It’s the way that the mind reacts to those things, the way it shapes those things and brings them in. That’s what’s weighing the mind down. So the stress and suffering you create for yourself, once that’s gone, there’s nothing to weigh the mind down at all. That’s why this is the best use of concentration.

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