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The Buddha said one time there are two ways of getting the mind to settle down. One is to actively direct it to a topic, and the other is to actively not direct it to things outside. In the first case, you find a topic that you find really interesting, something that you enjoy. Take, for instance, the breath. You can work with it. It’s like putty in your hands. You can breathe in long, breathe in short, breathe in the different parts of your body. There’s that great passage from the Desert Fathers, where one of the Desert Fathers goes to a more senior one and says, “Well, I’m doing all my practices the way I’m supposed to, my little chants or whatever they were doing in those days, and I meditate and get the mind still.” Is there anything further? And the second Desert Father steps out of his cave and points his hands up in the air and beams of light come out of his fingers. And he says, “How about making your body entirely light?” You can think of the breath that way. You breathe in and out your fingers, breathe in and out your toes. Get thoroughly absorbed in the breath. In that case, you don’t even have to think about concentration or stilling the mind. It’s just that the topic itself is so interesting. You find it captivating. And even though you’re thinking, even though you’re evaluating, these are actually parts of the concentration. The first jhana, after all, has a sense of fullness and ease that come together with the thinking and the evaluating. It comes from being secluded from outside thoughts, being secluded from unskillful thoughts, from sensual thoughts. In other words, you let go of your hunger for sensual things. And you realize that there’s a potential for well-being, a sense of fullness and refreshment, simply by sitting here breathing. And you can explore that. This is called meditating through directing the mind. Eventually, you get to the point where you’ve explored the breath, taken it as far as it can go. As John Fuehring used to say, you get to the point where it’s as full as it’s going to get. That’s when you stop the directed thought and the evaluation. You just kind of plunge into the breath. In John Fuehring’s analogy, let’s say there’s a water jar. There are these big water jars in Thailand where they take the runoff from roofs and they collect it. And there comes a point where you’ve put as much water into the jar as it’s going to hold. And no matter how much more water you put in, it can only hold that much. And it’s the same with a sense of fullness in the body. No matter how much more you analyze the breath, work with it, play with it. In the analogy of the jhanas, you kind of knead it through the body, k-n-e-a-d, like you would knead water into a ball of dough. There comes a point where you can only do it so much. That’s when you just stop the directed thought and evaluation and just plunge into the breath, become one with the breath. The quality in Pali is called ekadipavan, unification of awareness, where the breath and the mind become one. And they’re both expanded. Your sense of the breath fills the body, fills your range of awareness. The state of mind and concentration is also called maha-gatthang-jitthang, expanded awareness or expanded mind, enlarged mind, where instead of being just one point, your awareness is a broad field. But it’s centered. There is a center to all this. But from the center you have this expansive sense of enlarged awareness. How many times have you run across people who advocate that mindfulness is better than concentration, because concentration is only one point at which mindfulness is all-expansive? But that’s not how the Buddha describes it. It’s the concentration that is expanded. The mind settles down, and it is centered, fills the body, fills your awareness. And then you stay there. And from that point on, the more refined states of concentration are simply that, refinements on this stillness, this centeredness of mind. Because as you plunge into the breath and become one with it, the sense of fullness can get really intense, to the point where it’s almost too much. Sometimes it seems to throb, at which point it becomes a disturbance. So you tune in to a more refined level. Think of all those refined little atoms of breath. They’re filling the body. Instead of focusing on the sense of fullness, you just focus in on that more refined sense of ease, and that moves you into the third jhana. Whereas the texts say you sit there experiencing pleasure with the body, but the mind has a state of equanimity. And then finally, in the fourth jhana, everything grows still. The in-and-out breathing stops. And even though the body doesn’t have an oppressive sense of fullness at this point, it doesn’t feel like there’s anything lacking. Everything is just right. Everything is just balanced. It’s a state of purity, of mindfulness, and equanimity, which again shows that the Buddha didn’t distinguish between mindfulness and concentration. It’s here, in the fourth jhana, where the mindfulness finally gets still. It’s still and pure. So that’s one way of settling the mind down. It’s called directing the mind into concentration. The other way, not directing the mind, is when there’s something really disturbing outside. It might be a lot of noise, a lot of commotion, or a fear. It might be affairs in your life that impinge an awful lot on you, and you make up your mind that you’re not going to go there. These thoughts come up and you say, “Nope, nope, nope. The sounds are out there,” but you decide not to get involved with them. Jon Chah has that great line, “It’s not that the sounds are disturbing you. You’re out there disturbing the sounds.” Or another way of