Delight in Concentration

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When you look at the explanation of the factors of the no-bladeful path, you’ll notice that the first five are fairly short and straightforward. Lists of things to develop, lists of things to abandon. But then when you get to the factors that go into concentration practices, they’re longer, more elaborate formula. That’s because concentration is the skill that we have to work on with the path. There’s something much complicated about telling yourself not to lie and then sticking with that determination. But getting the mind to settle down, that’s a more complicated process. And John Lee gives the analogy of building a bridge across a river. Virtue, he says, is like the pilings on this side of the river. Discernment is the pilings on the other side. Getting those established is not that hard. It’s getting the pilings in the middle, concentration. That’s the hard part. And you notice that the three factors, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, are very closely connected. With right effort, you generate desire, uphold the intent to abandon what’s unskillful, to develop what’s skillful. If something unskillful has already arisen, you try to abandon it. If it hasn’t yet arisen, you try to make sure it doesn’t. As for skillful things, if they’re not there yet, you give rise to them. And when they are there, you try to develop them as far as you can. But notice, it starts with generating desire. That’s where you motivate yourself. And this is an important part of any skill. The same factor goes into ardency and mindfulness practice. And then as John Lee points out, the ardency turns into evaluation. Where you focus your desire to do this well on looking at what you’re actually doing, and then have the desire to make improvements. So this element of generating desire runs like a thread through all three factors. And this is where you have to be really intelligent to figure out what will motivate you to do this. People have studied those who have mastered manual skills or physical skills, say that they’re really good at motivating themselves because they see, one, the dangers that come when you don’t master the skill, and then two, the benefits that come when you do. And they have a very live sense of these things. If you feel that it doesn’t really make much difference, or if there is a difference, it doesn’t matter, it’s going to be hard to put in the effort to stir yourself to want to do this well. So if you’re going to get the mind to settle down, you have to see that getting it settled down is a really good thing. And not getting it settled down leaves you in a very dangerous position. And one of the ways of taking pleasure in doing this, even before you can find a sense of well-being with the breath, is to talk to yourself about what a good thing it is that you’re on this path. The Buddha lists six different ways of taking delight that he says can lead to the end of the affluence. It’s interesting that he uses that word because part of the definition of the craving that leads to clinging and suffering is delight. Delight here, not delight there. But there are also ways of taking delight that are helpful on the path. The first is taking delight in the Dhamma itself. The fact that there is this teaching, it’s been kept alive all this time, many people have benefited from it, and now you’re in a position where you can benefit from it too. And it lays things out clearly. We tend to take it for granted. But think about the people back in the time of the Buddha who, when they first encountered the Dhamma, were overwhelmed by how it cleared up a lot of their doubts, and compared it to turning upright something that was turned over, taking a lamp into the dark, so that people can see. Because it points us clearly to the importance of our own actions, and how far our actions can take us. We have good actions, bad actions, a mixture of the two. And then the actions that are neither good nor bad that lead to the end of action. That’s the Noble Eightfold Path. And that’s the special type of action that we’re working on here. And as the Buddha said, the duty of any teacher is to point out to you that there are certain things that should be done, and certain things that should not be done. And there’s a good basis for deciding which is which. It’s not just that you’re obedient and obey rules. But the basic principles are reasonable and effective. They really do give the promised results. I know there are a lot of people who say they prefer that life be left as a mystery. It seems bigger and more impressive. But you want aging, illness, and death to be a mystery? Do you want what happens to you after death to be a mystery? Do you want it to be a mystery that you don’t know if your actions will have an effect or not? It’s good to have this all laid out by reliable people and certified by many more reliable people. So take delight in the fact that you’ve got this Dharma available and you can practice it. That’s one of the days when you don’t want to follow the path. You’re going to ask yourself, “Well, do you really want to live in a world where there is no path, where there is no Dharma?” Because that’s what you’re doing as you wander away from the path. You’re putting