Concentration & Its Supports

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We just chatted the Buddhist explanation of the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, starting with Right View and ending with Right Concentration. It’s a little paradoxical because Right Concentration, of all the factors of the path, was the first one he discovered. You may know the story. He tried the path of torment. He tried the path of self-torture for six years and realized it was a dead end. Almost literally, if he pursued it any further, he was going to die without having attained anything. So he stopped to reflect. Could there be another way? He thought of a time when he was a child sitting under a tree, and it spontaneously entered the first jhana. He asked himself, “Could that be the path?” And something inside him said, “Yes.” So why was he afraid of the pleasure of that state of mind? He thought about it for a while and realized there was nothing to be afraid of. It didn’t intoxicate the mind. It didn’t harm anybody. In fact, it actually made the mind clearer. So he pursued that. But when he taught the path, he didn’t start with Right Concentration. He’d always start with Right View. And there are different ways in which he explains the relationship among the factors. But there’s one way in which it’s linear. He’d start with Right View. Basically, the suffering comes from within, comes from your cravings. But the path to the end of suffering also comes from within. So that alerts you that the issue is going to be inside, inside the mind. Based on that, you make a resolve that you’re going to get rid of unskillful intentions and develop skillful ones. Particularly, you’re going to try to get past sensuality, the mind’s fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, planning for sensual pleasures, ill will, harmfulness. And based on that, you develop Right Speech. No lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter. Right Action. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex. Right Livelihood. And as you practice these forms of virtue, you realize that the main focus, again, is on the mind. Because Right Speech, Right Action are defined. They’re defined by the intentions behind the action. That focuses you inside, even further. Then we come to the factors that have to do with the practice of concentration. Since you’ve been focusing on your intentions, you realize that rather than just having bad intentions and holding yourself back, it’s better to hold back on the bad intentions to begin with. You’re trying to prevent them from coming up. And if they do come up in the mind, you try to get rid of them. You don’t just sit and watch them. Although you do find that with unskillful mental states, there are some that go away when you just watch them. The reason they have power over the mind is because you’re not paying attention. When you start paying attention, you realize how harmful they are. They’re obviously bad ideas. So it’s very easy to let them go. There are others, however, that are not so easy. A part of you knows that they’re not good for you, but a part of you really likes them and can tell you all sorts of reasons for why you should go with them. So this is why you have to make an effort. The Buddha says you generate the desire to get rid of these things, and you uphold that intent to get rid of them. At the same time, you try to develop skillful qualities. This is where you get into the practice of Right Mindfulness. The Buddha’s description of Right Mindfulness is basically how you get the mind into the right concentration. You create a framework. Right now the framework is the body in and of itself. That means the body sitting here right now. And you’re not going to let your attention stray outside the body. Any thoughts that go out to the world, which the Buddha defines as thoughts of greed or distress, you put them aside. And you try to stay with that sensation of the body as it’s sitting here, right here, right now, as you breathe in, as you breathe out, as you get sensitive to long breathing, short breathing, to see what feels good. Then you try to breathe in and out, sensitive to the whole body. As the Buddha explains, you’re trying to get the mind into concentration. And in right concentration, there’s going to be a sense of ease and well-being. And you try to work that through the entire body. You can think of someone working water through a dough. So try to keep your attention focused right here. Any thoughts that go out into the world, you put them aside. And then you develop three qualities–mindfulness, urgency, alertness. Mindfulness is keeping things in mind. In this case, you keep in mind the fact that you’re going to stay with the breath and you’re going to cut off any thoughts that go out from the body. And the best way to do that is to make the breath interesting. After all, it is the force of life. It’s something that really deserves a lot of attention, a lot of inquiry. What’s going on with this force of life that keeps the body and the mind together? Where do you feel it? What ways of breathing really are good for the body and mind? You can explore that. That’s called directed thought and evaluation. As you get the mind into concentration, you try to adjust the mind, adjust the breath, adjust the body to fit snugly together, like a carpenter fitting pieces of wood together. You sand this little bit, sand that little bit, until you get a nice snug fit. So try to keep the breath in mind. And then you’re alert to how it actually feels. This is the basis for your directed thought and evaluation. And you’re alert to whether the mind is with the breath or not. And as for ardency, it’s basically right effort again. Anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you let it go. Anything having to do with the world outside, from the time being, you treat that as unskillful. As for skillful qualities, you try to give rise to them. The ardency is basically what makes right mindfulness. Mindfulness on its own is simply the ability to keep something in mind, which can be neutral and can actually be unskillful. You can keep the wrong things in mind. Same with alertness. You can watch what you’re doing, and it can be very unskillful, but as long as you’re