Ardent with Respect for Concentration

January 10, 2018

One who is ardent with respect for concentration. That’s the line in the chat we had just now. What does it mean to be ardent? You put your whole heart into doing this. You want to do it well. That means you’re basically siding with the concentration. You want your concentration to be good. You want it to be solid. You want it to be something you can depend on. Getting the mind to settle down is a skill. And as with any skill, it takes time, it takes patience, but also determination. Patience not in the sense that you don’t care when the results come. You do care. You come as quickly as possible, but you realize that you have to be meticulous in how you do it. And you’re willing to take all the steps that are necessary. You focus on the breath. Start out with some long and deep in-and-out breaths, basically to ventilate the body. And then ask yourself, “Okay, what’s comfortable now?” And if you’re not sure, you can experiment. And you keep at it until you find a way of breathing that feels good. And as for any thoughts outside, you can let them go. There are times when you have to deal with them. As I said this afternoon, there are some thoughts that just keep coming back, coming back, coming back, and they pester you, and you’ve got to deal with them quickly. In other words, figure out a way to disarm them so they lose some of their force. This can mean either looking at the drawbacks of those ways of thinking, or seeing that there’s a lot of tension in thinking those ways, and just breathing through the tension. There are lots of ways you can deal with distracting thoughts. It’s good to have lots of different techniques. The Buddha lists five altogether. One is just recognizing that the thought is not what you want. If you change your mind, you’re going to think about something else, i.e., the breath. The second one is seeing the drawbacks of that kind of thinking. If you were to think that way for an hour, where would it lead you? And since an hour doesn’t do much for you, why give any time to it at all? The third one is simply to ignore the thought. Let it be in the background. Don’t pay it any attention. Think of it as a beggar coming to ask for some food. If you pay attention, the beggar is going to hang around. If you pay no attention, the beggar leaves. The fourth way is to realize that there is a pattern of tension someplace in the body when you think. You have to ask yourself, “When I started this thought, what part of the body tensed up? What part of the body has tension that keeps the thought going? Can I relax that tension?” The fifth is just to determine. Press your tongue against the root of your mouth, clench your teeth, and make up your mind, “I will not think that thought.” You can use a meditation word to force it out in the way they used to jam the radio waves of Radio Free Europe. Think the meditation word, “I will not think that thought.” In quick succession, rapid fire. Then when things have cleared a little bit, you can go back to the breath. In other words, there are lots of different ways to deal with thoughts. And don’t be stuck with just one. Because if you have just one method, then thoughts will sneak in around that one method. It’s like putting up a fence on only one side of your house. All the animals and thieves or whatever, when they see that it’s only on one side, they run away. When the mind finally does settle down with the breath, with a sense of ease, what do you do to maintain that? That’s the next step. The more continuous your attention, the finer the breath will become. Then once you maintain that sense of ease, then you can think about it spreading to the different parts of the body. Because what we’re aiming at here is a sense of ease that fills the whole body, a sense of fullness that fills the whole body. So as you’re spreading things around, don’t force things, don’t push things. If you push them, you’re basically pushing the blood in different places, which is not what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to push the energy. You’re not actually pushing it, you’re allowing it to spread. You’re allowing the breath to diffuse in a way that feels good. You want to maintain that. That’s what ardency is all about. Then there’s the respect for concentration, realizing that this is a really important skill. You don’t want to throw it away. All too often, when we get up from the meditation after the sit, it’s as if the concentration was sitting in our lap, and when we have no more lap, it falls out. Try to keep it going. In the image the Buddha gives, it’s of a bowl of oil balanced on your head, filled to the brim. You’re walking between a stage and the audience. There’s a beauty queen on the stage singing and dancing, and the audience is really excited about the beauty queen singing and dancing. You’re going to walk in between, and there’s a man following behind you with a sword raised. If you spill even a drop of oil, it’s going to cut off your head. This means you want to give all your attention to that bowl of oil, and no attention to the beauty queen, and no attention to the audience. In other words, keep your focus on maintaining your mental equilibrium, your mental balance, as you go through life, as you go through stores, as you go through airports, as you go through whatever. There are beauty queens and there are audiences all around. Of course, the main audience is within you. There are all kinds of things out there to pull your attention away, but you want to say, “I want to maintain my sense of being centered here in the body.” You can be aware of the world. It’s not like you’re putting blinders on yourself. But you want your main attention to be centered inside, realizing that the focus of the mind and the equilibrium of the mind is going to be a huge factor in everything else that happens in your life. So you want to protect it. You want to care for it. You want to show it some respect. It’s interesting, in that chant, the Buddha talks about having respect for the training, and then he turns around and says, “Respect for concentration.” Actually, concentration is already in the training. “Training” here means the training in heightened virtue, heightened mind, which is concentration, and heightened discernment. But he stresses it once more, because we do tend to overlook the fact that a mind can be balanced and centered, because it seems like nothing new is happening there. It may be true that nothing new is happening, but that’s not the case. Nothing is happening. A lot of things are happening when you get the mind to settle down. You’ve learned a lot about the processes of the mind, both in the settling in and in the keeping it settled. There are intentions, there are perceptions, there are feelings. All the things the Buddha says we need to understand, all the things that we feed on, all the things that we tend to identify as ourselves, are all right here. And they’re in a way that’s really clear. And if you’re centered and clear and inquisitive, trying to figure out what’s going on in the mind, this is where you need to be. And everything’s going to make itself apparent right here. So you want to protect this place. You want to protect your attention to this place, your respect for this place. This place for the mind, this home for the mind. Because nobody else is going to protect it for you. There are people who will teach you meditation. You have to remember, meditation is something totally voluntary. You’re doing this for your own good. Nobody else can do this for you. When they do talk about doing it for you, like with apps and things, it’s a pretty denatured kind of meditation. This is something where you have to take your own initiative to figure out what’s really good, what’s working, what’s not. It all depends on you. So have some respect for your desire for true happiness, and realize that that means having respect for concentration. Then the possibilities of concentration can open up to you as you learn how to master it. Mind in a nice, still state. They’ve got apps that can soothe you into a state of peace. But they don’t teach you much about how your mind works. And it’s in learning how your mind works that you’re going to gain the insight that really liberates you. That requires that you ask your own questions and you be observant. You notice what’s going on. When the Buddha talks about the different factors that lead to success in concentration, one of them is intent. That means giving your full attention to this. And the one that goes along with it is the Pali term vimamsa, which has lots of different meanings in English. It can mean using your powers of judgment. It can mean using your ingenuity. Basically, your active mental faculties. But they’re used here not in the sense of ranging outside, but in the sense of being observant about what you’re doing as you get the mind to stay still, and what you’re doing as you get it to keep it still. Developing your sense of judgment as to what works and what doesn’t work. Learning the ins and outs of your own mind. So have some respect for concentration. It can teach you a lot of things if you approach it the right way. If you look after it, it’ll look after you.

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