

Concentration (Week 1 - Part 2)

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So then sitting upright in a meditative posture, gently closing your eyes in, feeling your body. If there is a vibration in your body, feel the vibration. Feel your body in order to be concentrated or composed. It helps to feel rooted in this place where you are sitting. So feel yourself here on a chair with your feet firmly planted on the ground, on the floor, solid base. Since concentration has a lot to do with softening or relaxing, letting go, see if you can let yourself be at ease even just a teeny bit, moving yourself, being at ease with yourself as you are here, at ease with what is.

Even if it's uneasy here at this time and place, it's where you find your lived experience, what it's like to be alive, a living human being. That experience, as only happens in the present, and for you, it's happening now through your body, heart, and mind. When a person is getting ready to do concentration in meditation, it can be very helpful to have a way of setting yourself up or preparing yourself for and of having a transition, getting ready for it. And one way I recall suggest is to go through a seven point relaxation exercise, and that is to systematically relax seven different parts of your body. So start by taking a few, taking a little bit longer and deeper breath, and then exhaling, relaxing a comfortable but fuller breath than usual. And then bring your attention doing that, keeping that breath going.

Deeper breath, fuller breath. And then bring your attention to your head, your face, feeling what's there, especially feeling any tension that might be there. And then, as you exhale, relax the head, the face. Still breathing deeply, bring your attention to your shoulders, shoulder blades area, taking it, breathing into that part of your body. And then, as you exhale, let your shoulder area relax, soften, even if just a teeny bit. Continuing to breathe more deeply than usual, feel the air of your solaris and diaphragm, front rib cage, and then as you exhale, let the whole area soften, relax.

And then feeling your arms and your hands, and as you exhale, let them soften as if the flesh and the muscles can relax away from the ones in the area of your belly, thighs, abdomen, abdominal cavity. As you exhale, let that relax, soften. And then feeling your legs and feet. As you exhale, let it relax and soften. Relaxing the tops of your thighs, the calves. And then the final seventh point is to relax, is to feel the whole body, the global awareness of the body, whatever way that's easy, and then as you exhale, soften it to the degree you can.

There's not to get rid of all the tension that's there, but just a little softening, letting go of how you brace yourself, and then let your breathing return to normal. Let your breathing be at ease. And in developing concentration on the breath, remember, we're trying to compose ourselves on the breath, on the experience of breathing. So you might go through your body and see what part of your body where you feel the breathing would be. It may be a nice place to compose yourself, to settle yourself, relax into. Or it's easy to be with the experience of breathing.

Or some people, it might be the abdomen moving, the belly going in and out, or up and down. Some people, it might be the diaphragm. For some people, it's the chest, centre of the chest, or the sides of the chest moving. Some people, it's feeling the sensation of air going in through the nostrils, or the air against the back of the throat. Some people, it's kind of a whole sense of the whole breath body. Spend all the time becoming familiar with how your body experiences breathing, how your body feels the breathing process, to see if there's some place, some center of gravity, some place where it may be easiest to compose yourself, settle yourself around the breathing.

If you can't decide, then just do the matter. Then choose whatever, and then see if you can begin to compose yourself, your being, on that breathing with the breath, like the breath is at the centre, and everything else kind of settles around it. Don't expect you can do it well, just a little bit, just a little bit of settling and composing on the breath. And then see if you can take your attention and really rest it in experience of breathing, in that place where you feel the breath, keeping attention alert there, present, restful, and awake to experience of breathing. And if there are thoughts or ideas or anything that is pulling your attention away, let go of it, saying, No, thank you, not now. Let go of it.

So you can enter into the world of breathing, so you can feel how the experience of breathing in is different in experience of breathing out, and then to help you stay present for the breath, one breath after the other. Each time you exhale, give that exhale a count, counting one to ten. The first exhale gets one, the second two, the third three. And when you get to the tenth breath, starting in at one again. If you lose count, don't worry about it. Without any judgment

or commentary, it's very simply, matter of factly, begin again at one, soft, gentle counting that encourages, encourages you to hang in there with one breath after the other.

