Success in Concentration

July 3, 2016

Bring your mind to the breath. And if it wanders off, bring it back again. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Keep at it. What you’re trying to do here is stitch together a strong state of concentration out of your normal little states of concentration. The nature of the mind is that it focuses on an object for a little bit and then it loses interest for one reason or another and then moves on to something else. And sometimes moving on, it totally forgets where it was. This is why when you try to trace the trains of your thought in the course of the day, you suddenly find there are huge gaps, where the mind simply blanked out and then moved on to something else. So what we’re trying to do is get the mind not to blank out, in that way, so that as it stays with the breath or begins to move someplace else, you know you can catch it in time and bring it back before it’s made the leap. To do this, the Buddha says, you need four qualities that strengthen the meditation and turn it from just ordinary little bits and pieces of being focused to a long, steady, solid focus. The four qualities are the basis for power, the basis for success. Meditation is something that you do either succeed or don’t succeed with. Sometimes you hear that all meditation is a good meditation whether it goes well or not, or there’s no such thing as a good or bad meditation. But that’s not what the Buddha taught. There’s right concentration, there’s wrong concentration. There’s a concentrated mind and an unconcentrated mind. And we’re working on the concentration to make it right. The fourth quality is desire, in other words, your motivation for wanting to do this. You realize that there’s a lot of suffering in your life, one way or another. And the suffering that comes from outside is nothing compared to the suffering that comes from inside. We sometimes try to straighten out the situation around us, but the more we try to straighten out other people, the more they resist. You can’t create a perfect world outside. And the more you try with just brute force, the more you make a mess. Think of that old fable about the sun and the wind. There was a traveler going along a road with a cloak, and the sun and the wind had a bet who could get the traveler to remove his cloak. So the wind tried to blow and blow and blow the cloak off the traveler. And of course, the more the wind blew, the tighter it got. Later, the traveler held his cloak. So then the wind gave up, and then it was the sun’s turn. The sun just sat there beaming. And the warmer it got, the sun didn’t have to do anything else. The traveler took off his cloak himself. So we’re going to live with people. You have to learn to be like a beaming sun. How do you do that? You’ve got to develop the mind in concentration so you have a sense of well-being inside that can begin to radiate outside. You have to motivate yourself to focus on the practice. Another course is realizing that if you don’t get the mind trained, you’re going to create a lot of messes for yourself. This is the principle of heedfulness. If you just give in to whatever the mind wants to think about right now, there’s going to be trouble down the line. This is where having a healthy sense of self is important. Again, a lot of us have problems putting together a healthy sense of self out of all the stuff that’s going on in the mind. You have to remember that some of the things that come into the mind are just results of past karma. You’ve just got to let them go. Other things are your intentions right now. Those are the things you have to focus on. You want to learn how to assemble a coherent set of intentions so you don’t destroy with one desire something you’ve worked hard to build up with another. Particularly if what you build up with is something really useful and helpful, you don’t want some other desire to just come in and destroy that. So you have to be able to protect your original desire. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration. You get a sense of what’s really skillful inside, and you get a greater sense of yourself being a skillful person. That way, you don’t destroy yourself. You destroy your own happiness. There are lots of different ways you can motivate your desire to practice. So if you find your practice is not going well, you can ask yourself, “What’s your motivation? What can you do to strengthen your motivation?” That’s one of the bases for success. The second one is simple persistence. Just keep at it. That doesn’t mean that you have to throw yourself into hours and hours of painful sitting. What it means is that regardless of your posture, you keep after the mind. You watch it as it goes through the day. You don’t say to yourself simply, “OK, I’m going to look after my mind while I’m sitting in meditation and doing walking meditation, and the rest of the day it can just go wherever it wants.” That doesn’t work. Because some of the things that are going to destroy your meditation actually are seeds that were planted in the course of the day. Intentions that came up in the mind that part of you knows are unskillful, but you give in to them and then you try to cover them up. Then they’re going to show up as the mind begins to settle down. They’re like seeds that are planted. So you have to be persistent with the mind as you go through the day. This is what restraint of the senses is about. When you look at something or listen, why you’re looking, why you’re listening, who’s doing the looking, who’s doing the listening, is a part of you that’s all ready to get aggravated by lust or aggravated by anger. Are they doing the looking and listening? If so, they’re going to create trouble, not only at that moment but further on as you go through the day. They’re going to create trouble in your meditation. So if you find that anger is doing the looking or lust is doing the looking, you’ve immediately got to stop looking that way. In some cases, it actually means don’t look at those things or don’t listen to those things. In other cases, it means look or listen in a different way. If it’s something that aggravates lust, ask yourself, “What is in there that’s really ugly?” If it’s something that aggravates anger, ask, “What is in there in this person that’s really good?” Don’t just give in to your urges and moods. If you can keep settled with the mind in this way, as you go through the day, it strengthens your concentration. But you do need to have a sense of well-being to keep it going. Otherwise, it gets really dry and very tight, and things begin to break down. So you have to learn how to breathe in a way as you go through the day, not just while you’re sitting here and meditating, but every breath coming in and going out. You want it to be comfortable. If you sense that there’s tightness