Right Here Where the Buddha Sat

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As the Buddha sets out the path, he puts right concentration right after right mindfulness. In fact, in all the different lists of the Wings to Awakening, mindfulness always comes before concentration. The Buddha’s not offering them as alternative types of meditation. In fact, his description of right mindfulness is a description of how to get the mind into right concentration. You focus on the body in and of itself, or some aspect of the body in and of itself, like the breath—hardened, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That’s two activities and three qualities of mind. One activity, of course, is staying focused on the breath, unwinding, and keeping tabs on something. Keep following and watching something. In this case, you’re watching the breath, and it’s in and of itself. You’re not concerned about how the breath relates to your daily activities or anything else, aside from just having a sensation of the body right here, being with that sensation. The other activity, of course, is putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any activities that you did today in relationship to the world that may be coming up to mind right now, you just put them aside. There is that tendency. You sit here, and nothing much is going on in the mind as you’re staying with the breath. This part of the mind says, “Okay, now’s a good time to think about x, what so-and-so said today, or plans for tomorrow.” You have to put those thoughts aside. It’s basically a description of staying with one topic and not allowing distraction to come and take you away. And you bring three qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness is keeping things in mind. In this case, you’re keeping the breath in mind. You’re also keeping your activities in mind. In other words, the activities you’re supposed to be doing right now. If anything comes up that’s not related to the breath or the mind in its relationship to the breath, you recognize them for what they are. They’re distractions right now. And you remember what’s to be done with distractions. Well, they’re to be blasted out of the mind or just simply not paid attention to. You don’t allow yourself to slip into distractions. That requires alertness, which is watching what you’re doing and the results, and then ardency, trying to do this well. As Ajaan Lee explains, ardency is the wisdom factor in there. You realize that if you’re going to get anywhere with this teaching, with this practice, you’ve got to put forth effort. And you’ve got to make the effort right. It’s something you have to want to do. The path is the truth of the will. William James, the American philosopher, once talked about two types of truth. There’s one truth that can be called the truth of the observer, like when you watch the orbits of the planets and your desire for them to be a certain way cannot get in the way if you really want to see the truth about them. You probably know the story. For a long time, they thought that the orbits of the planets should be circular, but they weren’t quite. They kept trying to fudge things to make them circular. Then someone finally admitted that the calculations actually show that they’re ellipses. They wanted them to be circular because circles were perfect. Ellipses were not perfect. That’s a case where what you want gets in the way of the truth. The other truth, though, that they’re not going to happen unless you want them. And the path is one of them. The mind doesn’t simply fall naturally in line with the path because it goes against a lot of our deeply ingrained habits. After all, as the Buddha said, we suffer in our clinging, and we cling because we crave. And he’s telling us to abandon the craving and comprehend the clinging to the point where we have no more passion for it. That goes against the grain. It’s going to require effort. So you have to create a state of mind where you’re willing to see things in that way, which is why we’re using mindfulness to get the mind to settle down. As the Buddha said, mindfulness, whether established or not, is the themes of right concentration. You preoccupy your mind with this activity of getting the mind with the breath, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. And that turns into direct thought and evaluation. There’s going to be a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of fullness, as the mind really gets centered on this. It shades very easily into right concentration. In fact, there’s one passage where he talks about getting the mind ardent, alert, mindful, watching the body in and of itself, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, and then putting aside all the thoughts about the body. You go right into the second jhana, which indicates the description of the establishing of mindfulness. That’s basically the first jhana, how you get into it. From there you follow more deeply into the concentration, get the mind really still, to the point where even the rapture seems gross. You let that go. Then even the pleasure gets gross, and you let that go too. The mind is perfectly still, the breath is still, because the breath energy fills the body. When you can reach that point, then you’re sitting where the Buddha