A Recipe for Concentration

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Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process, where the body seems especially sensitive to the breath. Focus your attention there. If the long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change the rhythm. If you’re feeling tired, try to breathe in a way that’s more energizing. If you’re feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that’s relaxing. In other words, use the breath in order to bring the body into balance. We’re trying to bring the mind to a state of oneness here, having one object and having that one object fill its awareness. But the first task is simply to get it to stay. One of the ways you can do that is to experiment with the breath for a bit. Otherwise, it’s just in-out, in-out, and then the mind goes out and doesn’t come back. But if you realize that the breath can have different effects on the body depending on how you breathe, you can explore it and see what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now. Whatever you need right now. Because an important principle in concentration is that you have a sense of ease. You have to enjoy doing the concentration, gain some pleasure, gain some satisfaction out of it. So you have to design the topic that you’re going to stay with. The breath is good because you can design it in many ways. You’ll notice that when you’re breathing, it’s not just a physical process. There’s an element of intention that goes into it. Notice also the image you’re holding in your mind, which should be more or less clear as to what’s happening with the breath. When the breath comes in, where does it come in? Where do you think happens to the breath once it gets into the body? Where does it go? If you’re not sure about what mental image you’re holding in mind, try a few different ones. Think of the breath coming into the lungs, but also think of the breath energy as energy, not just the air, but also the energy that allows the breath to come in and go out. And that can do lots of different things in the body. When you breathe in, sometimes there’s a sense that the energy is coming up into the head. Other times it’s going down into the body. You can think of it entering the body in any spot. Think of it coming in at the back of the skull, right at the base of the skull, the back of the neck, and then going down the spine. See what that does. You can think of it coming in right between the eyes, going down into your intestines. Think of it coming in right at the middle of the chest, going down through the liver, the stomach, down to the tailbone. Think of it spreading out through your arms on the legs. The breath can go lots of different directions, this energy. And the image you hold in mind will have an impact on it. Sometimes there’ll be times when you can’t change the breath energy, simply by thinking about it. Well, don’t try to put any force on it. Just see if you can change the image in your mind. And hold on to that image for a bit and see what it does. So what you’ve got here are the three main factors that get the mind into concentration. You’re directing your thoughts to the breath, and then you’re evaluating it to see what kind of breathing is best for the mind, what kind of breathing is best for the body. You can also evaluate how much pressure you want to put on things. If the pressure of your concentration is too weak, the mind will float away. If it’s too strong, it starts getting constricting in different parts of the body. You want the breath to have a sense of freedom. When it flows in, you don’t control it too much. The only control you exert is by means of the different images you hold in mind. Then by posing questions, this is also an aspect of evaluation. What kind of breathing would feel good now? When there’s a sense of balance, how do you maintain it? When it wanders off, how do you bring it back? When it wanders off again, how do you bring it back again? Each time you bring it back, actually, it’s not that difficult to bring it back. All you have to do is just drop the thought, and you’ll be back at the breath. The trick is in catching yourself before the thought gets too involved and destroys your concentration. You’re pulling away at the edge of your awareness. But as long as you don’t pay them any attention, that’s okay. You’re staking out a little bit of territory in here that’s going to be your territory. Maybe you can’t get the whole body quite yet, or the whole mind quite yet, but at least you’ve got part of it. It’s the same principle with the practice in general. If we had to wait until everything in the world is perfect before we trained our minds, we’d die first. So you stake out a little territory and say, “I’m going to be in control of this.” And whatever you can’t control, keep it out at the edges. And then gradually, as your sense of control gets more skillful, and it doesn’t feel like you’re clamping down on things, but there’s a sense that you are doing what you want to do, then the extent of your awareness that’s with the breath will begin to expand. That’s when you get the third factor of concentration, which is singleness and preoccupation. Your mind just stays with the one object. And there’s a sense that the breath, which is your one object, fills the whole body. Then the next step is to learn how to maintain that. As you do, the results will come. A sense of ease. First you’ll feel energized, and then things will calm down and you’ll feel a sense of ease. Then try to maintain that state in a state of balance. You don’t have to push on to the next moment. You don’t have to think about the last moment. Just be here with the present moment. Because what you’re doing is seeing how you put together your awareness of the present. These are the elements that go into it. The way you breathe, the perceptions you hold in mind, the feelings that result, say, from the breath or the perceptions, and the way you think about these things. All these together fashion the present moment. So try to fashion it well. Because as you fashion it well, then you can look at the other ways you’ve fashioned your present moment at other times, and you can see them a lot more clearly. This is the whole purpose of the meditation, to see these activities of the mind clearly. So you can understand, as the Buddha said, the reason we suffer is not so much from things outside, but it’s from how our own minds filter and process what’s coming in from outside. The thoughts we have, the perceptions we have, even the way we breathe can make us suffer if we do it in ignorance. So here we’re trying to bring some knowledge to all these processes. Because when you do them with knowledge, you’re going to cause yourself a lot of suffering. In fact, it forms a way to the end of suffering, the more knowledge you can bring to what you’re doing right now. And part of that knowledge is what you may learn in the books. But the most important part is just your awareness of what’s happening. You can read all kinds of books for years and years and years and not understand anything about your mind. Unless you settle down, just try to look at it and look at it as it’s trying to settle down. At this point, you don’t have to worry too much about the different processes going on. Just learn how to put them together in a way that gives the mind a sense of being at home here in the present moment, with the breath, right here, right now. And then work on the skills that are needed to keep it here. After all, the mind will say, “Well, that was nice. What’s next?” You say, “This is what’s next.” You want to turn this into a real skill. That’s one of the first things you have to fend off, are the thoughts that come and say, “Well, enough of that.” And you say, “Nope, not yet. I have plenty of time to think after the hour’s done.” But you’ve got an hour right now where you have no other responsibilities and you can focus directly on the mind, which is the big issue in life, what the mind is doing. No one else can do this for you, and if you don’t do it now, when is it going to get done? And if it doesn’t get done, then you just keep on creating more suffering for yourself. And as you do that, the suffering starts to spill out on other people. You see this most clearly with people who lose control, especially toward the end of life, when pain gets great, when their regrets get great. It becomes a huge burden on the hearts of the people around them, especially if they’ve learned how to train their minds. They’re not suffering, and the people around them don’t suffer either. So take advantage of this hour to see what you’re doing. And now you do it. And try to learn how to do it well and put it into practice. You have to put together a state of concentration. It’s like trying to learn about eggs. You don’t learn about an egg just by looking at it. You learn a little bit, but not much. But if you take it to cook and try to make different dishes out of it, you find that you learn a lot more about eggs. And the knowledge is really useful. The better you become as a cook, the more you understand about eggs and the more pleasure you get out of them. And the mind in the present moment. You’re putting together a good dish for the mind right here. Taste it and see if you like it. If you don’t like it, well, you can change the ingredients. You can change the way you breathe. You can change the way you focus. You can change the image you have in the mind of the breath and of the mind and its relationship to the body and the breath. So adjust the recipe until you get what you like. Because this is good food for the mind. If the mind doesn’t have good food inside, it’s going to go out and sneak a few things out of the garbage, sneak a few things out of somebody else’s plate. But if it does have this good food inside, then it can go wherever it wants, not be a burden on anybody, and not feel any lack. Because the best food for the mind comes from within. And if you know how to fix it, you never have to be hungry.

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