Concentration Through Pictures

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In the Buddha gives instructions for getting the mind in concentration. Some of those instructions are in the form of images, metal pictures you can keep in mind to help keep you on track. One of the most common ones is the one of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you hold it too tightly, the chick will die. If you hold it too loosely, the chick will fly away. When you’re focusing on the breath, you have to figure out how much pressure to put on it. If you put too much pressure on it, you’re going to kill it. In other words, the tightness of your pressure will make the mind all tight, your concentration will be tight, the breath gets tight, and it’s not a very pleasant place to be. You’ll quickly find yourself slipping away. So what’s the right amount of pressure right now so that the breath is comfortable and yet you’re not going to slip off of it? Here it’s best to remember that when you’re getting the mind into concentration, singleness of preoccupation basically means that you have just one object in mind, and then you’re allowed to fill your whole awareness. So instead of thinking of the mind as an object hand-holding things, think of it as a spot of light that radiates in all directions. And wherever it goes, it relaxes things. Move it around the body. You can start at the navel, you can start at the back of the neck, any place where you notice the breath energy. And you also notice that when you focus there, you can relax things. You want that to be your basic approach. So start with a place that you can relax, just by staying there, focusing there. Once that spot is relaxed, move around to another spot. This moves into another image the Buddha gives us of a bathman. Back in those days they didn’t have soap, they had bath powder, which you would mix with water until it was kind of like a dough, and then you would scrub your body with that and the bathman has to work the water into the bath powder the same way as when you’re making bread. You have to knead water into the flour, making the dough, so that all parts of the dough, the mass that you’ve got there, are moistened. There’s no excess water dripping out, and there’s no spots that are dry. So you move the breath energy around, you move your focal point around, to try to work that sense of ease into the body. When you get into the body like this, you find there are different kinds of blockages you’re going to run into. Some of them are pains. Some of them are parts of the body that don’t seem to be there. You can feel your hands and you can feel your shoulders, but for some reason your arms are gone. Or say the area maybe in the right side of your torso is gone. You just gently work around that. Focus first on what you can sense. You might find that the area between, say, your hands and your shoulders has just gotten squeezed out. There’s a very little bit of sensation there. But work with that little bit first. Look at it, see what its shape is, and then just think of focusing your awareness there and allowing whatever’s there to relax. This way you can knead the relaxation through the body. Until everything feels saturated, everything feels at ease. In the beginning, you may not be able to get every part relaxed this way, but do what you can. That’s for the things that seem to be resistant. Sometimes the resistance is physical, sometimes it’s mental. Parts of your awareness are tied up with different parts of your body. Be part of your awareness, part of your inner committee that’s been feeling mistreated and doesn’t want to have anybody move in on it, because it’s seen you push it around in the past and it’s just expecting to be pushed around some more. So you’ve got to show it that you’re approaching it in a new way. And it’ll take a while to open up. But don’t push it. Just keep moving around it and then move on. It’s like dealing with a wild animal. You don’t stare straight at the wild animal. The wild animal will run away, feel threatened. You look away, but you have it in the corner of your eye. And as you show yourself and show the different parts of the mind that you are learning a new way of approaching the body, a new way of getting into the body, there will come times when it begins to open up. And as you work through the body in this way, there comes a point where you’ve got it as saturated with a sense of ease as you can. Then you just sit in the midst of that ease. And because things have opened up a little bit, there’ll be a sense of flow. The blood is flowing more easily. The Buddha’s image here is of a spring feeding a lake. The rain keeps coming time and again so that the spring is well fed. And it just keeps welling up, welling up, welling up in the lake. And you just stay there. At this point, you don’t have to move around a lot. Focus your awareness in one point and think of your awareness spreading from there to fill the whole body all at once. And let the energy flow. And as long as the energy feels good, allow it to flow. You don’t have to focus on the energy. Focus on the breath. Because your focus on the breath is what gives rise to the sense of well-being, gives rise to that sense of relaxation, which allows things to flow. So keep causes and effects in mind. And the cause here, as John Lee says, starts out with what’s called directed thought and evaluation, and then it just becomes singleness. You’re focused in one spot, but your awareness spreads from that spot to fill the whole body. The whole body is, to whatever extent necessary, is possible right now. We’ll be breathing together. Try to make sure that the breath energy is coordinated. In other words, when you’re breathing in in the upper torso, you’re also breathing in down in your legs, in your arms, in your hands. Everything is coordinated in this way. There’s a sense of ease. After all, the sense of ease gets stronger than the sense of flow. So you let go of the sense of flow because the ease is more refined. Here are the images of lotuses in a lake of water, where the water is still. Some of the lotuses haven’t emerged from the water, and they’re just sitting there in the still water, saturated with moisture from their roots up to the tip of the flower. You’ll find that as the mind begins to settle in, the need for heavy breathing, the need for pronounced breathing, gets less and less. So the breath coming in and going out is a lot more subtle. The large parts of the body feel still, still with a sense of being nourished, still with a sense of fullness and ease. But there’s no need to push things around. Ultimately, the images of someone sitting in a lake covered with a white cloth from head to toe. In other words, at that point, the breath totally stops. There’s no sense of in, there’s no sense of out. It’s just your awareness right here. It is still. The breath energy is still. Everything feels connected. It’s still not because you’re suppressing it. It’s still because all the breath channels in the body have connected. So you get there by thinking of where things are not connected. You go back and do a little more work to connect things up more and more and more. So if there’s a sense of lack of breath energy in one part of the body, you can think of it moving from another part that’s got an excess. And things will begin to balance out, balance out, balance out, and then you’re just really still right there. Try to maintain that stillness. It’s a skill. That’s the whole path. The Dhamma is not for spectators. The Dhamma is for artisans, craftsmen. You’re a craftsman of the breath. You’re a craftsman of concentration. The emphasis in all the path is to focus on what you’re doing. I’ve been reading some about romantic ideas of religion, which have had a huge impact on the way the Dhamma is being taught in the West. One of the issues in romantic religion is that we’re concerned about our relationship to the world. But the Buddha never taught that way. He said, “If you start thinking about who you are in the world, that’s kind of becoming, and that’s going to lead to suffering.” What he has you focus on is what you’re doing. What are you doing right now? What are the results right now? That kind of focus can get you someplace. And the more skillful you are in your actions, the more you learn to be a skilled craftsman in your actions, the more you’re going to see. This is why John Lee has so many images of learning how to sew, learning how to make a basket, learning how to cook, learning how to make tiles, learning how to weave. You’re learning how to make things out of silver. You learn from the object you’re working with, and the mind develops certain qualities. If you have a manual skill, think of the qualities that you developed in order to develop that skill. So you had the desire to do it, but at the same time you didn’t let the desire get in the way. And your concern about who you are or what you are gets in the way of actually perfecting the skill. But you learn how to put that question of who you are aside and learn to look at, “Well, what am I doing?” That’s when you’ve developed the frame of mind that’s useful for the practice. Bring that to your breath. Bring that to your concentration. And you find that you get more and more skilled at this. In the beginning, you’re just simply following the instructions. But after a while, it becomes yours. It’s your breath. It’s your concentration. You’re a way of relating to these things, adjusting these things. And you find that you start developing your own images—what the mind is doing when it settles in, what the mind is doing when it’s staying settled. So start with the Buddha’s images. See how they help. And as you work with them, you begin to find that you have your own sense of what’s going on. Take that as your guide. Because as long as it works, it’s Dhamma.

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