A 100% Mind

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When you read the autobiographies of the forest ajahns, you’re struck by how often they talk about making a vow, making a determination. These tended to be the ajahns who also had the strongest concentration. The two qualities go together when you settle down with the breath. You want to gather the full force of your mind. But you have to do it with circumspection and you have to do it with sensitivity. Otherwise, simply having a strong desire can go too far. You have to figure out how much is enough. And it’s not that you just have a middling desire. It’s about figuring out where to focus it. That causes. But it’s what helps you get the mind to settle down. The Buddha lists the causes. When he talks about the establishing of mindfulness, he’s basically telling you that this is how you get the mind into concentration. This is a point that’s often missed. Sometimes people even think that mindfulness practice is one thing and concentration practice is something else entirely. But the Buddha never taught it that way. The basic process of mindfulness is getting focused on, say, the breath, or some aspect of the body in and of itself. Ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The staying focused, that’s the central part of the concentration, and then putting aside other distractions. That’s the work you’ve got to do around the concentration to protect it. And the qualities you bring are ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. In the ardency, there’s an aspect of desire. This connects the practice of concentration with what we were talking about earlier today, the formation of becomings in the mind. As the Buddha pointed out, the desires that lead to becoming can be the cause of suffering. Getting the mind into concentration also requires a desire. And you’re actually creating a kind of becoming here, too. It’s a skillful becoming. You might call it a transparent becoming because you can see all the processes clearly. The more the mind gets settled, the more clearly you can see them. And it’s for this very reason that it’s a good test case for figuring out what’s going on when you create a state of becoming, so you can catch yourself doing it at other times. The ardency starts with a desire. And then around that, as the Buddha said, or as he discovered on the night of his awakening, for there to be becoming there has to be attention and intention. In other words, some desires come and go, and you don’t pay much attention to them, and they don’t have much of an impact. But the desires you pay attention to, when you turn them into an intention, you want to stay with them. Yes, you choose this particular desire to focus on. And the acts of attention and intention then protect it. The intention is to maintain the concentration, and your attention is to look at anything that either might help or might get in the way of the concentration. You’re building a becoming here. So let’s do it well. Focus on the causes which are directing your thought to the breath and evaluating it. What kind of breathing feels good now? And you’re evaluating not only the feeling of the breath, but evaluating how you conceive the breath. Remember, we’re talking about the energy in the body, and it’s the energy that brings the air in and lets the air go out. That’s one level of energy, but it’s connected to other levels of energy as well. And call to mind the perception that the energy actually starts inside the body. We’re so used to thinking of the breath as what we get from outside, that it has to start outside and then comes in. But how is it going to come in unless there’s the energy inside the body that pulls it in? So the energy is the starting spot. The energy is there in the body already. So notice where the breath seems to begin. As you get more and more used to the breath, you may find that the spot that you focused on in the beginning is not quite the spot, but it’ll lead you there. Relax around that area. Give it some space. So as you breathe in, as the Thais say, you breathe with your entire abdomen. The whole torso is involved. And do it in a way that feels good. Feels refreshing. And then protect it. Again, it’s the act of attention and intention to maintain the state that are crucial. If you start paying attention to other things, the concentration is destroyed. It can be destroyed very quickly. So keep in mind that this is where you want to be. And fend off any other intentions that would move you anyplace else. As for the act of attention, that’s actually what’s watching to see what’s going to pull you away. And at the same time, try to encourage anything that might get the mind even more firmly established. You might run into a part of the body that’s especially comfortable that you didn’t notice to begin with. Shift your attention there. Do your best to protect this state. Because it’s in protecting it that you get to understand the process of becoming. This is a theme throughout the Buddhist teachings, that there are many things that we’re going to have to learn how to get past. But in order to get past them, first you have to learn how to do them well. So we’re going to do becoming well. At this moment, the only world that’s really relevant is the world inside the body. The only you that is relevant is the you that’s doing the meditation and is also experiencing the pleasure from the meditation. Any other sense of you that you might build around, any other desire, you’ve got to let go. This is why, when the Buddha talks about the different obstacles to meditation, you start thinking about what other people think of you. Because all of a sudden, there you are in a different world with a different you. You’ve lost the becoming of the concentration. So for the moment, there’s nothing else that you have to pay any attention to. Just let the crickets in the background stay in the background. Or if you want, you can think of it as surrounding you and then fending off everything else in the world. As soon as you start paying attention to the crickets, you know you’ve slipped off to the world. Come back to the breath. For the time being, this is the only desire that matters right now, the desire to stay here. Make a vow to yourself. This is what you want. You want to spend the hour settled down. Fend off anything that gets in the way. Encourage anything that’s helpful. Mindfulness will help you recognize what’s helpful and what gets in the way. Alertness lets you see how well you’re doing it. And ardency is the energy you put into it. When you focus on the causes, the more energy you put in, the more you get out. So when they talk about having balanced effort or just-right effort, remember, it’s not middling effort. It means effort that’s focused on the right spot. When it’s focused on the right spot, you can give yourself to it, one hundred percent. Because that’s the state of mind you’re working in. It’s a hundred percent state of mind. Everything is gathered into one. The word egata, which they use to describe concentration, means just that mind gathered into one or gathered around one thing. But it’s the whole mind. A hundred percent right here.

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