Balanced Concentration (outdoors)

October 5, 2016

When you’re meditating, you’re trying to bring the mind at the right concentration. The word “right” here means, of course, the opposite of “wrong.” But it also means “just right.” In other words, not too heavy, not too light. You want a state of concentration that’s alert, but still at the same time. And that takes some doing. As you sit down, you have to learn how to read your mind as you’re trying to get with the breath. If things aren’t just right, you have to figure out what’s wrong and what you can do to correct the situation. This is why the Buddha, when he was teaching the establishings of mindfulness, taught two exercises. One is keeping track of the mind, and the other is keeping track of mental qualities. Keeping track of the mind is like keeping track of a whole committee. The whole committee has decided to go for passion, or to go for anger, or delusion, or to go away from passion, away from anger, away from delusion. That’s the whole committee. That’s the state of your mind. If you figure that it’s out of balance, you have to figure out exactly which committee member is moving it out of balance. And what other committee members you can strengthen, so bring it back in. That’s what the mental qualities are all about. In other words, you analyze what you’ve got, and then you figure out what needs to be changed. What you’ve got is the mind, and what needs to be changed are the things that you can use to change it. Those are the mental qualities. The Buddha gives many lists of mental qualities. There are the factors for awakening, there are the hindrances, there are the sixth sense media. There are the aggregates, the clinging aggregates, the four noble truths. But while you’re trying to get the mind into concentration, two sets are especially useful, the hindrances and the factors for awakening. If you find you’re having trouble settling down with the breath, you have to figure out which hindrance is getting in the way, because each of the hindrances requires a different technique to deal with it. For example, sensual desire. This is the mind’s tendency to like to think about sensual pleasures. You’re going to do this, you’re going to do that, you’re going to eat this, you’re going to listen to that. And you have to see that those pleasures really don’t have anything of any substance to offer you at all. If your sensual desire is for lust, then it’s recommended that you analyze the body into its 32 parts. Think about all the different parts inside the body. Think about putting them out on the floor in front of you. And seeing if something is made up of these things, is it really worth desiring? You want to see that there’s really nothing there at all. It’s just the mind deceiving itself, seeing that there’s something attractive there. As for other sensual desires, the Buddha said to see them as borrowed goods. You get them for a little bit and then they go away. Or it’s like a dream, he says. You get the pleasure, then where is it? It’s gone. All you have left is the memory. And sometimes the memory is not good, because you’ve had to do unskillful things in order to get it, that pleasure to begin with. So when you see that sensuality has nothing to offer, then it’s a lot easier to get past that hindrance. As for ill will, when you want somebody to suffer, the Buddha says you have to see other people’s goodness, because you need their goodness. The image he gives is of a person crossing the desert, hot, trembling with thirst. He comes across some water in a cow’s footprint, and he knows if he used his hand to scoop up the water, the water would get muddy. So he has to get down and slurp up the water with his tongue. It’s not a very dignified position, but it’s the only thing that works. In the same way, if there’s somebody who’s really been misbehaving, you may feel that it’s beneath you to start looking for their goodness. But then remember, you need their goodness like water. Because if all you can see is other people’s bad points, it’s very hard for you to be good to them. And if you look around the world, all you see are greedy, selfish people, then you’re going to start being greedy and selfish too. So you have to look for other people’s goodness. You need it to survive. And if you can’t find any goodness to them at all, you have to feel sorry for them. Those people are creating lots of karma for themselves. There’s no need for you to wish them ill. They’re already doing ill for themselves. You have to feel sorry for them instead. As for the other three hindrances, sleepiness, restlessness, and uncertainty, those are all related to delusion. With sleepiness, you have to test it. Because sometimes you feel sleepy, but the body doesn’t really need to rest. It’s simply bored and it’s trying to find some excuse not to meditate. So you have to test it. Change the object of your meditation. If your breath is too light, breathe more heavily. Or you can think of a meditation topic that requires a little more thought, that’s not so calming, like the parts of the body. If that doesn’t wake you up, then you rub your arms with your hands, go out and wash your face, look up at the stars. If there’s some passage of Dharma that you’ve memorized, recite it to yourself. If that doesn’t wake you up, go out and do the walking meditation. If you’re still sleepy, it’s a sign that you really need to sleep, so you lie down. But you make up your mind that as soon as you wake up, you’re going to get up. You’re not going to continue lying there. With restlessness, if you’re concerned about losing something, think about if it’s just something you can lose, then it’s not really yours. Things that other people can take away from you, they’re not really yours. What’s really yours are the good qualities you’ve built in your mind. If you want any kind of wealth that’s reliable, you have to focus here in on the mind. And finally, with uncertainty, if you’re uncertain about the Dharma, well, there’s only one way to cure your uncertainty, and that’s to try to practice it and see if it really works. Sometimes uncertainty is just laziness. But you have to ask yourself, here’s an opportunity to find if the Buddha’s teaching, which promises true happiness, if it really works. Do you not want true happiness? Do you not want to see this? If you don’t feel that the Buddha’s challenge stirs up some desire in you, what kind of person are you? You have to think in these ways to get past that kind