

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 the nostrils. You can also focus on the movement of the body that brings the air in and lets it go out. And 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 have trouble staying with the breath, you can use a meditation word to go along with it. Think of *buddho*: *bud-* with the in breath, *dho* with the out. It means "awake," which is one of the qualities you're trying to develop.

You want to 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's 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, 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 throughout whichever parts of the body need energy right now. Your responsibility is just 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 doesn't develop. At the same time, if you're too lackadaisical, ease won't develop, either. If there's a little bit of ease, the mind just might ride off with it, leaving the breath and ending up who knows where. So you want to bring the proper attitude.

Part of that is the attitude of goodwill that we chanted just now: the desire for happiness, for true happiness that's does have to depend on things outside. And because it's a happiness that doesn't depend on things outside, 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.

The Buddha 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 and inspiration to the mind. You might want to think of all the people who have been good to you through your life. An attitude of gratitude can often give rise to a sense of ease and well-being. Then notice that the breath changes when you're thinking thoughts that are good like this. Then 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 the chant said just now, respect for concentration. Why? Well, because concentration takes work. We're not here simply blissing out, and 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. They'll pull you wherever they want to take you.

That's one of our problems: We respect our thoughts more than we respect concentration. So you've got to develop the right attitude toward concentration, remembering that 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. Remind yourself that when you get the mind to 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. But when they sober up again, they look at the insights, they realize there's nothing there, and so they throw them away.

At the moment, your powers of judgment are impaired, and even the craziest things can seem profound. So remember that as long as the mind isn't quiet, you're not in the best position to judge your thoughts. Put them aside for the time being and keep coming back to the breath.

This may seem to go against the grain, but again, concentration is work. And as with any job, you start out not at the top of the corporation, but basically doing the grunt work. You don't seem to be paid very well, the effort doesn't seem worth it, but if you can 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 or letters every day and you get

a huge salary, much more than you got when you were working 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 that it doesn't keep running off after its thoughts. 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, allows the mind to relax, to 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. You realize when you're breathing that it'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 easier; in other places it feels forced. Learn how to let 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?

Actually, the breath energy can come in and out of the body in any place. So if you find 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 that the breath is 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. Anyplace 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 as just waiting to come in 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 that 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, then 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 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.

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's untrained goes out and grabs hold of fire and brings it back in. It's like a little child who doesn't know anything. It sees something bright and red and interesting, and goes to try to catch it. But it's fire. It burns. And the mind is like this. There are always those flickering things that appear in the mind like images on a movie screen. We try to figure out: What is that image? It's like driving past a drive-in movie theater. You see something flickering on the screen, you turn around, you look at the screen, and you drive off the road. It happens an awful lot.

You have to train the mind so that it realizes that not every flickering is a good place to go. And with even the thoughts seem more substantial, dealing with issues that you've really got to face in life, it's not the case that you have to take them on all the time. Have a sense of time and place in your thinking, because some things, if you think about them hour after hour after hour, just wear the mind out, and nothing gets resolved. So you need concentration as a place where you can pull back and give the mind a chance to rest. Then it can get 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 is not necessarily one of physical strain, 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, in what ways the breath can be comfortable and nourishing.

When you have this attitude, then the technique will give results.