The Pleasure of Concentration

February 6, 2017

Focus on a theme that puts the mind at ease and the body at ease. One of the reasons we have that chant about goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity before the meditation is because those are topics that can put the mind at ease. Try to foster an attitude that you want to find happiness that doesn’t harm anybody, and so you want to wish for their happiness and your own happiness at the same time. Remind yourself that for that kind of happiness to work, everybody has to look for happiness inside. Because a lot of the pleasures of the world depend on one person gaining what someone else loses. But here you want happiness where everybody gains. So you think about it. It would be required for everybody to reach really happy inside. Well, everybody would have to understand the causes for happiness and have the strength and the willingness to act on them. That’s something you can wish for everybody. If there are a few holdouts in your mind where you say, “Well, I’d like to see this person suffer first or that person suffer first,” and ask yourself, “Why? What would be gained by that?” It’s not the case that everybody who suffers for their misdeeds comes to their senses and realizes what they do. Sometimes you just make them worse. Remember that the Buddha taught the end of suffering for everybody. In other words, whether your suffering was “deserved” or not, he was still willing to teach you how not to suffer. Because it’s not the case that the input from past karma makes you have to suffer. There may be pains and other unfortunate things that have happened from past karma, but the mind doesn’t have to suffer from those things. So if you’re willing to take on the teaching, it’s there for you. Thinking of these things helps put the mind to rest. Then it can get the mind into states of concentration. But you have to be very careful, though. Because with the pleasure that comes from that, it’s very easy to drop the thought of goodwill and just ride with the pleasure, in which case it runs out and then the mind is someplace else. Then you have to come back and create the pleasure again. This is why it’s good to shift to another topic that has more to offer in terms of investigating what’s going on in the present moment. Here you can shift to the breath, you can shift to the different parts of the body, depending on what theme you find in the present moment here in the body. It helps bring the mind to peace. You can work with the energies in the breath as you breathe in. Where do you feel the breathing? Forget about what you learned about the breath and physiology and just ask yourself, “Where do you actually feel it right now?” Then ask yourself if the way you’re feeling the breath feels good for the body in general, or if you could change the way you conceive how the breath comes in, where it comes in, how many different places it comes in, where it goes out. Once it’s in the body, in which direction? Does it flow up? Does it flow down? Does it flow in? Does it flow out? Does it flow in a circle? There are all kinds of ways that you can conceive the breath. And you can ask yourself which way of conceiving it helps the most to get the mind to settle down. Once there’s that sense of ease, then you can work with it. This is an important part of the concentration. The ease is there not just to enjoy and then move on. You want to work with it. Work with that ease because it’s going to help you build a more solid concentration, because the purpose of concentration is not just to rest. It’s also to give rise to more mindfulness, more alertness, more discernment. And for that, you have to work on maintaining it, despite all the voices in the mind that say, “Well, that’s enough for now. I’m going to move on to something else,” or “I’m bored with this,” or whatever the excuse. Sometimes you can dress it up by saying, “Well, I want to move on to the next stage of the practice.” Well, the next stage of the practice comes from learning how to maintain a sense of ease without wallowing in the sense of ease, but allowing it to do its work while you stay focused on the breath. And John Fung mentioned one time there are three steps to concentration. One is learning how to do it, and the second one is learning how to maintain it, and the third is learning how to use it. You can’t really get to use the concentration for more alertness or mindfulness or discernment unless you’ve learned how to maintain it first. Partly because those qualities are going to require a more solid mind, and partly because in the act of learning how to maintain the concentration, you’re going to be strengthening your alertness and your mindfulness and your discernment. Alertness here means focusing on what you’re doing. It’s not just a general awareness of the present moment. It’s a very specific, focused awareness. Mindfulness is what reminds you to stay here with the topic you’ve chosen. If you find yourself wandering off, bring yourself right back. That’s what strengthens your mindfulness and your alertness as they work together here to maintain a state of concentration. And then there’s your discernment to figure out if the mind has trouble staying focused, what’s the problem. Is it laziness? Is it irritation? Is it too little energy? Is it too much energy? By learning how to analyze the state of mind to bring it to a sense of equilibrium where you can maintain it and not fall for the voices that say, “Well, there’s got to be something more than this.” As I was mentioning this morning, have some respect for your concentration. And while you’re working on the concentration, remind yourself that just being able to stay here in the present with this sensation in the body, that’s good enough for now. Otherwise, the mind will come up with all sorts of stories about how it should be moving on, or it’s had enough of the pleasure. Okay, you may have had enough of the pleasure, but that means maybe you can move to a more subtle level of concentration where you don’t have to worry about pleasure. There’s just equanimity. That’s even more still. The part of the mind that says, “Well, I’m going to be doing some thinking,” say, “Well, I’m going to think.” Think in a way that leads to not thinking. See if you can learn that skill in your thinking. There will be the thought or basically just the perception of whatever your topic is with breath, breath, breath, for example. But beyond that, learn what it’s like to have the mind really rest for a while. At the same time, it’s very vigilant to not move off the topic of the meditation and to just the feeling of pleasure and the feeling of equanimity. In this way, you get the mind ready to use the concentration by exercising these faculties of the mind—mindfulness, alertness, discernment. So do your best to get focused with a sense of ease, but at the same time remind yourself there is a purpose to this. You are working. It’s not just here to rest. You want to learn some skills that will help you when aging comes, when illness comes, when death approaches. You’ll be able to deal with these things and not suffer. Sometimes you can use that thought as a spur to not get lazy or complacent. So we’re working with a sense of pleasure, but learning how not to get swallowed up by the pleasure. Or get complacent or lazy because of the pleasure. We’re using the pleasure for a higher purpose, to help the mind learn how not to make itself suffer. It may not sound like that grand a goal, but when you realize how much of the suffering of the world comes from people who don’t know how to control their minds, and from them it spreads out to other people. It can do a lot of harm. You can’t control other people’s minds, but you can learn how to control yours. So at the very least, none of that harm is coming out of your mind. And that’s a genuine accomplishment right there.

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