Mature Concentration

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Let things settle down in your mind. All the possible issues that you could think about right now, leave them unfinished. Because that’s the nature of the world. It’s a work in progress. There’s always something left unfinished. We like to think that life will come with a nice sense of closure. Things will get wrapped up nicely, but they don’t. There’s so much that gets left undone. Yet the mind is always saying, “Let me finish this first. Let me finish that first. Then I’ll get around to meditating.” But if that’s your attitude, you’ll never get around to meditating. There’s always something undone. So the skill in meditating lies in allowing things to remain undone while you settle the mind down. This doesn’t mean you’re being irresponsible. It means simply having a proper sense of priorities—what work really needs to be done. This has to have first priority. As for other things, you work on them as you find necessary. But always remember, the state of your mind is the most important thing in your life, because it’s the mind that shapes your experiences and if it’s in good shape, it’ll shape other things as well. If the mind’s in bad shape, it’s going to do a sloppy job. No matter how much you work at something, something else is going to be sloppy. So to do anything properly, you need the mind to settle down and be still. It’s like water. If water is sloshing around, it’s hard to see anything clearly in the bottom. It’s when the water is perfectly still, that you can get a very clear vision of what’s there. So allow the mind to be still. Allow the breath to be still as well. The Buddha talks about the basic steps of breath meditation, starting out simply being aware of when the breath is long, when it’s short. From there, he says, be aware of the whole body, as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Because when you’re aware of the whole body, you have to let go of everything else. It’s a special kind of awareness, this whole body awareness. It’s not that you’re up in the head here and the head has to take note of this, that, and the other thing. It’s like the hand knows the hand, the head knows the head, the chest knows the chest, the legs know the legs, the feet know the feet. Each part of the body has its own awareness inside it. Simply allow that awareness to be there. Don’t block it. Don’t cover it up with your other thoughts. When you’re fully aware of the body, let it be like this. Then the next step, he says, is to allow the breath to grow calm. The factor that may be stirring the body up and making it feel tense, excited, antsy, whatever, that’s breath energy. The breath energy is obviously tense or antsy or excited, so allow that to grow calm. That’ll have an effect on the whole body. Just this much, the Buddha said, is a basis for mindfulness. First of all, establishing the body in and of itself as your frame of reference, being aware of the long breaths, the short breaths, being aware of the whole body, and then allowing the breath to grow calm. That’s all you really have to do. Yet we make it so much more complicated than this. We have other issues. We want it to happen, the results to come fast. We want them to come in a certain way. We have preconceived notions about what a good state of concentration is going to be like, what a good meditation is going to be like, and if it’s not fitting in with our preconceived notions, we start getting frustrated. Notice the frustration. Put it aside. Go back to calming the breath again. There’s a natural rhythm to how the mind settles in. There’s a natural rhythm to how it starts getting stable and starts being able to see things clearly. And the trick in the meditation lies in allowing that rhythm to settle in, not trying to squeeze it too much at the same time, not getting too lackadaisical. Just simply follow the breath in, follow the breath out, or stay in one spot and allow the breath to come in and go out past the one spot you focused on. But then keep your awareness filling the body. That’s what anchors you in the present moment. If you’re only on one little spot in the body, it’s easy for thoughts to come creeping into other parts of the body and taking over. I once saw a cartoon of a meditator. First, it starts out with her sitting there, perfectly still, and then the word “think” appears on her forehead. And then the next frame, it’s “think” on her arm, and a “think” in her chest, and a “think” in her leg. And then by the final frame, it’s just her entire body is blotted out by “think, think, think, think, think, think, think.” And that happens so easily if you’re not fully aware of the whole body. Then once you’re aware of the whole body, you can go through. If you want, you can do a body scan. Just start, say, with the fingers. Relax your fingers. Go up each joint of each finger. Relax, relax, relax. And then the palms of the hands, the backs of the hands, then the wrists and the forearms, the elbows, the upper arm, the shoulders. Then start with your feet. Start with the toes, up the toes, up the feet, the ankles. The calves, the knees, the thighs, the pelvis, up the back. Relax things in a way so that you can be sitting perfectly straight, balanced, not leaning to the left, not leaning to the right. Relax things as much as you can, all the way up to the face, relaxing all around the eyes and the jaws, the back of the neck, around the ears, and then spreading your awareness to fill the whole body. If you find it difficult to stay with the whole body, try that survey again, going through the body, starting with the fingers, up the arms, and the toes, up the legs, up the back. Alternate between the survey and the full body awareness until you finally find that you can stay with that full body awareness. Allow the breath to calm down, calm down, calm down. If it wants to stop, let it stop. You don’t have to worry about dying. If the body needs to breathe, it’ll breathe on its own. If it doesn’t need the oxygen, you’re getting oxygen into the pores of your skin. The mind is really still. That’s plenty of oxygen right there. If you’re going to ask what happens next, just put that question aside. Learn to be patient. If the mind says, “This is stupid and you’re not learning anything,” you’re laying a foundation. Foundations don’t necessarily have to be smart. They have to be solid. They have to be steady. You’re creating the conditions for insight. You’re creating the conditions for discernment to arise. That takes time. It’s like having a child. You don’t have a child and then just throw it away. You say, “Okay, that was an interesting experience. Let’s go do something else. Let’s go star in a play. Let’s go ride around.” Once you’ve got the child, you’ve got to look after it. It sometimes means getting up at strange hours of the night. Whatever’s needed, you do it because it’s your child. It’s your responsibility now. It’s the same with the mind. You’ve got to tend to it. You’ve got to look after it. That means until it’s ready to walk, stand on its own two feet, you’ve got to keep helping it along. Keep your eye on it. You can’t let it out of your sight. That’s part of the burden of the meditation. But the reward of the meditation is that the mind feels more and more free. It’s more and more open. It’s not constantly creating trouble for itself. Again, it’s like raising a child. If you get careless and the child puts a piece of glass in its mouth, think of all the trouble you’d have. Much more trouble than just simply watching after the child, keeping it in your sight. As soon as it picks up a piece of glass in its hand, you get it to drop the glass. Give it something better to hold on to. Learn how to play with it. Learn how to enjoy the child so that looking after it is not a burden. Because the more you tend to it, after a while it learns how to go to the bathroom on its own. You don’t have to worry about that. Then it can learn how to go into the kitchen, fix its own food, take care of itself, clean up its own room. After a while it gets to the point where the child is actually helpful instead of a burden. You still have to look after it, but it can depend on itself more and more. And you can begin to depend on it more and more, too. The same with concentration. In the beginning, it takes a lot of attention. You have to keep coming back, coming back, coming back. You can’t let it out of your sight. But after a while it begins to develop. It grows mature. And the more mature it is and the more you can depend on it, the more pleasure you get out of it. You can play with your concentration. So if you’re willing to put up with the work that’s needed in the beginning, you’ll find that the rewards come more and more and more. As the concentration grows more solid, as it grows more mature, as the mind becomes more and more of an adult.

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