watching what you’re doing, you can be alert. It’s the ardency that makes it right. This is why John Lee said the ardency of those three qualities is the one that embodies discernment, because it brings right view to bear. Remember, right view has duties. Anything that’s unskillful, you try to abandon it. Anything that’s skillful, you try to give rise to it. And once it’s there, you try to maintain it and let it grow. Some might call this mindfulness 2.0. Mindfulness 1.0 is when you learn simply to accept what’s going on in your mind. That’s a good treatment for neurosis. But once you get over that, then you still got the suffering that un-neurotic people have. Remember what Freud said about psychotherapy. You can get rid of your neurotic suffering, but then it just leaves you with normal suffering. Well, the Buddha’s not going to leave you with normal suffering. He says you want to go beyond that. So you’re careful to watch the mind that stays in its frame of reference and doesn’t go outside. Any feelers or vines of the mind that send their tendrils out, you just cut them off. Think of yourself backing into the body. This is one way of getting out of that visual field inside the mind, in that sense that you’re up around yourself. You’re looking down at the body from your eyes. So back into the body, the way you’d back a car into a garage. Feel the body from within, all the way down to the tips of your toes. And if there’s any sense of ease with the breath, allow that to spread down. Through this all-body awareness. Then the Buddha says, once you’re aware of the whole body breathing in and the whole body breathing out, then you allow the breath to calm down. This doesn’t mean suppressing the breath or forcing it to calm down. You just get more and more sensitive to the whole body and all the little tiny capillaries in your body system. The little tiny nerves, the little capillaries in the blood vessels. Make your awareness of these things really refined. That allows the breath energy to flow through the body and to nourish the whole body so that you feel less and less need to breathe in and breathe out. And as you do this, you’re doing both mindfulness and concentration at the same time. There’s a passage where the Buddha says, “The breath is totally calmed.” That’s the fourth jhana, the highest level of right concentration. So you’re doing mindfulness and concentration, both at the same time, with this one exercise. So that’s how the different factors of the path work. Take mindfulness and concentration and make it right. So you’re not just sitting here, accepting whatever comes up. You’re directing the mind in the right direction. Once you get the mind settled down like this, the next question usually is, “Well, what’s next?” If you’re going to do any thinking, any analysis, do it in the concentration. Don’t drop the concentration. Don’t drop your full-body awareness and go someplace else. Whatever thinking you can do in the mind to maintain full-body awareness, thinking about where there’s still some stress in the body, where there’s still some stress in the mind, that’s okay. But anything that would require you to drop your full-body awareness, just drop that. Remember, this is the heart of the path. The other factors are its requisites, its supports. But you want to stay right here, after all. It was in the fourth jhana, in right concentration, that the Buddha gained awakening. What was he watching? He was watching his breath. So you’re in the right spot. And the question is, “Why didn’t you gain awakening?” Well, the Buddha was a lot more observant than you are. But being observant, being sensitive to what’s going on, those are qualities that you can develop. And you don’t have to leave concentration to develop them. You can develop them right here. Just make yourself as still as you can, as sensitive as you can. The same way that when you hear a far-distant sound or far-distant music and you really want to hear it, you have to make yourself very, very, very quiet. And so to discern the subtleties of the breath, you have to get very quiet. It’s as if you’ve been running around, and everything you run past is a blur. If you want to see things clearly and distinctly, you have to stop and be still. So keep backing into the body. Anytime the mind sends its currents outside, drop the currents, return into the body, and get used to being here, and get used to liking to be here. Because really, it’s a good place to be. It was in right concentration that the Buddha gained awakening. It was in right concentration that he passed away. Basically showing how it’s done right. So try to get yourself in this spot, and then get really familiar with it. Which means anything that has to do with the world right now, you just drop it, drop it, drop it. You can tell yourself that it’s as if you’ve died, and you no longer have any responsibilities out there. I had someone come here one time. He’d been down in Peru, hiking through the mountains, and an avalanche came down. And as he saw the avalanche approaching, he realized there was nothing he could do. And when he realized there was nothing he could do about it, this huge peace came over his mind. And it turned out that he was behind a rock that split the avalanche. So the avalanche went to either side. So he survived. Just sometimes telling yourself, for the time being, there’s nothing you’re going to do about the world. So you might as well not pay any attention to it and stay inside. There will be times as you leave meditation that you do have to deal with the world. But give your mind some shelter like this. Give it some protection. Where it has no responsibilities out in the world. And the paradox, of course, is that as you get better at looking after your mind, when the time does come to pick up your worldly responsibilities, you can pick them up and do them with a lot more skill. You’re actually being more responsible. Because you’re making yourself more capable of being responsible, you’re giving yourself more power than you didn’t have before. So for the time being, though, you’re totally irresponsible as far as the world is concerned. And let your responsibilities focus inside to dwelling here as steadily as you can.

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