Some people like to count both the in breath and out breath, one to ten, letting the voice that's counting be soft and relaxed. A whisper of reminder: Stay here, stay here, stay with the breath. If anything takes you away from the breathing, you can let go of it. If you can't let go of it, then perhaps by accepting it, it's content to be in the best air in the background. And you keep the breath in the foreground, you don't either fight anything or try to push something away. If it doesn't, you can't let go of it, but perhaps it'll just go to the background, keeping the breath in the foreground.

Now open up. Regena. Sit there too much. Two more minutes. Can you turn yourself over as fully as you can for two minutes to your breathing? Is it? This is the only thing that's important, only thing you need to do. Just breathing. And then to end the sitting, take a few long, slow, deep breaths. Feel your body, and then take a minute here to review what that sitting was like for yourself, without judgment or criticism, but just very matter of fact.

Like a reporter or a naturalist, what happened to you at present were you? How well could you be concentrated over some of things that took you away? And how easy was it? Let go of the things that took you away, reviewing a bird's eye picture of what happened, and then you can open your eyes. There are many different objects a person can use to develop concentration. In our tradition, the breath is very common. Another common one is using what's called loving kindness meditation, and sometimes there are other things people use. But for this class, I will use the breath. There's a lot of benefits in the breath, and it can go very far. With the breath, the counting can be very helpful.

Some people who never counted might think it's a little bit hard or awkward to do at first, but if you do it for a while, you get used to it. Like riding a bicycle, after a while it comes easy, and counting can be very helpful, kind of keep you on track. And even encouragement gets a kind of keep little the track of what's going on in order to know what the next count is and keep you present. It's also a good indication of how concentrated you really are. I think that it's very easy to be fooled and think you're more calm and concentrated than you actually are, and you're kind of sitting there. Sometimes people meditating for a long time, like, I've had this where I sit there, and I actually think things are pretty good here. I'm pretty concentrated and pretty calm, pretty good. And then I'll do something like count, and I realize, you know, I can hardly get beyond three, and I don't think I have a lot of strength in the concentration. And so then I'll work on strengthening the concentration until it kind of gets up, be stronger also. The counting sometimes can keep you a little more alert.

Sometimes the concentration practice can be you get too calm when you do concentration practice, get too sleepy. But to count, the counting can keep you from drifting or getting too tired. The important thing with counting is to be on guard that the counting doesn't become mechanical or automatic too much. Try to keep it living or organic or somehow alive. It's possible to get into a mechanic groove, just counting, and your mind is in tahiti, you know. You're counting. You feel like you're doing it, but really your mind is somewhere else. So you've kind of got mechanical and keep it living and loving. Connection there is, I think it's useful when a person is trying to develop concentration practice to do it with a lot of respect. And when you do some with respect, you don't do it kind of arrogantly.

You don't do it with demanding it. Or you kind of respect both the practice itself and also how difficult it is to get concentrated so that you're not kind of beating yourself up for how hard it is. There are some people who never seem to get concentrated meditation, but they still get a lot of benefit from it. And trying to get concentrated on, even though you don't get concentrated, it tends to kind of dislodge or reveal a lot of the inner psychic forces that are operating, and you can see much more clearly. All this is what's going on. This is what I tend to think about. This is my concern. These are my emotions and feelings. This is what you know. You see a lot by the attempt because you're trying to, and you might go somewhere else.

You can see that. And some people get a lot of benefit from that. So I would encourage you not to be upset or concerned if you don't at first succeed, just it's well worth making the effort of making the effort. I think it's also useful to think that concentration practice is helped a lot by preparing yourself for the concentration session. So if you had a busy day and you're running around and just plump yourself down to meditate and get concentrated, you know it's going to take you, you can spend a good amount of time just kind of cooling out from the day before you can socially start using your mind to get concentrated. I know that's a—there was a part of time where I worked at a restaurant, very fast, difficult work, rather loud. I enjoyed it, but it was kind of—and I'd go sit in the late afternoon when I came home, and I'd sit for forty minutes. And the first twenty minutes was just kind of cleansing the body and the mind, the tiredness, the exhaustion, the business of all that. I'd begun nodding off and conscious, and after twenty minutes, the cleansing aspect, the just kind of relaxing aspect that happened, and then last twenty minutes, like you get concentrated. So it's good to be prepared.