the mind in a world, in a state of becoming, where there is no Ajaan Mind, there is no Ajaan Li, there’s no Buddha. Is that a good world to be in? You’re much better off when you’re in this world. You can have a clear sense of what’s the right thing to do. Because this is the mind’s question all the time. The mind is an active principle. It’s constantly acting. The question it asks itself always is, “What to do next? What to do next?” And the Buddha’s giving you an answer for that. So take delight in that fact. The next two objects of delight are a pair. You delight in developing and delight in abandoning. In other words, you learn to take delight in the fact that you can develop good qualities in the mind and that you know how to motivate yourself to do that. And on days when it’s difficult and you use all your old tricks and they don’t work, you can delight in figuring out something new. I’ve heard some people say that the path is one where you shouldn’t try to figure things out, you should just sort of watch what’s happening. That’s certainly not how the Buddha found the Dharma. And you can use your intelligence to figure out your own resistance. So learn to take delight in that. See your defilements as something that are clever. But you can be more clever than them. The same with abandoning. You see you have old habits that are not good, and you can learn how to say no and take delight in the fact that you’ve learned how to say no. It will be a part of the mind that says, “Well, you may say no today, but tomorrow you’re going to give in, so you might as well give in today.” Don’t listen to that voice. As the Buddha said, even just making the intention to do something skillful, that’s good right there. But you don’t want to leave it right there, you want to get even better. As Ajahn Mahaprabhu points out, it’s better to fight and lose than not to fight at all. Because if you fight, even though you lose, you may have learned something about your opponent, so the next time you don’t fall for that trick. So even in losing, the fact that you put in an effort, and you can see what your defilements are doing, gets you to do something you know is not right. When you see them in action like this, then you can figure out a way around them. If you simply give in to them, there’s no way you’re going to figure them out. So take delight in your ability to develop good qualities in the mind and to say no to your old bad habits. The Buddha recommends this, your delight in seclusion. In other words, getting the mind secluded from unskillful qualities, and get it to settle down and enjoy it. Now part of the enjoyment here is when you are able to find a sense of well-being as you settle down, by working with the breath, but also just enjoying figuring out your mind as you get it to settle down. Taking joy in the fact that you are an agent and you can do these things. And they got mentioned before, those studies they’ve done of infants. When an infant discovers that it can do something, and do it again, and do it again, and get the same result, it’s really happy. Because that has a sense of agency, and it’s beginning to figure things out. You do X and Y results. So that’s part of the enjoyment you can get in getting the mind to settle down. Now of course, getting the mind to settle down is a lot more complicated than an infant making the same noise over and over again. But it’s simply a more convoluted and delicate application of the same principle. You’re learning how to figure out something that is really complex, your human mind. When you find physical seclusion and you can focus directly on your mind, and you get the mind into mental seclusion like this, learn how to delight in that. Then get the mind still. See, that is a genuine accomplishment. The final two objects of delight have to do with the goal of the path. One is the fact that it’s unafflicted. In other words, it’s not disturbed by anything at all. And two, it involves no conflict. You don’t have to fight anybody else off to get this. It’s yours, free and clear. And you’re in a state where there is no affliction at all. Learn to see that as something positive, as you’re saying today. If you see that there’s anything negative about Nibbana that doesn’t sound interesting enough, that doesn’t sound exciting enough, that’s wrong view. You’ve got to go back and check. What is it about my imagination that doesn’t allow for the fact that total freedom from affliction, total freedom from conflict, would be a worthwhile goal? So when you learn how to foster these kinds of delight, that’s an important element in learning how to master these skills. The skills of right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Which are the heart of the path? And they involve all the other factors. Being clear about your intentions, that’s what right concentration has in common with virtue. Understanding the ways of your mind, and learning how to foster skillful qualities in some way. That’s what concentration has in common with discernment. So if you focus on the concentration, everything gets pulled together right here. So take delight in this skill. Without that delight, it doesn’t get developed. With that delight, you’ve got your motor force to keep going.

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