Do, Maintain, Use

January 14, 2023

As John Fung used to say, there are three steps to doing concentration. One is learning how to do it. The third is learning how to maintain it. The second is learning how to maintain it. And the third is learning how to put it to use. The doing is not all that hard. You find an object that you like. A good place to start is with the breath. Make the breath something that you will like. It is one of the bodily functions that you can control to some extent. Sometimes it’s automatic, but sometimes you can change it. So change it for the better. Make this a good place to stay. You can try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, or shallow, or any combination of those. You don’t have to put much effort into adjusting it. Just think what it would longer be like. The body will tend to respond. What would shorter be like, it’ll respond. Then when you’ve found a rhythm that feels comfortable, try to keep it going. Think of it spreading throughout the body. So the breath flows through the body. Here we’re talking not so much about the air, the air coming into the nose. It’s the flow of energy. The Buddha classifies the in-and-out breath as part of the wind element in the body. So it’s not an outside tactile sensation. It’s one of the properties of the body itself. So hold that perception in mind. Realize that this wind element in the body suffuses the entire body. And when it’s comfortable, a sense of comfort can suffuse the entire body as well. You have the pains in different parts of the body. Think of the breath either going around them or permeating through them. But focus your primary attention on the comfort of the breath and keep the perception of breath in mind. Otherwise, you go slipping off into just the comfort and things begin to blur out. So when you’ve got your awareness filling the body, you’ve got the breath filling the body, and it feels good, then you can stop evaluating the breath and just be with the sensation of breath coming in and going out. There’ll be a sense of ease, a sense of fullness. It feels just right being here. Then try to maintain that. The maintaining work presents different problems. Because part of the mind will say, “Okay, I’ve had enough of that. What’s next?” You have to realize you haven’t had enough yet. I was talking to an athlete this week. He was complaining that people nowadays have some talent and they don’t develop it. They don’t want to put in the work. They feel they’re talented and they want to get rewarded for the fact of their talent. A lot of us are like that with our meditation. We have a little bit of concentration. It’s like, “Okay, now I want my discernment.” But no, you’ve got to put in the time. You’re getting to really know the present moment. It’s like getting to know a person. Somebody said you don’t really know a person until you’ve spent time with a person. Then you’re very observant. It’s in the maintaining that you begin to develop your discernment. You see, what are the things that disturb the concentration? The number one thing that disturbs it is your impatience, wanting to move on, move on, move on. You settle in. Learn how to separate yourself from that impatience. Sometimes it’ll go along with boredom. Nothing’s happening. It’s like that famous story of the French explorer who went up to spend some time with some Inuit. The Inuit were good. They built a little extra room in their igloo for him. One day the explorer went out with an Inuit father who was going fishing. They found this fish under the ice. Very patiently, the Inuit slowly, slowly, slowly drilled a hole in the ice. Then they slipped a little hook down and just stayed there. Then the explorer got impatient. “When’s the fish going to bite?” He got up and moved around. Of course, that disturbed the fish. They had to go without food that day. So you’ve got to think like a hunter. You don’t know how long the fish is going to bite. But if you get impatient, the fish is not going to bite for sure. So you’ve got to learn how to talk to yourself, to remind yourself that you’re right where you need to be. And if things aren’t showing up yet, it’s not because there’s something wrong with the fact that you’re maintaining concentration. What’s wrong is that you’re not paying careful enough attention. Because everything you need to know to gain awakening is right here, simply that you’re not sensitive yet. And you become sensitive over time. You begin to see how the mind slips off, how you can get it back again, how a little thought begins to form, and then it denies that it formed. Then it waits until your mindfulness slips, your alertness slips, and then it’ll take over. So you have to watch out for that. This is how concentration begins to develop discernment, and how maintaining provides the basis for putting the concentration to use. Because the major use you want to get out of this, of course, is how to see through your defilements, how to liberate the mind. The seeing through, the insight, the discernment, begins as you’re maintaining. It’s like maintaining the monastery. Building the monastery is one thing. Maintaining it is something else. It doesn’t require quite the same amount of energy. But it can be very boring. You sweep up the same places every day, every day, every day, and the leaves keep coming every day. Sometimes there are more, sometimes there are less. But you have to keep at it every day. You have to realize you’re being basically maintaining the newness of the monastery. If it gets dusty, if it gets dirty, if it gets messy, that’s no longer appealing. At the same time, you have an opportunity to reflect. Those