So one thing you might think of doing before you do your forty five minutes is to sit for five minutes and look out the window, just kind of and have some tea or go for a walk around the

block, or you do take a nice shower and relax. You don't kind of go for a run or do something kind of that kind of settles you and calms you down. So you ought not, as to you're not asking the meditation to kind of quiet, to relax the everyday kind of excited state you might be in. So you kind of do a little bit, kind it might be more efficient to do it kind of sitting, having tea for love, to sit quietly and not do a lot, and then go and sit something. You have to decide for yourself which is what it's best. It helps if you have practised moderation in food and drink. So don't drink a lot or don't eat a lot. Especially eating, it's best to kind of have a light stomach. So don't have a big dinner and then sit down to your concentration practice or big lunch. If you have to meditate after a meal, then eat really lightly, you know.

So you be careful that your energy and your physiological state is one that's supportive of the practice of waking up and being concentrated. It's said it's best not to sleep too little or too much if you only develop concentration. So it's a kind of epidemic in our society to get too little sleep. It's said Americans are a sleep deprived culture. Some people need sleep more than they need to meditate. But if you get too little sleep, you know? You're nodding off all the time, and you're not going to have a very good mind, crisp mind that can actually apply yourself. So during these five weeks of this class, if you're one of the people who don't get enough sleep, maybe you could try to sleep a little more, you know, go to bed earlier, watch less television, whatever it takes. I realize this class has a letter required of you, but hope it's not too onerous to get more sleep. But also you don't want to sleep too much. Also, that's also a hindrance to getting concentrated, because then the mind becomes slothful and dull.

It's helpful if you can practise contentment. And now, that's a tall order. Some people say, What do you mean contentment? The reason I'm practising meditation is so I can learn how to be content. You tell me how to get content before I can meditate, and that doesn't make any sense. But do what you can. See if you can practise a little bit of contentment. Be content with your life or with things as they are. It's good to push that edge of contentment. One way to do it is feel more grateful for things.

So if you have the energy and time inclination to cultivate a little more contentment, try to at least try to avoid discontentment. If you notice that a certain activity makes you really discontent, maybe don't do that. Do that after you meditate, before, like a few. Some people like me now look at the stock market, you know? And don't do that just before you meditate. Even if the goods good news, it's not good. It's not good for meditation. And as I said earlier, when you develop in concentration, there is such a thing as distractions. So to the best of your ability, you want to kind of create conditions around you when you're not less likely to

be distracted. And once you've created those conditions, the best you can, then just work with whatever arises.

If some noise comes or something happens, just work with that and try to keep you in practice. Don't set up some kind of resistance to what's happening, you know. But initially try to set up the right conditions. And one of the conditions that the classic texts talk about is meditate in a clean, orderly environment. In addition, especially if you are an aversive type—they say aversive personality—but it's probably good for anybody, you really want to get into this, you know, wear clean, orderly clothes, put on clean clothes, fresh clothes when you sit down to meditate. So all these things can help along. It's helpful. Concentration develops through repetition of practice over and over again. It's helpful if you get a sense of repetition of rhythm when you do the practice, so if you can meditate the same time every day, so you have a sense of that rhythm and so your body and physiology get used to it and know it's coming. So it's helpful to meditate in the same place if you can.

So again, so you have associations and meditation to that place as you come back there, and that's the place you do it. Some people who are a little more maybe religiously inclined or devotionally inclined find it helpful, normal. But a ritual before sitting down to meditate, chanting the *mettā sutta*, or bowing to a statue of the Buddha, or, you know, some kind of ritual, but sometimes a ritual kind of settles things and clears things out, can help. So in this first week of practice, of an hour forty five minutes of working with the breath, in meditation counting the breath, staying with it. Do the practice. I'd encourage you not to try for results. Don't look. Don't look for. Don't measure. So, am I doing? Have I done it yet? Getting concentrated. May do your best, but don't worry. But don't think about results. Don't be. Don't try to. Don't be concerned about it. If you get concentrated, great. But if you don't get concentrated, that's not the point for the first week. Okay, so you're freed. Results. Isn't that great?

