Appreciating Concentration

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Years back, when I was in Japan, there was a documentary on one evening about a living national treasure, an artist. I showed him in the process of creating a piece of art. He started out with little sketches. They looked like children’s sketches. He kept wondering, “What kind of living national treasure is this?” But then, as the program developed, the sketches developed. And finally, from that what seemed to be a very unpromising start, he created something that was really interesting, quite attractive. I stopped. I thought, “This is the way the world is. This is the way the mind is.” We love to create things. We take delight in our creations. For some people, it’s things outside. For some people, it’s things inside, the activities of the mind. We take these unpromising materials—form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, consciousness—and we create whole worlds out of them. The worlds of our desires, the worlds of our craving. And as long as we have the opportunity to keep creating these things, we’re happy. Then the Buddha comes along and says, “This is precisely why we’re suffering.” And it goes against the grain. But as he points out, those raw materials that we take, even though we can create something really elaborate out of them, are all going to fall apart. And we have to do it again and again and again. And if it were just innocent entertainment, it wouldn’t be a problem. But sometimes our craving for creations can cause us a lot of suffering. And they can spill out and cause suffering for others as well. You look around and you see a lot of world leaders with their ambitions. And they can create a huge mess. You have to look inside yourself and say, “Well, I’ve got that same potential inside me as well. How do I protect myself from that?” That’s when you sober up and realize that this process of creating states of becoming is dangerous. That’s when you’re ready for the path. Or at least part of you is ready for the path. And that’s what a lot of the practice is, is getting the rest of the mind on board, getting the rest of the mind cooperating with the path. Because otherwise you’re just sitting here and meditating. And part of you is with the breath. And there are other parts of you that are operating underground. They want to go someplace else. They want a little bit more entertainment. And as soon as your mindfulness slips, you’re off. Or else they can really convince you, “Yes, this is boring. Nothing’s happening. You’re just watching the breath come in and go out.” And you get on board with that. So you have to learn how to get past their tricks. And one of the ways of doing that is to get interested in them, the voices that say, “This is boring.” Where do they come from? And what are they looking for? And how do they convince you to be on their side rather than on the side of the Dhamma? These are questions you can pose. You don’t have to do too much analysis. In fact, a lot of analysis pulls you further and further away from the actual events in the mind. You want to be with these things as they happen. And so the best way to do that, of course, is to get the mind as still as possible. You may remember Ajahn Fueng’s statement that there are two kinds of meditators, those who think too much and those who don’t think enough. He doesn’t have room for a third. But those who think just right, we’re going to have to learn how to do that. And most of us here in the West are in the category of thinking too much. And we delight in our thinking. So we have to work on getting the mind still, and getting it content to stay still, and getting it to see the importance of staying still. That’s another way of getting past the boredom, is realizing that as you get the mind more and more still, you have to protect the stillness. And different things are going to come along and eat away at it or destroy it. And you want to see where they’re coming from and how they sneak in. You’re going to learn an awful lot about the mind that way. So there are interesting things happening here, even as you’re trying to get the mind still, because you’ve got to protect it. Sometimes we think that once the mind gets still, we’ll choose our favorite topic for discernment. And you can do that. But the topics that really are most important are the ones that come unexpectedly, hit you out of left field. So there’s plenty of work to do just keeping the mind still. And even when there’s not much happening in terms of outside disturbances, there’s that question of how much disturbance is there in your own concentration? How steady is it? And if you look at it carefully, you’ll see that there are ups and downs. And you might ask yourself, “When the level of stillness goes greater, what did you do? When it goes less, what did you do?” Don’t stray too far from right here, right now. Look right here at the perceptions, the feelings, the little bits and snatches of internal conversation. This stuff is all on the surface. It’s all happening right here. But we try to dig deeper, trace it further back. And the further back we trace it, the further away we get from what’s actually happening right now. As I would have said, there’s no way you can trace back the beginning of ignorance. But you can see what’s nurturing it right now. And the same holds for a lot of other things going on in the mind. You try to trace them back to your childhood. Well, there was something before your childhood. There was your previous lifetime, and there was a lifetime before that. So who knows where these things originated. But what you can see is what happens right now. Why does the mind go for these things right now? It’s all right here. So take it as a challenge, protecting your concentration. And you may say, “Well, my concentration isn’t all that much.” Well, protect what you’ve got. That’s how concentration grows. If you look down on your concentration, you’re going to trash it, and then you won’t have anything to build on. We build with these little moments of concentration, and we stitch them together, and things begin to settle down. Sometimes it requires a fair amount of direct thought and evaluation to adjust things inside so they feel good. But then comes the point where we have to rest. We have to be willing to rest. That tendency we have to think and create worlds. We exercise that in the concentration by adjusting the breath, adjusting the focus of the mind, changing our perceptions. And there’s a lot to play with here. But then again, there comes a point where you’ve got to say, “I’ve got to stop playing. Just settle down.” And then do the work of protecting your concentration, because that too is a state of becoming. And it’s going to be the state of becoming that you’re going to learn the most from over time. Because you learn to see very clearly how you put things together. In very basic, immediate terms. How do you pay attention to things? How do you ask questions? Which questions do you choose to ask? Which questions do you ignore? Which perceptions do you hold on to? And how do you change from one to another to get the mind to settle down even more? We’re dealing with the different factors that come under what’s called “name.” Independent co-arising. Just events here in the mind before they’ve turned into little worlds. You stand outside of them, watch them, simply as events. And, of course, you’ve been watching form, looking at the body, simply in the terms of breath energy, how it relates to the warmth and the coolness and the solidity in the body. So you’re going to need to look at the mind on the level that’s going to be really useful. You want to see these processes before they turn into the states of becoming. Well, concentration is going to let you see them. Getting the mind really still will let you see them. Because they’re happening right here. They sound abstract sometimes, but actually they’re very immediate. In fact, they’re even more immediate than your sense of yourself, because your sense of yourself is a pretty elaborate construct. There are many different senses of self, and they have their ways of passing the job on from one to another. So they have their patterns. But the events you see in the mind as you’re trying to get it to settle down are a lot more immediate. They’re there for you to see, if you’ll take an interest in them. So be up for the challenge of getting the mind to settle down and getting it to stay there. And if a voice in the mind says, “How long do I have to stay here?” Say, “I don’t know, but we’re going to stay here right now.” And just keep staying and staying and staying. That’s a skill in and of itself. It’s really underappreciated. That chant we have on respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha mentions having respect for the training. And then it says again, “Respect for concentration,” which is interesting because concentration comes under the training. It’s a triple training in heightened virtue, heightened mind, or concentration, heightened discernment, and then concentration again. It may be because the Buddha saw that there’s this tendency to overlook it and not really appreciate it. So learn how to appreciate your concentration. Take care of it. It’s going to be the source for a lot of inner strength and a good foundation for your insights to arise. It’s going to do a lot for you, so you do a lot for it.

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