leaves you’re sweeping up every day, where do they come from? They come from the fact that the trees keep producing leaves. Then you reflect back in your own mind. Why is it that you were able to deal with the defilement yesterday and it comes back again today? Well, the causes are still there in the mind. It requires that you think again and again. You begin to gain a sense of what the Buddha meant when he said that some causes arise at the same time as their effects. The effects disappear at the same time that the causes disappear. Other causes come, and the effects come later. Then the causes may end, but the effects still keep going. That means that when you’re in the present moment, some of the things that happen in the present moment come from your intentions right here, right now. Others come from your past intentions. Now you want to see the difference. At what point does the appearance of a thought in the mind come totally from past intentions? To what extent are you beginning to weave it into something new? That’s a good question to keep you interested in the maintenance and interested in using the concentration to develop discernment on this level. Because there’ll be many times when you assume that the thought sprung totally without any involvement from your part. And as you get to know it better, you realize that there were stages in its coming in, and you’re choosing to go with it. You’re making this little knot of energy that was going to grow into a thought go in one direction or another. There were choices you made right here, right now. And as you get more sensitive to those choices right here, right now, that’s when your discernment really gets good. Because when the Buddha talks about insight, it’s not about things outside. It’s insight into what the mind is doing. Sometimes people say it’s insight into the way things really are. But it’s more insight into how things function, and particularly seeing how things come to be. Things like greed, aversion, delusion, fear, impatience, boredom—how do they come to be? What are the steps in the process? To what extent are you contributing to the mind? That means, to what extent can you stop contributing? See what happens then. Insight has to be reflected like this. It’s not a matter of seeing the world outside as being inconstant, stressful, not-self, and saying, “Okay, I’m going to abandon my attachment to the world.” You have to see there’s a lot of inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness in your own mind. And there’s a benefit to seeing a lot of things outside. And even the part of the mind that’s telling you, “Do this, do that,” that’s been running the path up to this point, you’ve got to start looking at that, too. To what extent can you identify with that? It’s good to identify with it up to a certain point. Otherwise, the practice doesn’t get done. You can’t just say, “Well, the practice is doing itself.” As Buddha said, it’s something you develop. The sermon begins with that question, “What will I do? Will it lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” It’s something you do. That’s what you’re focusing on. You’re doing the path. But then you start asking, “Well, who is this you who’s doing the path? Where is it? What is it?” Track it down. Ask questions. “Is it really me, this voice in the mind that keeps giving directions?” When you reflect in that way, you reflect on what you’re doing. That’s when the insight really gets genuine. As the Buddha said, you nourish the Dhamma by committing yourself to doing it and then reflecting on it. And the more you can maintain the concentration, the deeper the reflection goes. So even though we tend to focus on the doing and the putting it to use, a lot of the work lies in the maintaining. As I say, genius is ten percent inspiration and ninety percent perspiration. It’s the effort to maintain. That’s what gets real results. It’s going to involve a lot of nitty-gritty. You’re going to see little parts of the mind that complain, that don’t like doing this, that want to get quick results so they can go on to something else. It’s like little fleas that come and bother you. Well, you’ve got to take all the fleas away. You can’t pretend they’re not there. You can’t say, “Well, I want to get something better than fleas.” These little thoughts, if you don’t pay careful attention to them, if you don’t deal with them, they’ll grow. What starts out as fleas can turn into much larger animals that overwhelm the mind. So be patient with the details. It’s like going to the Grand Canyon. We want to go to the Grand Canyon for the splendor, for the grandeur. But you take the road to the Grand Canyon, and then instructions don’t say, “Well, follow this road until you get to the splendor, and then turn right when you get to the grandeur.” You don’t follow the grandeur and the splendor to get there. You follow I-15 and then I-40 and get off I-40. At I-40, at Williams, you head north. You have to go through some pretty bleak country. But when you get to the edge of the Grand Canyon, you realize that it’s all worth it. And the concentration is not bleak. It’s simply that it’s not entertaining. It’s going to show you a lot of little things about yourself that you’d rather not see. But there are things that you have to see if you really want to be released from them. So learn how to enjoy the maintenance work. It’s like learning how to enjoy the ride in the Grand Canyon. Whether it’s going to be joyful or not, it’s up to you. It’s in your best interest to develop the right attitude towards it. Good morning.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230114_Do,_Maintain,_Use.mp3>