Your Concentration Home

August 13, 2020

In the Buddhist time, they often spoke of concentration as a dwelling for the mind. If you were to ask someone, “What concentration topic are you focused on?” they’d say, “What dwelling are you taking as your dwelling?” For example, the Buddha once told Ananda that he took emptiness as his dwelling. When they speak of staying in concentration, again, the word they use is to dwell. You enter and dwell in the different jhanas. You enter and dwell in concentration. So it’s good to think about what it means. You’re developing a home here. Part of it, of course, is that you start out with a house and you make it a home, make it a good place to live. The body offers you the breath, so you take the breath as your means for adjusting things in the body. Try to find what kind of breathing is just right for the body right now. We speak a lot about relaxing, allowing, but sometimes you need to energize the body and energize the mind. And you can do that with the breath as well. Breathe in, and if you’re going to breathe out, let the body breathe out on its own. You don’t have to help the body force the breath out. If you want to help the body, help it with the in-breath. Make the in-breath long. You can develop a sense of greater breath energy in the body that way. Right here, again, you have to look at what the body needs. Does it need to be relaxed right now? Does it need to be energized? Learn how to read what the body needs. And, of course, a lot of it is going to be a sense of feeling good right here. But you have to be alert. As with any home, you can’t spend all your time sleeping in the home. You’ve got to look after it. There are things to be fixed here and there. John Lee once told the monks and nuns at Varasokaram, “When you live in a monastery, your eyes have to be as big as the monastery.” In other words, everyone has to look at what needs to be done and notice what needs to be fixed. If you can’t fix it yourself, find somebody who can. But at least be the ears and eyes all around, so problems can be nipped in the butt. That applies to settling into the mind. You have to make the eye of your mind as large as the body, all the way from the tips of the toes up to the top of the head, front and back, left and right. See what needs to be fixed. And the more you can get a sense of well-being to saturate the body, the better. Find where are the really sensitive spots in the body that notice a difference in the level of comfort between the in-breath and the out-breath, or a difference between long and short, fast and slow, heavy or light. What are the parts of the body that tell you, “This feels better”? Those, as John Lee would say, are the resting spots of the breath. He recommends several. Right at the palate, at the top of the crown of the head. At the tip of the sternum, above the navel. It’s usually the ones down in the torso that tend to notice this more than anywhere else. So find your sensitive spots, because when you can please your sensitive spots, they will be very pleased. It’ll be easier to just stay right here with a sense of being absorbed. It’s interesting when the Buddha describes the jhanas. He describes them in terms of the feeling tone. The first jhana, rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by direct thought and evaluation. The direct thought and evaluation are not the jhanas. The substance of that sentence is the pleasure and rapture. But as you try to get absorbed in the pleasure and rapture, you don’t get so absorbed that you’ve lost the breath. Because if you do, you start wallowing around and you lose your focus. Remember, the theme of concentration is always the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, and the Buddha recommends that you take as your home base the breath. So don’t lose track of that. After all, the breath is your anchor in the present moment. You can be with a pleasant feeling and then you lose sight of the fact that it’s just a present feeling, or a past pleasant feeling, or a future. Where does it end? It’s pretty amorphous. But if you’re with the breath, you know that this is the breath coming in, this is the breath going out, this is right now. And then to maintain that, you’ve got to keep tabs on things. The important part of getting the mind in concentration is that even though the task gets more and more simple as you get more settled in, you can’t let the mind go on automatic pilot, because then you lose it. You’ve got to be really on top of what really feels good right now. So the rhythm of breathing will have to change to suit the body, and you have to be fully alert and aware to notice that. Again, it’s like keeping tabs on what’s going on in your house, checking the pipes, checking the coins, making sure that everything is in order, everything is clean. One of the reasons we do the body survey is to make sure that patterns of tension don’t have a long time to build up. So you do that every day. I know when I’m teaching retreats, people ask, “Do we have to do the same scan every day?” That’s not the case, but at least once a day. John Furing had a student who was a nun. She’d ordained because of health problems, and the health problems just continued. So he told her, “Every morning, do this as your physical checkup. Check all the different parts of the body and how they relate to the breath, so you can take advantage of the breath medicine that you’ve got.” So this house has a medicine chest. It also has food, the pleasure and the rapture. And it’s got its office, when you start using the concentration to analyze what’s going on in the mind in concentration. Always remember, there’s work to do. This is the kind of home from which you work from home. But the important thing is that you do get some rest, but you remember you can’t spend all your time sleeping. You do get to feed the mind, but you can’t spend all the time eating. You feed the mind off the rapture and pleasure, because the mind needs energy to work. It needs stillness to work. So the concentration is not there for its own sake. Remember, it’s part of the path. You use it. This is another way in which right concentration provides an alternative to devotion to sensual pleasure and devotion to self-torture. We mentioned before that it provides a pleasure that’s non-sensual, a pleasure of form. But it’s also not taking the pleasure as an end in and of itself. It uses it as a tool to give you the strength you need, to give you the sense of well-being that you’re going to need to look into the mind, because you’re going to be seeing things in the mind that often you’re rather not seeing. After all, we’re here to look for greed, aversion, and delusion, and all the permutations that those defilements can go into. Pretentiousness, deceit. The Buddha has a whole list of sixteen what he calls upigilases, the minor defilements. Heedlessness, intoxication, spitefulness, antagonism. All these things are defilements that are not very good-looking. We don’t like seeing them in ourselves. But if we’re going to clean out the mind, you’ve got to admit, “Yeah, there’s some dirt in there.” So remember, the pleasure here is something to enjoy. We don’t just enjoy it. It’s for the purpose of the work that needs to be done. Because this house that we have has a habit of getting dirty very quickly. So we have to be constantly cleaning it out. This applies both to the house of the body and the house of the mind, but more particularly to the house of the mind. The mind can get dirty very quickly. So try to make this house a home, a livable home. A home where you rest, a home where you can get your work done. Because the work you can do here is the best work of all. Getting rid of your ignorance, getting rid of your cravings, finding happiness that ultimately will not need repair, that will not need to be fixed. It will need to be maintained. But in the meantime, maintain this. Look after it. Enjoy it. Maintain it at the same time. And that’s how concentration becomes right concentration, part of a noble path. It’s not noble just to sit here and relax. But it is noble to relax, gain strength, and then devote that strength to what the Buddha calls the noble search. It’s the attitude you take to it that makes the difference.

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