Sustaining Concentration

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It’s one thing to get the mind into place and something else to keep it there. Two different sets of skills. You make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath and you remind yourself that this is where you want to go. Part of right effort is generating So this is not something you just do because you feel you should do, or you’re compelled to do, but something you want to do. You want to gain some concentration because you know the benefits, or you’ve learned or heard of the benefits of concentration, or you may have already tasted some of those benefits and you want to go back. You’re trying to find what the Buddha calls the potential for stillness in the mind. That can also be a potential for stillness in the body. Find someplace that feels comfortable, that when you breathe in feels good, when you breathe out feels good, and you can maintain a steadiness of sensation even with the in-breath, even with the out-breath, that doesn’t change. Then you try to develop that and gradually the mind settles down around it. You have to fight off some distracting thoughts. But basically it’s making up your mind you’re going to stay right here and then doing whatever you can to stick with that intention until things settle down and you actually do get a different quality to your concentration. You feel more settled, more at ease. And that’s when the skills change. You’ve got to protect that sense of being at ease and at the same time not drift off. Don’t get so quiet that you lose track of where you are. The Buddha talks about three qualities you’re trying to maintain in balance—concentration, effort on one side, and effort on the other. To stay with the concentration, there has to be an effort. It’s like getting a sailboat. First in line with where you want it to go. And to get it in line with where you want to go, you have to steer back and forth, back and forth. But then when it’s finally in line, then it’s simply a matter of maintaining just the right amount of pressure on the rudder so that it doesn’t tip too far to the left, too far to the right. Occasionally there’ll be a strong crosswind which you have to hold on tight, but otherwise it’s just maintaining just the right amount of pressure. And here it’s the same thing. It’s just the right amount of effort that’s not going to destroy your concentration and equanimity. That’s one of the reasons why John Lee recommends that when you get a sense of ease and stillness, start spreading that around. And you can be fairly active at thinking about how to spread it around. You’ll find that if you push it, you’ve lost the sense of ease. So you have to be as light as possible in whatever physical pressure you put on it. Use simply the power of thought. There are channels of energy in the body, and you can open them up simply by thinking about them, focusing your awareness on the chest and asking yourself where is the channel here? Focusing on the stomach, where is the channel here? Focusing on your spine, where’s the channel there? Down through the pelvis, down through the hips, down through the legs, out through the toes, spaces between the toes. Can you think of the energy opening up? You don’t push the energy. They talk about the flow of energy. It’s nothing you push. It’s more like you control the valves. In the water system, the pressure of the water is coming from someplace else. Your main duty is to control the valves so they’re just right. You don’t have to push the water through yourself. The same way with the breath. You don’t push the breath. Just think of opening, opening, opening the channels. And however long it takes to get the mind so that it can settle down with a sense of full body awareness, everything wide open and aware of what’s going on. Aware, aware. However long it takes to get there, you continue with your direct thought and evaluation. This is the work you do in the concentration. So you don’t just lose focus. You blur out. You don’t lose what you’ve got. So learn how to tend to the concentration so that once it’s there, once there’s a sense of being settled, you can protect it. And you maintain just enough energy to keep going. Because after all, you are trying to develop a state of mind that has concentration and discernment together. And the direct thought and evaluation are the activities of discernment, particularly the evaluation. In other words, you think about opening up a channel of the breath, and then you notice it happen. How well did the body respond? And what are the benefits or what are the drawbacks of thinking about the breath in that particular way? You’re exercising your discernment as you evaluate things here. And this is what keeps the concentration from becoming just a blank. So that when you realize that the breath is really are ready to settle down fully, i.e., a sense of awareness streaming out throughout the body and everything’s very bright inside, then the concentration is enough to maintain itself. And that’s when you can let the evaluation off to the side. Part of the mind will complain, “Well, this is kind of empty here. There’s no thinking going on. There’s no intelligence going on. If you identify yourself with your intelligence, you’re in trouble.” You’ve got to say, “I’m willing to be stupid for the time being. Just be here with the breath. Create this foundation.” Because what this does is it provides the opportunity for the mind to see more subtle things inside. What’s going on still in that concentration? What’s still going on in the breath? What’s still going on in the body and the mind? You see more and more subtle things, the more stillness you can get. So it’s not that you’re being stupid. You’re just allowing the mind to get in a place where it can see more subtle things. And then you watch. It’s like somebody in a factory whose job is to watch the minor imperfections in whatever the product is. Say a cloth is being sent down the assembly line, and you want to have the state of mind that’s open so that it can see any little tiny imperfection in the cloth. Maintain both your alertness and your stillness until you’re ready to stop the machines as soon as you see that the cloth has some imperfection. It’s this balance between stillness and alertness that is a skill and takes time to acquire. But it involves getting the equanimity and the concentration and the effort all in balance. So you can put the mind in a position where it’s going to gain the insights, the deeper insights, that it wants. Insight isn’t something you do. It comes about as a result of the activity of getting the mind concentrated and then noticing what movements are still going on in the mind. When the mind flickers out after greed or flickers out after aversion, how can you catch it just at the bare flicker before it turns into a real fire? You can see that only when the mind has been well-concentrated. And, of course, the mind isn’t going to show its stripes all the time. So you have to be very careful to watch. You can’t make an appointment ahead of time that the insight’s going to come at 8.20 or 8.15. Your duty is to get the mind in the proper position, looking in the proper place, asking the proper questions for whatever the state of concentration is. And when the time comes, the answers will be there. You’ll see in particular how the mind has a thought that comes in and then you go after it, you go with it, or you react against it. I was reading a peculiar piece today when someone was saying that the problem isn’t the mind, the problem is how you relate to it. And the question, of course, is, well, who’s relating to what? Isn’t the mind relating to other things in the mind? So it is the mind. The issue is the mind. It’s just the question of the potentials that are coming up and then your present karma, your present action, your present choice, and what you’re going to do with those potentials. And you want to see the mind in action and as it’s making those choices so it can learn how to make them better. Just these are some of the things to keep in mind as you’re trying to develop the skill of staying in concentration, creating something good in the mind, and then maintaining what you’ve got.

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