Technique & Attitudes

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Concentration practice is partly technique and partly attitude. The technique is pretty simple. Be aware of your breath as it comes in. Be aware of your breath as it goes out. Know clearly when it’s coming in, clearly when it’s coming out. You can focus on any part of the body where there are sensations that tell you, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” In other words, you don’t have to focus on the feeling of the air coming in and out of the nostrils. You could also focus on the movement of the body that brings the air in and lets it go out. It’s important that you let the breath be comfortable. Try not to force it. You’re not trying to put yourself into a trance. Sometimes to make the breath clear, you have to make it long and deep. But if you find that deep and long breathing doesn’t feel good over time, you can change it. If it does feel good, stick with it. Monitor the quality of the breath, and also monitor the quality of your awareness. If you find that you’re having trouble staying with the breath, you can use a meditation word to go along with it. I think “buddho,” “budd” with the in-breath, “tho” with the out, means “awake,” which is one of the qualities you’re trying to develop. Be mindful to keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, and alert to see how things are going, how the breath feels, and how well you’re staying with it. When there is a sense of ease or comfort in the breath, think of it spreading out from the spot where you’re focused. You don’t have to leave the spot. Just think of the boundary around that spot opening up and letting all the ease and relaxation that you can feel with the breath spread out to whatever part of the body it’s going to go. In other words, try not to hem the breath in. Let it move through whatever part of the body needs energy right now. Your responsibility is to keep on generating that sense of ease. This is where the right attitude comes in. If you try to force things too much, the ease just doesn’t develop. At the same time, if you’re too lackadaisical, the ease won’t develop either. If there is a little bit of ease, you just might ride off with it and leave the breath and end up who knows where. So you want to bring the proper attitude. Part of that is that attitude of goodwill that we chanted just now, the desire for happiness, for a true happiness that doesn’t have to depend on things outside. Because it’s a happiness that doesn’t depend on things outside, it means it’s a happiness that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. So your true happiness doesn’t have to conflict with anyone else’s. This is a good attitude to bring. Thugmuda mentions that sometimes meditation can get dry, in which case it’s good to stop and think about themes that give a sense of refreshment or inspiration to the mind. You might want to think of all the people who’ve been good to you through your life. An attitude of gratitude can often give rise to a sense of ease and well-being. Then you notice that the breath changes when you’re thinking about thoughts that are good like this. Just let that same ease of breath continue as you drop the thought and return to the breath. Another attitude you want to bring is an attitude of respect, as in the chant just now, respect for concentration. Why? Because concentration takes work. We’re not here simply blissing out. Even though the instructions may be simple, they’re not easy, especially if you’re the sort of person who likes your thoughts. It’s going to be hard to resist their pull wherever they want to take you. It’s one of our problems, is that we respect our thoughts more than we respect concentration. So you’ve got to get the right attitude towards concentration. You’ve got to keep remembering it. You have to keep coming back, coming back, coming back to the breath, even in the beginning, when it doesn’t seem all that promising. But remember that the best way to judge your thoughts as to whether they’re worth thinking or not is to come from a still mind. So no matter how fascinating or outstanding your insights may seem at the moment, just let them go. Let the mind settle down. Then you can look at those insights again. It’s like people who get stoned and have wonderful insights while they’re stoned, and they write them down. Then when they sober up again and they look at the insights, they realize there was nothing much there, and they throw them away. At the moment, their powers of judgment were impaired. Even the craziest things can seem profound. So remember, as long as the mind isn’t quiet, you’re not in the best position to judge your thoughts. So put them aside for the time being. Keep coming back to the breath. This may seem to go against the grain, but, yes, concentration is work. Then, as with any job, you start out by not at the top of the corporation, but basically doing the grunt work. It doesn’t seem to be paid very well, it doesn’t seem worth it, but if you stick with it long enough, you work your way up the corporate ladder. The work gets easier, more interesting, and the results multiply to