In a Rut

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When you’re doing concentration practice, there are two times when it can get tedious, when you feel that you’re in a rut. One is when, day after day, the mind simply will not settle down. The other is when it does settle down and nothing happens. In each case, you have to take an inquisitive attitude. Why? When it’s not settling down, you’ve got to figure out what is it, what’s the problem. Is it the breath? If the mind has trouble staying with the breath, there are other objects you can use as topics of your meditation. You can spend some time with goodwill, sometimes contemplating the different parts of the body. Or just repeating a meditation word. Give the mind something new to do, and maybe you’ll see some new things going on. As the Buddha said, there are times when you try to settle down with the breath, the body in and of itself, and there’s a fever associated with the body or with feelings or with the mind. You have to switch to a theme that you find inspiring. The juice is going. Body-tongue contemplation can really get you going, because there’ll be parts of the mind that don’t want to do it, very much don’t want to do it. And as you stick with it, they’ll start complaining. You get to see, “Oh, here’s a defilement. This is what defilement looks like. These are the arguments that defilements use. They come up with all kinds of good arguments. There are arguments to not practice the Dhamma. Or you can try goodwill and see if there’s anybody out there that you have ill will for. You may not think you have ill will, but simply the fact that you get upset that somebody is not getting properly punished for their misdeeds, that counts as ill will. So you can give yourself something to think about, because as long as the mind is going to think, have a think in terms of the Dhamma, and eventually be ready to settle down, then you can bring it back to the breath and see if it can stay. Or you may find that you like staying with that alternative topic. That’s when you contemplate the parts of the body and get really engrossed in how incongruous it is that you have this part, oh, and you have that part, oh, and there’s that part, too. You’ve been walking around with these things inside you all the time. You can look for what’s of essence in the body and realize there’s really nothing there. You think about all the trouble that we’ve gone through to keep the mind and body going. What does it have? It just has this part and that part and this part and that part, which will function together for a while and then misfunction and get functioning again, and ultimately, of course, all fall apart. Now, the attitude is not that you want to get rid of the body. After all, you need the body to meditate, you need the body to practice. But simply get a healthier attitude toward it. It’s not simply a tool to be used for the sake of the mind. It’s a strange tool. It has its limitations, but you can work around them to some extent. There’s a challenge there. How can you work around the limitations of the body to do the good that you want to do? With goodwill, you might get interested in the fact that there are a lot of people out there for whom you have ill will, and you want to clean up the house of your mind. So you have a better attitude toward the people around you, and that will help you have a better attitude toward yourself, for the mind really to settle down. Ultimately, you have to do what the mind tells you to do, and you have to do what the mind tells you to do. That’s because you’re not paying attention. A lot of times the problem with boredom is simply that you’re not paying careful attention. As the Buddha said, all kinds of things are happening in the mind, even when it’s very still. There’s an act of will, there’s an act of determination, there are perceptions going on, there are feelings, all the things the Buddha said that can cause suffering if we cling to them. They’re right here. So if it seems still and nothing’s happening, it’s because you’re not looking carefully enough. So start asking some questions. Could it be more still? What’s a level of disturbance that I haven’t noticed? Ask disturbance. You have to develop the princess-in-the-pea attitude. Otherwise, you’re not willing to lie down anywhere, even if there’s the slightest little lump. So look for the lumps in your concentration, because they’ll be there. The mind will be still for a moment and then pull out for a bit, and then go back in again, pull out for a bit. Well, why does it have to pull out? It’s kind of like music. You play in phrases, and then the phrase stops, and then you start with another phrase, and that stops, and then another phrase. Well, can you make the concentration totally continuous without phrases, so that the phrases of the in-breath and the out-breath have no effect on the steadiness of the mind? And the little disturbances that eat away at the edge of the concentration, you look into those. What’s that all about? There’s lots of levels of observation going on right here, lots of comments going on around it. They’re very subtle, very quick, but they’re there. So if you learn how to ask the right questions, you find that there’s nothing really tedious about the mind. It’s the biggest trickster there is. So you’re trying to figure out its tricks, and one of its tricks is when things get quiet and nothing seems to be happening. It’s like a child who’s quiet when the teacher is in the room, but as soon as the teacher turns his or her back, the child starts misbehaving. You’ve got to catch that out of the corner of your eye, so you don’t fall for the mind’s tricks. There’s a lot going on right here, even as you’re sitting, watching the breath, and it’s very still. Little tiny messages are getting sent back and forth, just like messages getting sent back and forth in a class when the teacher is writing on a blackboard. So look into those messages, because, as I said, that’s where the aggregates are—feelings, perceptions, fabrications. The aggregates to which we cling, the aggregates when we cling to them, are suffering. They’re right here. We’re sitting down, settling the mind down at the place where all the action is. It’s just that the action is very subtle, so you have to make your awareness subtle. You have to make your powers of observation subtle. Then recognize that there are questions to be asked, because, after all, these are the workings of your own mind. These are the workings of the mind that have caused so much trouble and disturbance in the past. And you can make them still for a while, but that doesn’t solve the problem. You’ve really got to get to know them, how they interact, how they act up in the world, how they act up again. If you work on your powers of observation, you’re going to see it all happening right here. So remind yourself that when you’re in a rut, you’ve put yourself in the rut, but you can get yourself out. Just learn how to ask the right questions and be all around in your way of looking to find an answer.

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