sat. And that’s from that point that you can begin to see his way of looking at experience. And you see that it makes sense. It wasn’t just some peculiar way of analyzing experience that he came up with because he was Indian or because he lived 2,500 or 6,000 years ago. If you’ve been doing the mindfulness and doing the concentration, then you start seeing things in his terms, like with name and form. You’ve been sensing the body from within. It’s going to be composed of a sense of warmth, a sense of coolness, energy, solidity. That’s form. Name is feeling, perception, perceptions, attention, intention, contact. And you’ve been dealing with those, with the feeling. You get the mind to settle down with the breath until it feels comfortable. And the different levels of right concentration are defined as feeling tones. The first jhana is rapture and pleasure, born of seclusion. The second jhana is rapture and pleasure, born of concentration. The third jhana is the most mind is equanimous, so you sense pleasure with the body. And then, finally, the fourth jhana is the purity of equanimity and mindfulness. So you can recognize the different stages of concentration by the feeling tone. Then there’s the perception, as the Buddha points out. Each of these levels of concentration is a perception attainment. It depends on your perception of the breath. He talks about the sense of ease coming from staying with the breath and letting it spread throughout the body. And John Lee talks about having perceptions of the breath, feeling the whole body, so that sense of ease and pleasure can spread. And, of course, staying here, you’ve maintained an intention, you’ve been in contact with the breath, and you’ve been paying attention to the feeling tone, paying attention to the breath, getting everything just right, paying attention to the state of the mind. These are all the categories that the Buddha describes in name. And it’s good to see things on these terms, because you can start taking apart your sense of who you are doing all this and see that it’s basically these activities that you’ve been doing. It’s a good way of preventing you from thinking that when, say, everything settles down, you’re really, really still inside, that you’ve hit some kind of ground of being. Because you’ve been watching this. There’s a series of activities that you’re doing. If you’re really attentive to what you’re doing, you see, “This is something I’m doing, something I’m maintaining.” There’s no ground of being. It requires that you fabricate things, that you put things together. It requires effort. There’s a lot of pleasure, a lot of sense of well-being that comes in with it. But you can see it simply as activities. You’re not so much concerned about who’s doing it because you’re just really into doing it. You can see things in these ways. This puts you right at the right spot for undoing that. You can see the craving that would lead to further becoming, because you see the activities of the mind that would lead to more becoming. And you realize how ephemeral they are. And it’s this constant upkeep that keeps you here. And there comes a point where it really hits you. Wouldn’t it be good if there was somebody who didn’t require any upkeep at all? That’s when the mind is ready for discernment. When discernment comes, it yields dispassion. But the important thing is to get right here, sit where the Buddha sat. Because getting here has forced you to look at things going on in the mind in these terms. So the analysis is nothing foreign. It’s something that we have common to everybody’s mind. It’s not the case that people from India use perceptions, but we don’t use perceptions. Or they have feelings, but we don’t have feelings. We all have all these things in common. This is part of the Buddhist genius, to see what is common to everybody’s experience, common to everybody’s experience of suffering. And there’s a path to the end of suffering that’s common for everybody as well. We can all sit at that same spot. The particulars may be different, how you’re feeling your body right now. As you’re settling down, it may be different from how anybody else is feeling it here in the room. But the basic patterns are all the same. And as Ajaan Fung once said, Ajaan Pandit told him, “Everyone is all alike, but then we’re all different.” But when you come right down to it, we’re all alike. As Ajaan Fung said, “Think about that.” We’re all alike in that we want happiness, we want to get away from suffering. The particulars of our suffering and the particulars of our happiness are all different. But the basic pattern of how the mind works, how the mind works in creating suffering, how the mind can work to put an end to suffering, that’s the same for everybody. So try to have this experience. Sit in the spot where the Buddha sat. Learn how to see things in his terms. But getting to that spot requires that you see things in his terms. And then you’ll be primed to start taking apart this mass of ignorance, this mass of suffering. The problem is right here, but the solution is right here. The important thing is that you get right here, get really familiar with right here. And you’ll find that what was true for the Buddha can be true for you, too.

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