Concentration Isn’t Dumb

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There was one time when I was on my alms round, at Vatama Sathya in Thailand. My mind had been very quiet. A thought went through my mind, “This is stupid. You’re not thinking about anything. You’re not being intelligent about anything.” But then I reflected. Having to get my mind to be quiet required a lot of fear. I’d heard many lessons about how important it was to get the mind quiet as an intelligent way of administering your mind, you might say. Because if you’re going to think, you want to have the mind rested so it can think clearly. Without stopping to sharpen it, bathe it in oil, it gets dull. And then as you try to cut through things, nothing cuts. Because it’s so dull. You have to take time out, sharpen the knife, and the next time something comes up you need to cut through, chop. There it is. It cuts right through. The mind is like that. It needs to be rested in order to think properly. In order to stay sharp. The other images of a motor, if you keep the motor running all the time, after a while it begins to run out of lubricant, begins to seize up, burns, and you’ve ruined the motor. The mind is like that too. You need to take care of it. Give it time to rest. Because otherwise the thoughts that come out just get lower and lower and lower in quality. So even though you’re not thinking too much when the mind is quiet, it’s actually part of a larger policy which is actually quite intelligent. And as I said, to get the mind to settle down requires some understanding. Now some people can get it to settle down very quickly. There are the people who tend not to think too much anyhow. The problem is they don’t understand what’s happening. The people who find concentration easy, find discernment hard. Because they’re used to not thinking. They’re not too much involved in the world around them. They should let it go. Which is okay, as long as they can let it go. But then there come times when they are involved. Issues come up in their minds. And they can’t let them go. They can’t get the mind to settle down at all. They don’t know how to do it because they haven’t got the mind to figure it out before. Most of the people who like to think a lot, those are the ones who have to figure things out. How to get the mind to want to settle down. How to talk to it. How to give it encouragement. How to have some respect for concentration. But also figure out what are these things I’m putting together to create a state of concentration. You’ve got the breath. You’ve got your thoughts that you direct to the breath. And then evaluate the breath. And there are perceptions you’re holding in mind. And feelings you’re trying to create. All these forms of fabrication are going on in your mind all the time. Even though you’re getting the mind into concentration, they’re still going on. Simply that you’re changing their focus. So how do you change your breath? How do you change their inner conversation so that it’s more willing to settle down? It takes an interest in the breath. Because this whole thing about the breath energy in the body, it takes a while to get used to how to deal with it, so you’re not pushing it around too much. You’re not oppressing it. Because a lot of times when we’re told, “Let the breath go here, let the breath go there,” you forget the word “let.” It turns into “make.” Make it do this, make it do that. And then pushing on it makes it uncomfortable. So you want to allow the breath. Get in touch with what feels really good right now. And then figure out how to let that good sensation spread in a way so that it still feels good when you spread it. There’s a lot to figure out here. It requires a more pragmatic intelligence. Not thinking about things in general or abstractions. You’re thinking about actions and trying to act in a way that’s skilled. That too is a kind of intelligence. And knowing how to read the mind so that it can settle down and stay there. Because to keep it there, you have to protect it. Because other thoughts will come up. And it’s so easy for the mind to jump onto those other thoughts. So you’ve got to figure out some strategies to keep it interested in staying still. And then being able to zap the new thoughts as they arise. And learn to see that you’re actually learning about how the mind switches from one form of reverence to another. Like that science fiction story I read about one time. These two pilots were in a spaceship. And the spaceship didn’t need to use any propellant. It moved because it changed its frame of reference. If its frame of reference was the earth, it stayed on the earth. If its frame of reference was the sun, all of a sudden it would zip away at the same speed that the earth was going around the sun, but in the opposite direction. If its frame of reference was the center of the galaxy, it was way off our way. The important elements of the story was that when the ship changed its frame of reference, the people on the ship would get knocked out, unconscious for a while. And then come to in the new frame of reference. And that’s the way the mind is. It just gets knocked out. And you suddenly find yourself thinking about something else. It’s like you’re in a different world someplace else. Well, how does that happen? There are steps. And there are choices that are being made. And learning how to figure out which voice in the mind has been making that choice, and then hiding behind other voices. And then coming out, pulling you away. And you let yourself get pulled away. And what are the different stages by which that happens? This should be something fascinating. The mind is deceiving itself, playing make-believe. And we like to make-believe along with it. How does that happen? There’s a lot to figure out here. Simply getting the mind into concentration, getting it to stay in concentration, and then figuring out how to get it more deeply into concentration. So there’s plenty to engage your intelligence. It’s just that it’s a different kind of intelligence. So it’s not dumb. It’s simply a matter of learning how to have the right attitude. As the Buddha said, “Concentration is something you should respect.” Because it does have this ability to heal the mind of its wounds, allow it to rest, gather its strength, and to be still at the same time that it’s not falling asleep. Because you do have to be mindful. You do have to be alert. You have to make the right effort to keep the mind here. So you’re developing strengths in the mind as you stay still. The Buddha also says to learn how to delight in seclusion. In one of his suttas he talks about how a monk leaving the villages goes off into the forest and stops to reflect. As you stay in the forest, the disturbances that come from being around a lot of people are not there. This is to counteract your fear of being in the forest with its animals and diseases and hardships. You do not appreciate the positive side of being separated from all those disturbances. Then in order to get past the disturbances that come with the perception of forest, you have to think about the perceptions of concentration. In that sutta he talks about taking the earth element as your focus. But you can do the same with the breath. Just think breath through the body. Breath going out into the world in all directions. And how much more peaceful that perception is than the perception of wilderness. The deeper and deeper states of concentration with the perception is less and less disturbed. You learn how to appreciate the fact that the mind is not being disturbed. It’s still. But it’s alert. Learn how to delight in that. So respect and delight for concentration. Those are the attitudes you should have. So learn how to talk yourself into winding to get the mind to settle down. And then doing the work that needs to be done. And you find that instead of limiting the range of your mind by doing this, you’re actually expanding it. You’re getting intelligent in a different way. In a very useful way. And you come to see what the Buddha included. Concentration not only as a part of the path, but as the part that he said is in the heart. That the other parts serve to support. Because it allows you to see a lot of things you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. And it clears up a lot of the issues in the mind that otherwise would keep you enslaved. Because freedom lies in this direction. And there’s nothing dumb about that.

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