Cherish Your Concentration

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The Buddha once said that there are four uses for concentration. There’s concentration for pleasant abiding. There’s concentration for mindfulness and alertness. Concentration for gaining psychic powers. And concentration for getting rid of the defilements. The pleasant abiding, of course, is when you’re able to sit here with the breath, for example, and it feels really good. You’ve learned how to settle into the body so you’re not putting too much pressure on it, to allow the breath to flow. And you gain a sense of what kind of flow is going to be healthy for the body right now. This one involves some visualizing. For example, you can visualize a column of energy spreading down through the head, down through the torso. And as you breathe in, the energy comes into that column from all sides, not only from the front, but also from the sides and the back. And as you breathe out, it also goes out in all directions. That can be a calming perception, and it can give rise to a sense of the breath energy flowing freely. If there are any tense spots in the body that seem to be interfering, think of them dissolving. Or you can think of them as being composed of atoms that are mostly space. And so, of course, the breath can go right through. Your perception of their solidity may be preventing it. But this is one of the strange features of perception as it relates to the breath. You change the perception, you change how the breath flows. So find a perception or a series of perceptions that feels good right now, or allows the breath to feel good. That’s concentration as a pleasant abiding. Concentration for the sake of mindfulness and alertness. That’s when you try to maintain the concentration as you go through the day. It won’t be as deep. Or as refreshing as when you sit down with your eyes closed. But it’s much better than not having a foundation, not being grounded. And because you’ve got something you’ve got to keep in mind, and because you’ve got something against which you can measure the movements of the mind, you’re going to be a lot more alert to what’s going on. Concentration for psychic powers. That’s for people who tend to have those things in their karmic background. There seem to be fewer and fewer of those nowadays. Concentration for getting rid of the defilements. That’s when you’re really putting the concentration to work. You try to get the mind still. There are several ways you can do this. One is you can pose an issue in your mind before you start concentrating. Go into concentration and get as pleasant and as full a sense of the body, full a sense of the breath, as you can manage. Totally forget about the question. And then when you come out, either you’ll find an answer waiting there for you, or the mind will be in a position where it can think the issue through more clearly. You’re not really in the concentration, but you’ve used the concentration to settle things down so that you can come at the problem with a new perspective. Or you can take the concentration as your object of contemplation. This is what the Buddha calls having your theme of concentration well in hand, well penetrated. He illustrates it with an image, a person lying down and a person sitting up watching the person lying down, or a person standing watching the person sitting. In other words, in each case, you’ve got one person a little bit higher than the other. Ajaan Fuang would use the term “lift the mind above its object.” In the other case, there’s a sense that you’re stepping back a little bit from the state of concentration, not totally out of it, but stepping back from it. And you’re looking at what’s going on in terms of form, feeling, perceptions, fabrication, consciousness. After all, if you’re going to comprehend the five aggregates, this is the place to comprehend them. Because you’ve been working directly with them—the form of the body, the feeling of ease that you’ve been trying to develop. The perception allows you to stay anchored with the breath. The fabrication, which would be the direct thought and evaluation, lets you try to get the mind and the breath to fit snugly together. And then consciousness, your awareness of all these things. All the aggregates you need to know are right here. Because you’ve been using them, you’re more familiar with them. You can start contemplating. The fact that even the state of concentration, which seems so still, does have its fabricated nature. It shows the fact that it’s fabricated. There are little ups and downs. As a perception comes and goes, and then you replace it again and it comes and goes away again, there’ll be a little bit more stress. Or some ways of directing your thoughts and evaluating the breath will be more stressful than others. You can see this in action. At the very least, that’ll inspire you to go to more subtle and deeper levels of concentration. But it’s the same pattern all the way through. The analysis is going to give rise to the insight that allows things to open up to another dimension inside the mind. It’s pretty much the same process. It differs simply in that the issues become more subtle. But again, you’re looking for the stress, looking for the fabricated nature of the concentration, and trying to look for something better. Notice that this is driven by desire, always for something better, something with less stress, less suffering. But that’s the desire that the Buddha encourages. These four uses for concentration correspond roughly to a Chan Fung’s comment one time that there are three skills you develop as you meditate. One is learning how to do the concentration. The second is learning how to maintain it. And the third is putting it to use. Doing the concentration would correspond to concentration for the sake of a pleasant abiding. You’re there for the sake of the concentration itself, to get what nourishment you can from it. Show it some respect. Give it your full attention. All too often we get the mind to settle down a little bit, and we’re ready to go on to the next step. You have to keep reminding yourself that the next step is learning how to stay here. And staying here can mean both staying here while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, in which case you’re trying to get the mind to settle down more solidly so that the abiding is even more pleasant. Or it can correspond to that second use of concentration, using it for mindfulness and alertness, as you try to take the concentration through your day. Because that’s precisely where you’re going to be developing as you protect your concentration. You’re mindful to keep your object in mind, and you’re alert to anything that’s going to come up and destroy it, whether it’s from within or without. Then finally putting it to use would correspond to those last two purposes for concentration, gaining any of the psychic powers or direct knowledges, and then gaining the insight. That’s the important use, gaining the insight that gives rise to the end of the defilements. So there are all these ways of using the concentration, approaching the concentration, since you get the most use out of it. It all rests on that principle of respect for concentration. Sometimes we feel a sense of urgency. We’d like to get moving on the path and putting notches in our belt. But there’s the paradox. If you push things too fast, you can ruin them. You know that story of the Brahmin and his wife, the old Brahmin who was proud of the monkey. He had a young wife when she was pregnant. They decided to get a monkey for the kid. And they decided, “Well, we should dye the monkey blue if it’s a boy and pink if it’s a girl.” Even in India back in those days, those were the colors they had for boys and girls. The question, of course, is what’s the gender of the fetus? So the wife goes into her bedroom, takes out a knife, and cuts open her womb. Of course, that destroys the fetus and probably kills her too, all because of her impatience. You don’t want to destroy your concentration with impatience. You work with it. You protect it. Try to get a sense of cherishing the state of concentration, savoring the food of concentration. If people say, “You’re stuck on the concentration,” well, that’s their business. It’s not yours. Your business is to make this as solid and as centered and grounded a state of mind as you can. The more pleasant it is, the better alternative you have for the mind running around in issues of sensuality. In other words, things go through the senses. The more steady it is, the more you’re going to see. So value whatever state of stillness you can develop in the mind. It’s amazing how when the mind does settle down, you can criticize it for being too still and not moving fast enough in the practice. When it doesn’t settle down well, of course, you can criticize it for not being still. It’s not the case that you have no concentration at all. It’s just that it’s divided up into little bits and pieces. Well, don’t throw the bits and pieces away. Stitch them together. Keep coming back. Cherish what you’ve got. Even if it doesn’t seem like much, don’t throw it away and look for concentration someplace else. Because those little bits and pieces will grow, and they will connect, and they’ll become the kind of concentration that provides you with all the good things that concentration can give. Maybe not the psychic powers, but a pleasant abiding, mindfulness, and alertness, and a way to clean out the distractions. The defilements of the mind.

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