of uncertainty. If you’re uncertain about yourself, as to whether you can do this, remember the Buddha only asks that you be a human being, that you be honest with yourself, and that you be observant. Those are qualities you can develop. Based on those qualities, he’s an easy person. You can do the practice. Think about the times you’ve been generous in the past, the times you’ve been virtuous in the past. These are all indications that you’re a good human being. So you’ve got what it takes. In each of these cases, you get past the hindrance with a quality that’s called appropriate attention. In other words, asking yourself the right questions, the questions that get you on the path. That’s one set of metal qualities, the hindrances, so you can recognize what’s keeping you from getting into concentration. When you do get into concentration, then you have to read it to see if it’s too light or too heavy. If your concentration is too light for the time being, don’t worry about the breath and the different parts of the body, just choose one. Get one spot in the body and focus your attention as strongly as you can there. Not so strong that you give yourself a headache, just strong enough to maintain your spot. Then as for whatever else comes up, don’t pay any attention. This comes under the factors for awakening, what they call concentration, calm, and equanimity. In other words, you calm the mind down, focus it in on one spot, and whatever comes up, you’re not going to pay it any attention at all. You’re just going to stay with your one spot. Then as the mind begins to settle down, settle down, settle down, then you can expand your awareness from that one spot. Don’t leave the spot, just think of the range of your awareness growing out from that spot until it fills the whole body. This way, use the factors of awakening on the settling side to settle your mind down. If it’s settled down too strongly, you focus on the breath, everything gets very still, very quiet, and then you’re not really sure where you are. Everything seems empty. You come out and you’re not really sure where you were. That’s what’s called delusion concentration, and it’s caused by not being able to keep track of the breath. You drop the breath and you go for the pleasure. Your mindfulness and alertness just get lost. Everything is still, it’s a state of concentration, but it’s delusion, because there’s no mindfulness, no alertness. The way to cure this is to use the factors for awakening that are energizing. The first one is called analysis of qualities. To prevent that state from arising, as soon as the breath is comfortable, you start thinking of spreading your awareness. When the breath gets refined, you still have a frame of reference that you can follow. Then you try to figure out where in the body is the breath not going. It might be down between the toes, it might be in the hips, it might be in your neck. Make a thorough survey all around the body. Give yourself work to do in your concentration. That pulls you out of concentration that’s too deep or too quiet. But you notice in both cases, eventually what you’re trying to do is get to a state where the mind is still but has a broad range of awareness, because that’s the just right concentration that we’re going for. It’s the kind of concentration that’s good for giving rise to insight, because it’s still and it’s all around. Remember, concentration is something you can do, insight isn’t something you can do. Insight is a quality of mind that comes when you see something you didn’t see before, and when you see an attachment you didn’t see before, and you can see through it, you can let it go. You can’t determine ahead of time that you’re going to let go of something, but you can create the conditions that make it easier for the mind to gain insight. That’s what the concentration is all about, when the concentration is just right. It’s like a hunter. The hunter goes to the spot where he knows the animals go. When he gets there he has to be very quiet, otherwise he scares the animals away. But at the same time he has to be very alert, otherwise the animals can pass right in front of his nose and he doesn’t see them. So he has to learn how to combine these qualities of being quiet but alert all around. And even then though, he can’t determine, “The rabbit’s going to pass by at this time, or this animal’s going to pass by at that time, or I’m going to catch this many animals today.” Those are things he can’t determine. What he can determine is he’s going to get the conditions right, so that if an animal comes, he’s there, he’s ready for it. It’s the same when you’re doing concentration. You try to get the conditions right so that when something comes up in the mind and you suddenly see, “Oh, this is what my mind has been doing, fooling itself, attached to this, holding on to that,” you’re in a position where you can see it and let it go. You can let go because you’ve got the state of concentration as your food. The reason you held on to those things in the past is because you tried to feed on them. You thought they were good food, but now you’ve got better food. The Buddha compares this to a beverage that has poison. It’s been made to look good and taste good. Before you didn’t know that it had poison, so you kept drinking it down, drinking it down. Then you complained because you were feeling sick. But now that you’re fixing concentration, you’ve got a better beverage, one that you drink and it gives you energy. And then someone brings the poison beverage to you, you recognize it immediately. “Oh, this is poison. I don’t need this.” What’s happened is that concentration has enabled you to make a better value judgment as to what’s worth eating and what’s not. The concentration right now is your good food. All those other attachments, those are poison food. So make sure that you fix your concentration just right. Not too sweet, not too salty, not too whatever. You want just right concentration so that you’re right in the position where you can see what’s going on in the mind and deal with it skillfully. This is how you read the mind. First you figure out where the mind is and then you figure out which mental qualities need to be dealt with, which ones have to be abandoned, which ones have to be developed to bring things into balance. When they’re brought into balance, then they’re just right for putting an end to suffering. This is how it works.

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