Insight from Developing Concentration

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Listen to the instructions for breath meditation. Make up your mind you’re going to maintain one intention. You’re going to pay attention to the breath. You’re going to make it consistent. So you can observe how to breathe in a way that gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. And John Lee recommends that you use the perception of air coming in and out of the lungs, but the perception of the energy in the body as your main focus. And think of the breath throughout the body, the energy throughout the body. Hold that perception in mind. Note the words in those instructions. Attention, intention, feeling, perception. Those are things that come under the factor of name, in name and form, part of dependent co-arising. What you’re doing is you’re learning how to look at mental events on those terms, on that level, in those terms. This is priming you to see the processes that can lead to becoming. You will be maintaining this perception of the breath and it will lead to a state of becoming. A skillful one. Concentration. You’re inhabiting the body. There’s a sense of you in here, in the world of the body. But you’re doing this in such a way that the processes leading up to becoming are transparent. Most of the time they’re not. Do you think of your distractions when you’re trying to get the mind concentrated? You’ve made up your mind you’re going to stay here. But part of the mind is going to play traitor. Or parts of the mind will play traitor. And they make an agreement. As soon as your mindfulness slips, your alertness lapses. They’re going to go. Sometimes they’ll go for whatever comes up. Sometimes they have a particular thought in mind that they want to go into. And it’s almost as if a curtain comes down on your mind and then you’re off someplace else. You’ve fallen into the thought world. The appearance of the thought world there is becoming. And you’re going in there as birth. And you want to be able to catch yourself doing these things. Otherwise your concentration is destroyed. But you can learn both from the process of getting the mind into concentration and learn how to say no to those distractions. Each time a distraction comes up and you catch yourself that you’ve left the world of the concentration and entered another world, you’re going to drop that world and go back to the breath. And you have to make up your mind that you’re going to be quicker and quicker at sensing when the mind slips off. Until you get it to that point where it’s still with the breath, but it’s already looking for another place to go. The image I like to use is of an inchworm. It comes from the edge of a leaf and it starts waving around, looking for another place to go. Another leaf. And another leaf comes by. When the breeze comes, it’s gone. It’s on another leaf. But that period when it’s halfway on the leaf and halfway searching for something else, you want to be able to catch the mind quickly before it goes anyplace. And you can start asking yourself, well what is it that makes those parts of the mind want to go? Is it a particular perception? Is it a particular intention? Again, you’re thinking in terms of name, which is one of the big factors in dependent co-arising. Dependent co-arising is one of those topics that you could talk about for days and days. But one of the most important things to notice about it is all the different factors that come prior to sensory contact. And as we’re dealing in concentration, getting the mind to settle down like this, those are the factors we’re paying most attention to. As you think in these terms and get the mind prepared so that when there is a slight stirring that could turn into a thought world, you’re there. You sense it. Before it turns into a thought world, before it turns into a state of becoming. And you can abort the whole process. Sometimes it seems just to be a little knot or tangle of energy in some place in the breath energy field. So you just breathe right through it. You can think of having a comb to untangle that little knot. Whatever image you want that helps disperse that energy. And then you’re like a spider in the middle of a web. An insect comes, hits the web, you go over there, take care of it, and then you come back to your center. Another one comes, you take care of that, go back to your center. And this way the mind can stay and not get sucked into the worlds of what those little insects might be. So it’s in this way that concentration leads to discernment. You’re getting the mind to look at events in the mind, not in terms of what you like or don’t like, but simply what are they as processes. Because if you’re going to get good at concentration on the one hand, you’re constructing the state of stillness. Then you have to think about attention and intention and perception and feeling. And at the same time, fending off any other intentions that might go someplace else. This is something you see in the instructions in Right Mindfulness. On the one hand, you keep track of one thing, like the breath. And you’re ardent, alert, and mindful as you do it. And on the other hand, you’re also putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, any other thought having anything to do with any thought world. Aside from the world of concentration, you’ve got to say no. And it’s in saying no to those thought worlds that you, on the one hand, strengthen your concentration. On the other hand, you get to see how those thought worlds are constructed. It’s like watching a movie being made. You see all the tricks that they employ in order to create certain impressions on the film. And you realize how much make-believe goes on. And John Sawat commented one time that the word “sannyā” perception, in Thai, also means agreement. And there are these agreements that the mind makes. It’s like one part of the mind wants to play make-believe, and other parts of the mind will play along. And everybody voluntarily contributes to the illusion, whatever the illusion may be. And that’s what these thought worlds are. They’re illusory. They’re totally made up. They come from past karma. But they’re also involved with your present karma, what you’re doing right now, what you choose to pay attention to or not pay attention to. And you start seeing where their allure is. Again, a lot of the allure has to do with what you’re paying attention to and not. You see this in sexual fantasies. There are certain parts of the body that you pay a lot of attention to, and other parts that you would rather not think about at all. This is why contemplation of the body, in terms of its 32 parts, is an effective exercise in attention and perception. Making you pay attention to things that would help counteract the lust, and hold on to perceptions that would help counteract the lust. And that can bring you back to getting the mind into concentration again. So whether the mind is concentrated, or whether it’s saying no to its distractions, in either way you’re learning a lot about the factors of name. This is how you start seeing dependent co-arising in what you’re doing right here, right now. So it’s not the case that you totally leave concentration and start doing another vipassana technique. As the Buddha said, if you want to gain insight into things, you have to get the mind in jhana. If you want tranquility, you have to get the mind in jhana. Both tranquility and insight come from getting the mind properly concentrated. Through right mindfulness and right view. So you’re not just gobbling down the pleasure, or like that horse in the analogy, it just thinks fodder, fodder, fodder. As it’s eating, it’s fodder. You’re stepping back and you’re thinking about things, as the mind is still. In John Lee’s images of holding on to a post with one hand or two hands, and then running around the post. As long as your grip on the post is firm, you can run around as much as you like and you don’t get dizzy. In other words, the thinking that surrounds concentration is an actual part of getting the mind properly settled, hardened, alert, mindful, in a way that you can’t gain both the pleasure of the concentration and the insight that can come. Insight into the workings of the mind. That can only come when the mind is really still. So don’t worry about when you have to do samatha practice or when you have to do vipassana practice. Work on getting the mind into right concentration and you have the stillness and the insight working together. That’s the kind of concentration that can lead to release.

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