Alert

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The purpose of getting the mind into concentration is so that it can see itself, both in the sense that it’s quiet enough, that it’s not creating disturbances, so anything subtle that shows up in the mind will be very clear. Also in the sense that it should be feeling well-being. Without that feeling, it’s very easy to go running after things, sneaking little snacks here and there, running it hard to resist the impulse to do something unskillful. So as we get the mind quiet, there should be a sense of being happy to be here. It feels good. Both physically and mentally. Mentally in the sense that you know that you’re not doing anything wrong, you’re not harming anybody. And you have a chance to look at your mind, to explore, experiment. Physically in the sense that you can manipulate the breath in a way that maximizes feelings of pleasure. One of the most important teachings the Buddha gave had to do with the principle of causality. He expresses it in very simple terms. When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. If you don’t listen to it carefully, it sounds like a simple principle. Yes, there are causes and effects. If you listen more carefully, you realize there are two different principles going on right there. One is immediate causality. In other words, A appears, B appears immediately. A disappears, B will disappear immediately. The other one is causality over time. You plant a seed now. You’re not going to get the tree right away. It’s going to take time. But the fact that the seed itself is impermanent means that the tree will be impermanent. It’s going to have to end someday. So what this means is what you’re faced with at any moment is the results of actions you’re doing right now and the results of actions that you did a while back. These are many different actions over time that you did in the past, all bearing fruit right now. And you have the choice in the present moment as to what you’re going to amplify, what you’re going to not emphasize. So as we meditate, we’re trying to take advantage of that freedom. Because not everything is caused by the past. If everything were caused by the past, there would be no path to practice. Everything would have been set into motion inexorably a long time ago. And things would just work themselves out. But the fact that you can make choices, you are free to change your ways in the present moment, is what allows us to practice. So try to take advantage of that. Instead of sitting here just doing the same old things every day, every day. Ask yourself, “What can I do more skillfully?” That was how the Buddha defined his search. He was looking for the Deathless. He also said he was looking for what was skillful. It seems that he began his search with the assumption, “There must be a path to practice. There must be things you can do that would lead to the end of suffering, that would take you to the Deathless.” The question was, “What?” He tried lots of different paths. In each case, he gave himself fully to the path. So that if it didn’t work, it wasn’t because he wasn’t really doing it. It didn’t work because that path didn’t work. So you should have the same honesty and the same dedication as you practice. Because we are here testing the path. Until you’ve experienced your first taste of the Deathless, you’re still not 100% sure that this is the right way. And it’s good to be honest with yourself that you have doubts. But the only way you’re going to overcome those doubts is to give yourself to the path. Really do it. Commit yourself, as the Buddha would say. Anuyoga is the Pali word. And then reflect on the results. If they’re not good, ask yourself, “Could I be doing something different?” Take advantage of the fact that you do have the freedom to do something different. All this will require that you get the mind really still, so you can really see what’s going on. Because after all, the Buddha said, “Where is the cause of suffering? It’s in the actions of the mind.” So look at your mind. In the beginning, it’s hard to look at it directly. So you anchor it with the breath. Guarantee that you’re in the present moment. Without the breath as an anchor, it’s very easy to get carried away into thought worlds, which refer to the past, refer to the future, any place but right here, right now. Then you can’t really be sure that what you observe is true. If you want to see your mind, you have to see it in action, what it’s actually doing as it’s doing it. This is the quality of alertness. Which is why your concentration has to be the sort that allows you to see. There are states of concentration that you get into where your awareness just gets blanked out. As the John Fung said one time, there are some people who think that it’s actually Nirvana. They hear that it’s like the extinguishing of a fire. Well, fires go out and that’s it, nothing. But you have to remember that back in the time of the Buddha, that’s not how they saw fire. There’s a fire property in everything. And sometimes that property gets provoked, and that’s when we have actual fires. It latches on to its fuel and feeds on its fuel. And then it gets trapped by the fact that it’s latching on. When it goes out, it’s because it’s let go of its fuel. In other words, it’s freed because it’s let go. And then it returns to its quiet state. So when the Buddha said Nirvana, or used it as an image for his goal, he wasn’t talking about extinction or blanking out. He was talking about a state of non-agitation, and one that can’t be really defined. There was a wanderer who came to see him one time and was confused about what the Buddha had to say. And the Buddha gave the example of a fire that’s gone out. When it goes out, where does it go? Does it go east, west, north, south? No, it’s just out. In the same way, you can’t say that someone who’s totally awakened after they die exists or doesn’t exist, or both, or neither. So it’s an undefined state. But it’s found through awareness. All the images the Buddha gives, in fact, he calls it awakening. If it were blanking out, you’d call it a big sleep. You’re waking up. So you want to develop a state of mind where you are very clearly aware of what’s going on, and especially very clearly aware of what you’re doing. So alertness is always important as you meditate. And the question is simply how quiet can you get the mind at the same time that it’s still alert? This is where you’re trying to get sensitive to when you’re settling down. First, the obstacles are going to be things that will pull you away, thoughts that will pull you away from the concentration. You deal with those. You either just note them, that they’re pulling you away, and you drop them. Other times you have to think about their drawbacks before you’re willing to drop them. If they’re there persistently, you ignore them. And you try to relax around them. Notice where in the body, when a thought comes into mind, where do you tense up? Where is there a little pattern of tension? Sometimes it’s along the skin, sometimes it’s in different parts of the body. Relax that. See what happens. If nothing else works, then just grit your teeth, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and repeat a meditation word really fast. Puto, puto, puto, puto. Jam the circuits so there’s no room for the thought to stay. In other words, there are lots of different techniques you can use to get rid of the distractions. And eventually the mind will settle down. Then, as it settles down, you begin to notice there are layers and layers of settling down. You’re going to get more sensitive to what, in your state of concentration, is stressful. Or, the way the Buddha uses “tatata” can be translated as a disturbance. How are you disturbing yourself? How are you disturbing your concentration as you concentrate? You want to be able to see that. Realize that that level of disturbance goes up and it goes down, up and down. When it goes up, what did you do? Here again, that’s that principle of immediate causality. What are you doing right now as the stress goes up? Drop that. And you find that the mind goes to deeper and deeper and deeper levels in the concentration. And as you appreciate those different levels, that’s one of the ways in which you can gain awakening. As you get more sensitive to the amount of fabrication that goes on, the layers of fabrication that go on, even as you try to get the mind to settle down, so given that we do have this principle that some of the causes of what you’re experiencing right now are actually happening right now, it’s not all a fabrication of past karma. There’s present karma. So be alert to your present karma. Get the mind in a state where it really can see clearly what it’s doing. And that’s how you get into right concentration.

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