

## Concentration (Week 2 - Part 2)

**Gil Fronsdal**

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If you like to stand for a minute and stretch, they will do us sitting. There is a psychology professor at UC Berkeley by the name of Eleanor Rouch. She wrote this once some years ago. I was questioned by a visiting Tibetan monk who gave me a piercing look. He said, "And do you think that's ethical?" So yes, partly what we're doing here is studying and learning about the mind.

If you don't get concentrated, maybe instead you'll learn a lot about how your mind works. Engaging, arousing energy is important, and relaxing is important. Both are needed in practice—not just one, but both. Those qualities should be first in some way, established in your posture and your body. So won't you start by making your body, your posture, alert, so it expresses a sense of alertness? Another way of saying it is a posture that expresses a degree of intentness, like your intent.

My son now is in middle league, and he's learning the ready position. A coach is always in a ready position out there, you know, and then they get into their intent. They're ready, you know? So you can get a posture that kind of expresses—if someone looked at you from outside—"Oh, that person's kind of intent," not just like a couch potato kind of intent. One way to develop that sense of alertness is to have your attention slowly go up your spine, so your spine is a little bit more upright than maybe you normally have it. Gently close your eyes.

Part of this intentness is to feel a solid base, a solid look, a rootedness, whether your feet are solidly on the floor—if you like, rooted in the ground there—or your butt or your thighs are rooted in the chair or the cushion. You feel the support. Here you are. This is the place—you're here. You're gripped, you're rooted. Okay, be established.

So, OK, with no apology, with no apology for who you are here. You are upright, alert. Maybe be dignified. And then, keeping your spine alert, upright, and perhaps some inner sense of alertness or uprightness, take a few long, slow, deep breaths and, as you exhale, relax as much as you can around that core of uprightness. Uprightness doesn't go away, but around it, it's like things hanging from it and letting go. The shoulders can hang, the arms can feel they're hanging, the belly can soften, hang forward, the muscles and flesh of your face can relax and fall away from the bones of your skull as you take a deep breath and let go on the exhale.

Perhaps you can have a feeling of the muscles and skin of your body falling away from your bones, relaxing. Taking a relaxed, deep, full breath, as you exhale, relax the thinking mind. A thinking brain is—the brain is a muscle. Let it relax, let go, and then let your breath return to normal in whatever way is accessible to you. See if you can have a full-bodied awareness, a global awareness of your body. We're condensing, concentrating our focus, our attention away from future and past concerns and things, away from us, and letting the concentration, our life attention, enter into and get focused on a full body awareness.

Feeling, in a sense, the three-dimensional aspects of being in a body: front and back of the body, the sides, the lower body, the upper half of the body, and then within the body as part of the body. Start becoming familiar with how the body experiences the breathing, and start noticing your breathing. Try to develop a little more heightened sensitivity to the bodily experience of breathing, and then begin experimenting or playing around a little bit with your breathing to see if you can adjust your breathing pattern where you breathe maybe a little bit more comfortably or pleasantly or enjoyably—not so still, so it remains a natural breath. Maybe there's a simple way of letting go more as you breathe out, or a simple way of relaxing as you breathe in so you breathe in more fully, or by shifting your attention into the belly and relaxing it there, or shifting it to the middle of the chest. Or maybe it's more enjoyable to feel a letting go into stillness at the end of the out-breath. Maybe it's more enjoyable to breathe long breaths.

Or maybe it's the opposite: to shorten it up a little bit, play around a little bit. Don't manipulate the breath so much that it becomes tiring or strained, but just a teeny bit, many small shifts. Or maybe you can't make the breath any more pleasant than it already is. Or maybe you simply notice that a certain area of your body is where breathing feels more comfortable and pleasant than other places. Feeling a place in the body that feels enjoyable to experience the breath doesn't have to be dramatic enjoyment—just be a little hint. Then connecting to the breath.

And once you're engaged with the breath, the attention is there. Then arouse that part of the mind that needs to function so you can hang with the breath, hang in there with it, sustain the attention, one breath into the next, breath into the next. And without straining or pushing or demanding, expecting, can there be a gentle, appropriate desire and intentness? A sense of intentness and desire to get concentrated, to be concentrated. Stay with a breath, letting go of everything else, all other thoughts. If something doesn't interfere with your concentration on the breath, if some thoughts interfere, some feelings or some mood or some sensations in the body that are not interfering, you can just leave them in the background, in the foreground.

Be interested in the breath, engaged in the breath, intent on the breath. Arouse a sense of persistence, both of coming back over and over again when you get away from it, but also of persistence when you are there to maintain the continuity. If it's helpful, and very quietly, soft whisper in the mind, count the breaths. We often say count to ten, but if you prefer, it can be a smaller number. You count up to after five or seven, eight. And when you get to ten or get to your number, then start over again, and use the counting as a little encouragement for you to hang in there, taking on each breath.

And as you're staying with the breath, kind of in the corner of your eyes and the sense, also monitor your inner state, how you are. You might notice if it would be helpful—if there's any way it would be helpful maybe to be a little more relaxed. Just mind you can relax in such a way that it helps you stay more with the breath, condensing the attention more fully into the experience of breathing. Relaxing any performance anxiety you have or judgments about how you're doing. Relaxing any pushing which is not useful, relaxing and yet but also engaged without any expectation of getting anything but still wanting to develop concentration. Continuity—breath after breath, condensing on the breath.

If there are thoughts and concerns which are really preoccupying you, you might try telling those thoughts, "Later, not now, but later." If you take up a cloth to polish a brass bowl, you first have to take the cloth and connect it with the bowl. Place it on the bowl and then you have to rub the bowl with the cloth. Keep it there. And it's the rubbing of the cloth which polishes the bowl. So with your attention, place it on the breath and then let the attention rub the breath. Stay there with the breath. Let the breath rub the cloth. Have attention with the in-breath, the out-breath, the next in-breath, the next out-breath.

So then, the last minute or two of the sitting, take a deep breath and let it all go. And then spend a little bit of time reviewing what that was like. See what you can learn or discover about what that process of concentrating on the breath was like this last period. Become a

student of your own mind and the different qualities, *kicca* qualities or activities of your mind, functions of your mind as.