developing in the breath energy in the body, do what you can immediately to release it. So you’re not carrying a lot of stuff around. Because the more tight energy you carry around, the more things are going to explode. You’ve got to learn how to release it through the way you breathe. Release it out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet. Allow good energy to develop in its place. Then learn how to carry that through the day in the same way that you’d carry a bowl full of water, trying not to let it drip or slash. Try to maintain that sense of balance inside. That will go a long way. The third quality is indebtedness. What can you do to really give your full attention to what you’re doing? This is where working with the breath is very helpful. Seeing that the way you breathe has an impact on the body and the way the breath energy flows throughout the body. It can have an extreme impact on what it feels like just to have a body as you’re going around. Learn how to take an interest in that. We’re talking today about the stage of concentration where you’re beginning to settle down but you’re not fully implanted in the concentration. That happens as things get more and more comfortable, and then you just kind of wallow in the comfort and drift off. The level of concentration, as I said, has no resistance to pleasure. So as things begin to get pleasant, the next thing to do is work to gain an interest in what’s going on. Once there’s a sense of pleasure, what can you do to move it around the body? What can you do to let it expand? What ways of expanding the pleasure actually destroy it? What ways of expanding the pleasure allow it to grow and to glow, turn into a kind of radiance? That effortlessly goes through the body. In other cases, it requires consciously going through the different parts of the body, releasing any tight muscles you may feel here or there. But what you’re doing is you’re giving yourself work to do in the pleasure. In other words, the pleasure is still there, but you’re learning how to work with it. So you’re not just wallowing in the pleasure and drifting off. You get things more and more evenly spread through the body. The breath fills the body. Your awareness fills the body. And you’ve figured out all the little nooks and crannies and other problems that keep getting in the way of having this large, full body sense of ease and awareness. By taking a real interest in what’s going on, that strengthens the concentration so that even though there’s pleasure, you don’t get carried away. You don’t get carried away by the pleasure. And the concentration can reach a state of real stability that’s not affected by pleasure, not affected by pain. You’re here fully in the present moment, and you feel like you belong. So these are some of the benefits of taking an interest in what it’s like to have this sense of the body sitting here, learning how the breath relates to the warmth, how it relates to the coolness, how it relates to the solidity in the body. There are ways of conceiving the breath energy that allow it to permeate areas that otherwise would be blocked off. Remembering, as I said today, that the breath is there first. There’s breath everywhere in the body, but in some cases it’s really tightened and constricted. So try to find the breath energy that’s there and allow it to open up. This moves into the fourth quality, which is basically your ingenuity. You’re discernment in how you approach this. One of the things that gets in the way of concentration is the fact that there are other intentions going on in the mind at the same time that you’re trying to get the mind concentrated. You have to learn how to deal with them in such a way that they don’t disturb the concentration. One of the worst things you can do is try to chase them off. It’s as if you’re standing at a well and you’re trying to get to chase away everybody that comes near the well. And so as soon as they appear, you go running after them. Well, that means other people from another direction can come into the well, because you’ve left the well. What you’ve got to do is realize that these things that come and appear in your mind, the thoughts that appear in your mind, are there and you know that they’re there. But you don’t have to pay them any attention. The more attention you pay to them, the less attention you’re going to be able to give to this well of cool water you’ve got inside. And they come up, just say, “Okay, that’s old karma. I don’t have to get involved.” And the less attention you pay to them, the less you feed them. The more you try to fight them off, the more energy they get from you. It’s like that monster that Hercules did battle with. Every time he threw the guy to the ground, the guy came springing back up with renewed energy. That’s when he realized that this person was actually a child of the earth. Every time he made contact with the earth, that’s how he got his strength. And so Hercules picked him up, didn’t let him touch the ground, and the guy lost his strength. He didn’t have to fight him, didn’t have to throw him down. He just picked him up. So often you have to realize that your efforts to chase away the distracting thoughts actually give more strength to the distracting thoughts. In this case, you don’t pick them up, but you just don’t pay them any attention. And they’ll say wild, crazy things to catch your attention, but you say, “Nope, nope, nope. I’m going to stay here with the breath.” Once you can make the distinction between present karma and past karma, and that’s what a lot of those voices are, past karma, you remember that your present karma is what you’ve got to maintain. So the decision and the intention to stay with the breath is something you maintain. Let everything else go. This way you lighten your load considerably. That’s one of the purposes of discernment, which is to lighten your load, to realize that some of the battles you take on are not really necessary, so you can focus on the things that really are. And this too helps the concentration to settle down and develop stability. So if anything comes your way, it doesn’t disturb you at all. You’re trying to get to a level of what the Buddha calls unperturbed. You’re not perturbed by your own thoughts. You’re not perturbed by things outside. So it requires desire, and it requires persistence, and it requires intentness, and it requires that you use your discernment. When you’ve got these different bases for success going, then maybe you can see that the meditation will succeed. The concentration will develop and become solid and become the kind of concentration that leads to even greater discernment. So do your best to do the meditation well, because it’s when it’s done well that it shows its true rewards.

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