Just-Right Concentration

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And John Fuang often made the point that for concentration to be right, it has to be just right. In other words, not too still and not too active. Too still is when everything blanks out. Either you’re going into delusion concentration where things are pleasant, it’s kind of like a mist. But you’re not really sure about what you’re focused on or where you are. And you come out of it wondering, “Was I awake? Well, not really. Was I asleep? Well, not really.” That’s not right concentration. Another way of being too still is when you totally blank out. Just focus down, down, down, down, down. You lose all sense of the body. All sense of time. Time passes very quickly in that state. But you don’t learn anything. You’re just blanked out. Of course, concentration is too active. You’re thinking about this, thinking about that. It’s not really concentration. The ideal concentration is where your mind gathers around the breath. All of its activities gather right here. It’s on Lee’s images of holding onto a post and then running around the post. You’ve got to create a place to settle down, a good place to settle down. That requires some thought. How are you going to breathe? What way of breathing is just right right now? And what do you need in terms of the breath? Do you need to be energized? Okay, breathe in a way that’s strong. Long in, short out. Do you need to relax with a short in, long out? One of John Lee’s observations is that as people get older, they tend to go for a short in, long out. They just kind of drift off. So adjust things so they’re just right for what you would need right now. Once the breath has the right rhythm, you think about the breath energies in the rest of the body. How do they connect? There’s breath there already. If there weren’t breath, you’d be paralyzed. It’s running through the nerves, running through the blood vessels. How do you sense where it’s blocked, where it’s not flowing as smoothly as it could? Open those things up. Open up those spots. Try to be systematic in how you go through the body so you don’t lose yourself. That’s the kind of thinking that’s useful. It’s thinking focused on the breath, focused on the mind, trying to be with the breath. Because sometimes the other thing you have to think about is, is your mind ready to settle down? And if it’s not, if it’s got issues that it won’t let go of, what ways of thinking can you devise so that you don’t just spend the whole hour thinking about this, thinking about that? And ask yourself what kind of energy is behind those thoughts. Sometimes it’s angry energy. Sometimes it’s the energy that’s looking for something pleasant. Sometimes it’s a lazy energy. So figure out how to counteract those things to bring everything into balance. And remember, they’re going to be staged. As you settle down, first it’s just a matter of getting the mind to stay with the breath and having to deal with its tendency to go someplace else. You just keep bringing things back, bringing things back. And then when it settles down, you can’t just sit there and enjoy the quiet, because that turns into delusion concentration pretty fast. When things have settled down, then you tell yourself, “I’ve got work to do.” This is where you can work with the breath energies and the different parts of the body. And do your best to expand your awareness, the range of awareness, so that it covers the whole body. Ask yourself, are you totally aware of the body? Where are your toes right now? Where are the spaces between the toes? Work your way up through the feet. Where are your ankles, your shins, your knees, your legs? Up through the pelvis, up through the torso, all around the head, all the different muscles in the face. Think of them being nourished by the breath each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, and the different parts of the body are not exerting pressure on one another. Think of down the shoulders, down the arms, out to the fingers, spaces between the fingers. Give the mind work to do. It doesn’t involve too much thinking, but it involves a lot of being alert, fully alert. When you find a balance, then try to maintain it. That’s basically all you have to do. You’ve got the doing and then the maintaining. Some of us want to move on quickly to the next step, but get to settle in where you are. Because we’re here to study the present moment, and the best way to study the present moment is to create a state of the mind and then be with it for a while. To get a real sense of exactly what’s going on. What are you doing? The stages of jhana are set out very clearly in the text, but they’re not all that clear as you’re exploring your own mind. You have to go over the territory many, many times until you’ve got the map firmly in place, and until you’ve really surveyed the territory. Whatever you come up with in terms of a state of concentration, use a post-it note to tell yourself, “Okay, this might be what I’m looking for. Maybe it’s not, but let’s assume that it is.” One of the worst things you can do is to gain a state of concentration that doesn’t strike you as all that impressive, and you say, “Well, this must not be it.” And you drop it and you go someplace else. Strong concentration comes from weak concentration, from protecting your weak concentration. And as you value it, it begins to grow. So learn to have the right attitude toward being here. You’re not going to try to burst your way into awakening. It’s more developing your sensitivity as to what is just right for right now. It means reading the body, reading the mind, getting a sense of what they need, learning to provide it, then learning to protect what you’ve got. Value what you’ve got. There’ll be a voice in the mind that says, “I want to move on faster.” Well, where are you going to go? Study what you have right here, right now. Settle in. Get comfortable with it. And things in the mind and the body will open up. So work on developing a sense of just right. Because that leads to being just right in all the other factors of the path as well.

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