Why Practice Concentration

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Years back I participated in a meeting of Buddhist teachers. I found myself sitting next to a Zen teacher. He turned to me and said that he’d like to read the Pali Canon. It was full of all kinds of good koans, questions you can’t answer, like the Four Noble Truths. What is the cause of suffering? There’s no answer to that, he said. Which surprised me, because the Four Noble Truths do contain an answer to that question. We suffer because of things going on in our own mind. This is one of the reasons why the meditation focuses your attention right here in the present moment, so you can watch your mind and learn to see where it’s causing suffering. In those Four Truths, the path is what you do more than any of the others. You develop, basically, virtue, concentration, discernment, so you can put the mind in a good position to see itself and to be comfortable watching itself. All too often we don’t like watching our own minds, because there are a lot of things in the world that we are not all that proud about. Which is one of the reasons why the path requires that we follow the principles of virtue as well. In terms of your speech, you don’t lie, you don’t speak divisively, you don’t use harsh speech, you don’t engage in idle chatter. In terms of your body, you don’t kill, you don’t steal, you don’t have illicit sex. In terms of your livelihood, you don’t make your livelihood in a way that’s dishonest or harmful, which means that when you sit down to meditate, you can look back at the day and you haven’t been wounding yourself by doing things that you know are beneath you, that you know are unskillful. Then you develop a quality of honesty. Because when you look at your own mind, you’re going to find that a lot of things you like are actually causing suffering. Then you have to be very honest with yourself. I like these things, and yep, they’re causing suffering. Although in some cases the word “suffering” is a little bit too strong. But they are stressful in ways that don’t accomplish anything. And because you’re going to be seeing things you don’t like in the mind, you have to provide the mind with a sense of being soothed so that it’s in the mood to see its own mistakes and it doesn’t feel threatened by them. It’s like trying to talk to somebody about some problems you have with them. You want to put them in a good mood first. You feed them well, you treat them well, and they’re more likely to listen to you. So in the same way, you have to treat your mind well. This is why we practice concentration. Focus your attention on the breath. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body. It could be mainly at the nose, but you also notice that that’s not the only place. The chest, the chest rises and falls with the breath. Sometimes your shoulders. You can feel an energy wave going through the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. So wherever that sense of the body breathing is most clear, focus there. Then ask yourself if it’s comfortable. You can start with long breathing to energize yourself, but then after a while long breathing might get tiresome, so you make it shorter, more shallow. But you can make it fast, slow, heavy, light, breathing mainly with the shoulders, breathing mainly with the back, breathing mainly with the stomach. You’ve got your choice. What feels good right now in the body? And then try to stay there. You’ll notice that the mind will wander off, but you don’t have to wander off after it. Your thoughts go here, your thoughts go there. But the breath is still here, coming in and going out. So try to stay anchored here. If you find that you have wandered off, just drop whatever the thought is. You don’t have to finish it. Just let it go. Leave the ends dangling. Come back here to the breath. When the breath gets comfortable, think of the breath flowing throughout the whole body comfortably. The Buddha talks about the breath flowing through the different parts of the body. So you can ask yourself, when you breathe in, how do your arms feel? How do your legs feel? How do the different parts of your head feel? Can you sense any kind of energy there? Does the energy feel tight or does it feel more relaxed? Wherever it feels tight or blocked, think of it dissolving away. There’s nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to do. This is an important skill in learning to observe your own mind. In other words, create a mind state that’s really good to stick with. It’ll allow you to see a lot of things going on in the mind. Of course, there’ll be the distractions that will take you away. And when you learn about how to deal with distractions, you’ll learn an awful lot about the mind. It’s like a play. They’re going to change the scenery, so they pull the curtain down. And then when the curtain comes up, you find yourself in a different place. Often, being distracted is like you’re here with the breath and then all of a sudden you’re someplace else at some other time. And you wonder what happened. What happened in the middle? Well, there was a gap in your mindfulness. You forgot what you were doing. And there was a gap in your alertness. You didn’t see what you were doing. So you get back to the breath. And the next time, you try to be a little bit more alert to what’s going on so you can catch yourself as you’re about to go. Sometimes the mind is like an inchworm at the edge of a leaf. One end of the worm is on the leaf, another end is waving around looking for the next leaf. In other words, it’s ready to go even before a thought is formed. And if you find your mind waving around like that, just remind yourself that the breath is not yet as comfortable as it could be. Because when the breath is really comfortable, it’s very satisfying. Just think of it as the energy of life flowing through your body. Where it doesn’t feel constricted, where it doesn’t feel blocked. Allow those parts of the body to breathe, too. Think of everything getting connected. And you begin to see these steps in the process by which the mind shifts from one level of what the Buddha calls becoming, or bhava, to another. In other words, you’re here in the world of the body, and then all of a sudden you’re in that other world someplace else. Well, how did it happen? What were the steps? Think of your mind being like a committee. Some of the voices right now in the committee are interested in meditating, and others have other agendas. They’re waiting for you to be a little bit mindless, a little bit forgetful, and then they’re going to do what they want. So you want to be sensitive to where those voices are right now. Say a few things and they’ll disappear. Say a few more and they’ll disappear again. But they’re priming part of the mind so that when you do have a lapse of mindfulness, you’re gone. This is something else you learn about the mind. How many different agendas it has at any one time. It’s when you set up one firm intention like this that you’re going to stay with the breath, that you begin to see the other intentions that come and push against that original intention or pull you away. And sometimes it’s frustrating that you can’t settle down as much as you want, but at least you’re learning something about the mind, and that’s the important thing. And as you do this again and again, you find that you get better and better at it, and you see more and more. Sometimes we’re told that concentration is one thing, discernment is something else. But as the Buddha said, there’s no concentration without discernment, and no discernment without concentration. These two qualities work together. The more you understand the mind, the more you’ll be able to get it to settle down. And the more it’s settled down, the more you’ll see. So this is an important part of that path to the end of suffering—getting the mind to settle down, getting it to stay alert, mindful, and really wanting to be here. It’s a good place to be, and it’s a good place to learn. So work on this, because it’s the best way to put it into suffering. As the Buddha said, you’re not going to put it into suffering until you understand it, and you’re not going to understand your mind until you’ve learned to get it into concentration. So this is why even though the problem that we’re dealing with is the problem of suffering, right now you’re going to focus on your breath. You’re going to focus on making it as comfortable as you can, getting the mind as solidly here as you can. Because that’s the state of mind that enables you to see.

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