thinking of it is that you’re putting up a wall of resistance, and as long as there’s a wall of resistance, the sounds are going to bang against the wall. So think of the body and your awareness as this net or like a screen that the sounds can go right through. You don’t put up any resistance. They can go through. Your primary determination is that you’re simply not going to get involved with them. It’s the same when issues come up in day-to-day life. You’ve had difficulties with the people around you, or there have been events that really shake up your life. But you need some stillness. You need some time to gather your strength. So you consciously tell yourself, “Don’t go there.” What happens is you find yourself settling down with one of the call establishments of mindfulness, or the frames of reference, either the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, just the state of awareness sitting here. When you’re very consciously not going outside, what’s left is what’s inside, and you settle down here. And then once you’ve settled down, then you can get the mind into concentration as you’re able. Because, after all, as it says in the text, the topics of right concentration are the four frames of reference. Again, there’s no clear distinction between mindfulness practice and concentration practice. The two come together in this way. Now, there are times when it’s really difficult to get the mind into strong states of concentration when there’s a lot of disturbance outside. But at the very least, you can hang out here, simply in the sense of the body as it’s experienced right here, right now, or the feelings, or your mind states right here, right now. This is especially useful when the narrative of your life is getting difficult. This is either with just a lot of disturbances outside or difficult events. I’ve been struck recently by the number of people who’ve called up and said, “Somebody’s died. Good friend, relative.” It happens all the time, but sometimes it seems to happen more intensely in waves. We’re going through a wave right now. Or people call up with really intense illnesses. The question is, “How do I practice with all this going on?” And it’s at times like that you simply have to make up your mind that you’re not going to follow the narrative that talks about the illness, or talks about the death, or any of the other difficulties. You’re simply not going to go there. This is called training the mind through not directing, i.e., you consciously don’t let it go out there. When you don’t direct it out there, it comes back and settles down with the frames of reference. So there are lots of ways of getting the mind to settle down in right concentration. It varies with the person. It varies with the situation. As the Buddha pointed out in the Four Bases of Power, the Four Bases of Success, sometimes the concentration is going to be based on desire. Sometimes it’s based simply on persistence. You just really stick with it. Sometimes it’s based on being intent and trying to be really, really sensitive to what’s going on. Sometimes it’s based even on analysis, as you probe and experiment and find yourself simply getting absorbed in the breath. These things vary from person to person. Some people simply say, “I just want to get the mind concentrated,” and there it goes. They let go of outside things and the mind simply settles down. Other people find that that doesn’t work. You have to actively engage yourself in the object of meditation. Then you become absorbed in the object. Then your interest in things outside just gradually falls away into the background. It’s like an artist working on a mural. You get totally into the mural. You can paint for hours and the time flows very quickly, simply because you’re so absorbed. So keep in mind that the practice of concentration has these many avenues. There’s no one way to get the mind concentrated. Look at the way Jon Munn taught us to concentrate. There’s no forced, tie-forced method that applies to everybody. The basic teaching is that you get the mind to settle down with whatever object you find congenial, in whatever way you find congenial, either directing it to the object or not directing it to things outside. The important thing is that you have that sense of affinity for the object, an affinity for the way you might engage it, either simply drilling into the object or playing with it, analyzing it, getting absorbed in the understanding. So experiment to see which of these ways works for you, and keep in mind that sometimes things will change. So when your favorite way of dealing with the breath or your favorite way of dealing with settling down with whatever the object doesn’t work, remember that there are other ways of doing it, so that you have your full set of tools. Because once you’ve learned how to get the mind to settle down in one set of circumstances, the next step is learning how to do it wherever you go, in whatever place you may find yourself, in whatever condition the body may be in, whatever the circumstances of your life. The real skill in concentration lies in being able to maintain concentration, or attain concentration, and then maintain it no matter what’s going on. And it is possible to do that. It simply requires an understanding that there are many dimensions to concentration and many valid approaches. And as you understand it in this way, this understanding helps you to attain full mastery. As it stands to reason, the ways of the mind are many, the ways of your defilements are many. And so it’s good to have many approaches. So you can deal with whatever issues the defilements stir up, whatever the situation, inside or outside.

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