Lessons from Concentration

April 10, 2021

Try to be totally here. Get your awareness to fill the body. And the more it’s filling the body, the less likely little bits and pieces of it will start wandering off to the past or the future. So make a survey from head to toe, and tell it back up to head. Breathe in deeply. And as long as deep breathing feels good, keep it up. If after a while it begins to feel tedious, then you can change the rhythm. But try to change it within the context of this whole-body awareness. If anything else comes through the mind, just let it go. Don’t get upset about the fact that there are thoughts in the mind. The fact that you’re outside of the thought is the important thing. It’s when you get into the thought that’s when you’ve left the body. You’ve gone into another becoming. If you catch that happening, just drop it. Think of it being a bubble. You burst the bubble and then fill the body with your awareness again. There’s an awareness already there. It’s simply a matter of getting in touch with it and uncovering as many things as you can that obscure it. The various thoughts that are lying around in the mind that are ready to spring up when there’s some space. But just let them pass. They’re fed by attention, so don’t pay them any attention. Think of that image of the person who sees something he doesn’t like, so he turns his eyes away. You just don’t have to get involved. Someone asked yesterday, “What level of concentration do you learn that are actually useful in life?” The implication being that you’re here in the present moment, but when you’re out in real life, you can’t be in the present moment. You’ve got to think about the past. You’ve got to think about the future. You’ve got to think. So being fully here and seeing the processes of thought as they come and as they pass, and not getting involved in them, you can see how much they add to the present moment. You see how much your fabrications obscure a lot of things that are going on. And it serves as warning when you’re out around dealing with people. And tomorrow we’ll be dealing with a lot of people. How much are you adding to the situation? We tend to come to situations with ready-made scripts and lots of assumptions. And as long as you’re clear about your assumptions, you’re okay. You can see which ones are useful, which ones are not, and you can sort through them. And it helps to have some practice when you’re not multitasking, when you’re monotasking like this. You can see the movements of the mind and see cases where they create unnecessary stress. Realize that you can let them go. Just because something has appeared in the mind doesn’t mean it has to stay, or that you’re committed to it. And that’s a good lesson to carry through, carry into the day. One teacher had a student one time who had very strong powers of concentration, so strong that she couldn’t even think. If she got into a weird state, she’d have to have him there to talk her out of it. And she complained to him one time. She didn’t see how the meditation was helping in her daily life. She was still angry. And as you told her, it’s because you’re not consciously taking the lessons from the meditation. You can’t expect the simple fact that you’re sitting and meditating for an hour or so to clean up your life automatically. You’ve got to take the lessons that you’re learning about the mind, about the process of fabrication, and then look at your daily life, the way you interact with other people, the way you interact with your jobs, the games you play with other people when you find yourself in a situation where they’re trying to play a game with you. How do you step out of those games? If you’ve seen the different layers of activity in the mind when you’re meditating, it gives you some warning signals, tells you some places to look, things you have to watch out for, things you have to keep in mind. Because that’s what mindfulness is. You’re keeping something in mind. Right now you’re keeping in mind just the breath and your awareness of the breath. But there’s more than that. You’re keeping in mind what you need to do. Because as you settle down, there are going to be some imbalances. So you have to make adjustments. The breath will be okay in some parts of the body and not so okay in others. What do you do? You’ve learned lessons like this in the past. So it’s good to have them ready, to have them at hand. So it’s not just being totally in the present moment without any reference to the past at all. It’s simply realizing there are some things from the past that you’ve got to forget, a lot of things you can put aside, and just keep a few lessons in mind. That’s the lesson you carry with you into the day. If you know you have particular problems dealing with people, dealing with difficult situations, remind yourself you’ve got to watch out for them. Don’t let yourself slip into your old patterns. Try to remember times when you’ve dealt with those situations well. And above all, don’t let your moods get in the way. That’s one of the meanings of that statement, I think it’s the third patriarch, Zen patriarch, “The great way is not difficult for those with no preferences.” And our big preferences, of course, are our moods. To be the mood that says, “I don’t feel like trying extra hard right now. I’m feeling tired, I’m feeling sleepy, I’m feeling exasperated.” Well, those are precisely the times when you’ve got to be on top of yourself. After all, someday you’re going to die, and you can’t say, “Gee, I feel weak right now. I have no energy to practice.” That’s the time you’ve got to practice. So look at your moods and learn how to step back from them, step outside of them. Again, think of them like bubbles coming through the mind. As long as you’re outside of the mood, you’re okay. The problem is that the mood will tend to affect your breath, and the breath will create feelings in the body that are uncomfortable. You associate those feelings with the mood, and then they get oppressive. But here again, you’ve got a lesson. You’ve learned from dealing with the breath that you can breathe through these things. So there are a lot of lessons you can learn, lessons for the day. We’re not just here resting and then picking up where we left off and before we set down to meditate. You want to come with a better attitude to what you’ve got to face. And so it’s always good at the end of a meditation to stop and take stock. Here, of course, we end right as soon as the bell rings, everybody gets up, bounds down, and leaves. But as you’re leaving, think about what lessons did you learn? And watch for the mind as it begins to pick up some of its old attitudes. The whole purpose of getting the mind really quiet like this is so you can see the noise that in most people’s minds is just there in the background, something they accept, something they don’t pay attention to. The noise is where all the trouble comes from. So when you’ve been quiet and the noise starts up again, notice why. Which part of the mind is picking it up? Why is it picking it up? Can it not pick it up? That’s how getting the mind still helps you, with lessons that you can really apply. After all, we’re here to understand this process of becoming, the craving and the clinging. And the most transparent example of that is a mind that’s still, when you’re filling the body with your awareness. That’s a very transparent state of becoming. There’s a little bit of craving there, a little bit of clinging, but it’s minimal and it’s skillful. There’s a sense of you as your awareness filling the body, and the body as the world you’re inhabiting. There you are, state of becoming. And you can see how you create this. It’s the same process as you go into other becomings. You pick up a thought and dive into it. You pick up a situation and dive into the situation with your old assumptions and your old ways of dealing with that situation. Here you want to step back. If you catch something unskillful coming up, you want to be able to drop it right away. So even though things may seem to happen a lot faster out there, it’s simply through force of habit. But the fact that you’ve been able to slow things down here helps you see that there are steps that you take as you go into state of becoming. And you don’t have to follow all the steps. For most of us, getting into state of becoming is like falling down the stairs. You’re not aware of the individual steps as you hit them and fall over them. Try to reverse that. See it as going up some stairs, and you always have the right steps. You have the right to stop at any one of the steps. This, of course, involves having some value changes as well, by realizing that you’re the one that’s creating the trouble when there’s suffering in the mind. Other people may be misbehaving. That’s definitely a possibility. We’re not here laying blame. But you do have the choice whether you’re going to suffer from their misbehavior or not. And so when you have the attitude that you want to add as little suffering as possible, then you’ll be more willing to look at the ways in which you create unnecessary suffering and can stop yourself in time. So there’s plenty to learn here. And the more mindful you are, and the more determined you are to learn these lessons, then the better the results are going to be. It’s as simple as that.

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