Pleasing to the Noble Ones

April 6, 2025

Practice of concentration starts with the practice of right mindfulness. You focus on an aspect of the body in and of itself, and you put aside greed and distress with a reference to the world. That’s what the formula says. You’re doing two things. One is trying to keep focused on the sensation of an aspect of the body, like the breath. The other is, if anything else comes up to get in the way, you fend it off, or you just drop it. You can stay with your object as steadily as you can, because it’s when the mind is steadily focused like this that you can begin to observe it. The mind is running around, it’s hard to see. It’s like a picture with a very long exposure. You keep the long exposure, the person moves around a lot, and the person is a blur. But if the person stays perfectly still, and even though the exposure is long, everything is very clear, sharp, in focus, to try to develop that quality of your mind. And this, of course, is part of a larger training, which is called the Triple Training. The Training in Heightened Virtue, Heightened Mind, or Heightened Concentration, and Heightened Discernment. They’re listed in that way, to give you a sense of the order in which they’re mastered. When you reach stream-entry, you’ve mastered virtue. You have some mastery of concentration and some mastery of discernment. It’s not like you start doing concentration after stream-entry, or you develop discernment after stream-entry. You have to develop them to begin with, to some extent. But the big one you’ve mastered is virtue. There’s a paradox, or what looks like a paradox, in the description of a stream-enterer. On the one hand, the stream-enterer has abandoned the fetter of grasping at precepts and practices. But at the same time, the person who has become a stream-enterer is said to be possessed of precepts that are pleasing to the noble ones. Now, in some cases they say, grasping at precepts and practices means you don’t care about any particular precept, or care about any particular practice, you’re not attached to any of them. But that would mean that anybody walking down the street would have the quality of a stream-enterer, because a lot of people are not attached to precepts or practices. Perhaps a better way of translating it, though, would be grasping at habits and practices, and everybody has their habits they’re addicted to. But at the same time, the stream-enterer is said to be pleasing to the noble ones, and observing the precepts. And what’s pleasing to the noble ones about the precepts, or your observance of the precepts, one is that they are not broken. In other words, you abide by the five precepts. And two, they’re conducive to concentration. And part of the reason they’re conducive to concentration is because if you’re not breaking the precepts, and you look back on the day, the events of the day, look at your actions, or for the past week, the past month, whatever, and you realize you haven’t harmed anybody. You haven’t killed anything, you haven’t stolen anything, you haven’t had illicit sex, you haven’t lied, you haven’t taken intoxicants. So there’s no reason for regret. Just that fact in and of itself is conducive to concentration. The other way they’re pleasing to the noble ones is that they’re conducive to concentration, and they’re conducive to concentration because you’re not obsessed with details. You realize that the essence of the precept is your intention. And as long as you don’t intend to break the precepts, then you haven’t broken them. So you look after your precepts by looking after your intentions. And that focus on your intentions is what keeps you in line to get settled down in concentration. As long as you keep your precepts pure in your intention, then it’s easy for the mind to settle down and be one. You don’t have to put up walls. You don’t have to deny any harm that you’ve done. You don’t have to lie to yourself about ways in which you’ve caused trouble, because you haven’t caused any trouble. As for unintentionally breaking the precepts, you’re not worried about that, because you realize that the precepts are there to train your intentions. And that realization is what keeps you from grasping at precepts and practices. You’re more concerned with the minutia of the precepts. You’re more concerned with the intention. You realize the intention is what they’re all about. So you keep your focus here. And that’s conducive to concentration, because you want to learn how to observe your mind. And the best way to observe the mind is to do things that are harmless. And in order to be skillful at something, the harmlessness means that you look at your actions, and you don’t have to deny anything. So you can watch your mind clearly, without any fear that you’re going to run into anything negative. And as you’re working on a skill, as with any skill, you’re concerned about what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. And you want to see clearly the connection between the two. So if the results are not coming out well, then you can go back and look at your original actions. What were you doing? What could you change that would give better results? Having that kind of focus on skill is what allows you to really see things clearly. You understand the principle of karma inside. Because karma is not just something that acts between lifetimes. It’s happening all the time. With every intentional action, there’s going to be a result. Some of those results show up right away, and some of them show up over time. So you want to be able to see the connection. So observing the precepts, having precepts that are pleasing to the Noble Ones, means you’re going to stay right here. That’s your intention. And the results will have to be right here as well. That’s why it’s easier to see the connection between the two. That’s how the practice of virtue and concentration then leads to discernment. Discernment is all about seeing cause and effect. You start out by taking on the Buddha’s word for it. You take his teachings as a working assumption. But then when you’re really here, focused, still, then you can start seeing the truth of those teachings for yourself. So virtue, concentration, and discernment all comes back to it right here. Your intentions. You focus on the breath because the breath, of all the physical properties, is the closest to the mind, closest to your awareness. It’s also the most responsive to any acts of awareness, any acts of the mind. There’ll be times when something goes through the mind and you don’t see it clearly, but you do see the impact on the breath. So stay right here. Everything you need to know is right here. It’s a question of being patient enough and sharp enough in your powers of observation. What’s showing itself right here will show itself more and more clearly, because your abilities to observe and judge what’s going on get more and more refined, because you’re getting the mind as steady and as centered as possible. Alert, but still. That’s when you’re going to be able to see things you never saw before, things that can make a real difference in how much suffering you’re creating and how much suffering you can stop. So settle in right here. The show has been showing itself for a long time. As the Buddha said, you don’t have to know the beginning point, just watch what’s happening right here, right now. And you begin to see which events in the mind depend on which other events in the mind, which events are skillful and which ones are not, which ones need to be abandoned, which ones need to be developed. It’s all playing out right here.

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