And what I do, what I'd like you to do, is as you try to stay focused on the breath, try to get concentrated. And also, as you're memorizing the *Mettā Sutta*, I would like you to, as you're doing that, to study how you're using your mind. What is it you're doing? What is it like to use the mind to try to apply the mind to the breath, to rest the mind there, to engage the mind with the breath? With that movement of engagement, of resting, of placing the mind in which I'd like to turn the mind and put it there. You have to do it many times to get a sense what that's like. What's it like to try to keep it there? What happens in the mind when you get pulled away from the breath? What's that like? And what do you do to that? What do you do when you notice you get pulled away? What are your habitual things you do? You judge that.

You get upset. You get criticised. You say, Oh, great. This is fantastic. I don't like this breath stuff, and now I can think about tahiti. It's much nicer. What do you do?

And then start exercising your capacity for letting go, and see if you can learn how to let go in a way that is soft, gentle, not averse to not trying to push something away. And try to let go in such a way that it's convincing, like you really, you know, really understand. Oh yes, I'll take it. I'll do this later. Thank you, ladies. Thank you. I'm glad you're there, thought, but we'll take care of this. We'll think about this later or not now, thank you, something that's kind of respectful. So see if you can kind of exercise and learn what it's like to let go. So what's the effort required to rest and stay with the breath, and what's the effort required to let go? So you're studying that. You get in to know it in doing the work. So it's learning something how your mind works. You are to do this first week not necessarily get the results of getting concentrated. If you get concentrated to some degree, take that as a nice byproduct under some expense.

So the homework, as I said, is to memorize the *Mettā Sutta*. Some people don't have very strong ability to memorize. Don't feel bad about how well or poorly you can memorize. Just do the best you can and be content with how well you can do it. If between now and next week, if you sincerely try and all you can manage to do is one line or one word, the title is you. The idea is to try, you know. It's not a loophole out, you know. It's well worth the effort of memorizing one line if that's all you can do. Whatever you can do if you make the effort is sufficient to get benefit. So don't hold up the standard, Oh, I didn't get all the way through the whole thing. Some of you will get through the whole thing in a week. Some you'll get through the first two lines. The point is to memorize what you can and learn how to use your mind. Learn how you use your mind. What's required of your mind to hold something in your mind and to bring it back up again so you can recall it, make sense. And now I'm counting on some of you memorizing it, the whole thing by next week, so you can recite it in here for us. That would be very nice to have some things, very helpful, inspiring to have someone recite it from memory. It can encourage everybody else, shows it's possible. It's like the four minute mile. Well, they can do it. I think I can do it. to them.

And the last thing then I'll say is that there are a lot of benefits from concentration, and I won't go into all of it now, maybe as me more for next week. It can be very healing for health purposes, for psychological purposes. It can generate a lot of happiness, glad feelings of well being. It's not uncommon for people who can get concentrated well, really well, pretty well, to say that the ecstasy or the joy or the rapture of concentration in meditation is so experientially greater than the pleasure of sexual organism. What to think of that has a character?

So that's one benefit, the one of the one of the benefits of concentration practice is it helps a person live happily here and now. So that would be great. So I hope that this so far has been useful. All this lot of talking, lot of ideas. It's not that important you took it all in, but it's important you have just enough for the instructions to know what to do during the week.

So memorize a sutta. Sit for forty five minutes a day and then, if you want to get extra credit for this course, what? Oh, I don't give grades. Grades don't make any sense. But you can get extra credit, extra merit. And that is, keep a journal. At the end of your sitting, spend a little bit of time reflecting what happened. But spend the time acknowledging what happened that sitting. Not to criticise or be upset by what happened, but just kind of very neutrally kind of acknowledge what happened. You'll actually become more familiar quicker about the whole process of how the mind works, what happens in meditation.

You'll learn, you'll be more honest by what's happening, and will take that into account almost automatically the next time you go and sit. It's like you're building. You have a reservoir of knowledge and experience that you're building on. If you take, you know. That's greater if then if you didn't reflect on it, didn't review it. And one of the ways to review is to write a little journal. Write down what that sitting was like. And then as the weeks, these five weeks call goes along, you might go back and review it and see how things are changing over time. Or if there's frequent patterns, you might not notice you have patterns in your practice unless you have that record of how it went. So I wonder how many of you will come back next week. I papers pipes anyway. I thank you very much. Anyway, I thank you very much.