the point where all you have to do is sign a few checks, sign a few letters every day, and you get a huge salary, much more than you got when you were working down on the factory floor. It’s the same with concentration. In the beginning, it takes a lot of work to keep pulling the mind back in, reining it in, so it doesn’t keep running off after its thoughts. But after a while, as you get more used to being with the breath, you get a better sense of what the mind is like when it really does settle down. You find that the rewards begin to come, a sense of ease, a sense of fullness, refreshment. At the very least, the mind isn’t scattered around all the time, being pulled this way and that by all its different thoughts. That in and of itself, if you give it time to stay that way, doesn’t mean that it’s going anywhere. It allows the mind to relax, soften up a little bit, soften up in the sense that it’s able to settle down and seep into the breath, seep into the present moment, your sensation of the body here. These things begin to intermingle. At the same time, as you get to know the breath better, it gets more and more absorbing. Realize that when you breathe in, there’s not just the sense of the air coming in and out of the nose. There’s a flow of energy throughout the body. In some places it feels easy, in other places it feels forced. Learn how to make it feel easy. Ask yourself, when you think about the breath, how do you conceive it? What’s your picture of how the breath comes in, how it goes out? Where does it come in? Where does it go out? Because the breath energy can come in and out of the body at any place. So if you find that there’s a place of tension, think of the breath coming in right there. Or reverse your sense of where the breath is coming in. If it seems to be coming in and out the front of the face, think of it coming in through the back of the neck, coming in through your hands, any place where the breath energy seems starved. Think of the breath coming in and out right there. You don’t have to pull it around. Think of the breath energy just waiting to come in only if you let it. See what that does. In other words, getting absorbed in the breath doesn’t mean simply that you tie it down or you tie the mind down to the breath. You also want to gain some understanding as to how you’re relating to the breath. This is why the Buddha said that concentration requires discernment. You need some insight into the workings of the mind before the mind will really settle down. At the same time, insight requires concentration. The more still the mind becomes, the better you’re able to judge how your tactics are working. This is the test for everything as you meditate. How is it working? What kind of results are you getting? The more you get absorbed in the breath like this, the less you consciously have to think about developing attitudes of goodwill or gratitude or respect, because the breath in and of itself seems more and more absorbing. But if you’re not there yet, remember that these attitudes can help. Think in ways that induce a feeling of well-being and allow the breath to pick up that feeling of well-being and maintain it. In this way, your technique and your attitude go together and enable you to train the mind. As the Buddha said, a trained mind is the mind that can bring you happiness. The mind that is untrained goes out and grabs hold of fire and brings it back in. It’s like a little child that doesn’t know anything. It sees something bright and red and it’s interested and goes and tries to catch it. And it’s fire. The mind is like this. There are all these flickering things that appear on the mind, like images on a movie screen. When you try to figure out what that image is, it’s like driving past a drive-in movie. You see something flickering on the screen, and you turn around, you look at the screen, and you drive off the road. It happens an awful lot. So you have to train the mind so that it realizes that not every flickering is a good place to go. And even the thoughts that seem more substantial are really dealing with issues that you’ve got to face in life. It’s not the case that you have to take them on all the time. You have to have a sense of time and place in your thinking. Because some things, if you think about them hour after hour after hour, it just wears the mind out and nothing gets resolved. So you need concentration as a place where you can pull back, give the mind a chance to rest, and then it can gain a new perspective on whatever the issue is. So have some respect for this quality of stillness, the potential for stillness in the mind. And be willing to put in whatever effort is needed to develop that stillness. It may sound paradoxical, “effort” and “stillness,” but the effort to develop it is not necessarily one of physical straining. It’s simply reminding yourself to come back, come back, come back. Watch. Observe. Take the time. Make the effort to really understand what the breath is doing and what ways the breath can be comfortable and nourishing. When you have this attitude, then the technique will give results.

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