

## Concentration (Week 3 - Part 2)

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So often at the beginning of a session of meditation, it's useful to be quite intentional, conscientious, careful about getting yourself settled in after this place at this time. So to be intentional about your posture, take a little bit of care in having an alert, balanced, upright, rooted posture. You might start by just feeling rooted, feeling your feet on the floor stable, solid, or your legs and your bottom kind of on the chair, on the cushion, the floor, feeling the stability there, feeling a solid connection, feeling the connection with the floor or the chair. This is the spot where you are right now, here and now, this here. To be a little bit intentional about your spine, give some attention to it, and perhaps let your spine be a bit more alert or upright than it normally would be. And keeping the spine upright, alert, may be a bit more, you know, a little bit effort or energy there with the spine.

Well, see if you can relax everything else around the spine—the shoulders, the arms, the muscles of the chest, torso. And one way to do that is to take a few long, slow, deep breaths, filling the torso as you breathe in, expanding it outwards. And then as you exhale, let go, relax everything but the straightness of your spine. Breathing in deeply, feeling yourself, feeling your body being connected to your body, feeling the physicality of your body as you breathe in and out, and as you exhale, relaxing or softening, even if you're a teeny bit. Whatever holding or tension that you notice in your body—your face, your jaws, shoulders, stomach, arms, legs—and then over the next three or four breaths, let your breathing slowly return to normal. Small steps towards normality: easy, relaxed breath and breathing, easily breathing in and out.

A kind of image that's used in ancient texts for sitting down to meditate is wrapping yourself in a soft cotton blanket. There are monastics and nuns who wrapped themselves in a soft robe so that your whole body kind of is whole, held, contained. Imagine yourself as wrapped with

a soft cotton blanket, and the world, your world of meditation, is going to be the world inside this soft blanket, the world of your body, the world of your body here and now. And there is a long tradition of beginning a session of meditation with a few minutes of loving kindness meditation. And for this particular session, turn to yourself with kind regard. Perhaps you can have some simple thoughts of good will toward yourself, of kindness towards yourself.

If you're having some struggles, perhaps you can just simply hold those with some compassion and care, kind regard, wishing yourself well. Even the idea of being friendly with yourself is a very foreign idea. Maybe even a kind of stand at the edges of that possibility. And then feel your breathing. Take a few moments here to enter the world of your body breathing. Feel, experience, how your body experiences breathing.

And if it's easy enough, natural enough, see if you can adjust your breathing ever so slightly so that it becomes more pleasant or comfortable. So you don't want to force the breath. It may be some small adjustments so it's still a natural breath, but it's more enjoyable. Breathing a little bit more deeply, breathing out a little more fully, perhaps letting the breath be a little more subtle or softer or bigger. Then if there's some place in the breathing or the way the body breathes that is compelling, interesting, or pleasant, let that be your spot. Will you let the attention, your folk, be focused on the breathing?

And kind of like if you are flying a kite, you don't want any one to keep the string of the kite taut so tight—it doesn't work. But if it's too loose, the kite will fall. You want to give just the right tautness so the kite will stay up in the wind. So you want to keep just the right tautness of attention. But the kind of string of attention is hooked on to a particular place in your body where you feel your breathing, and then for both the in breath and the out breath—breathing in and breathing out. See if you can keep that string of attention taut—soft, relaxed, but also taut—connected, stays there with this very simple experience of breathing, very simple sensation in one spot.

If there are thoughts going on in the background of attention, don't worry about it. Just stay with the breath in the foreground. If you get carried away in thoughts, then train yourself in letting go of those thoughts, letting go of all thoughts, so that you can stay better with the simple experience of breathing in and breathing out. Sometimes it helps folk to relax or rest with the experience of breathing with a breath. Sometimes it's more important to be more intentional about it, more directed, and just kind of yoke the attention to the breath more actively, keeping a focused attention on the breath, but at the same time alert to notice when the mind wanders away, begins to wander away. When it does, begins to do it, soften the mind.

Relax it. Relax the thinking brain. Let go of your thoughts, keeping the focus on the breath, at the same time composing your body around the breath, settling yourself around it. So there's also a broad awareness of your body, and that whole body is composing itself. Rest, centering itself on the experience of breathing. If it's helpful to count the breath, by all means count in, register, focus, connected.

Imagine that the breath, experience of breathing, is the most important thing in the world, that the most important and valuable thing you can possibly do right now is to be absorbed, completely attentive, completely alert, involved, connected to breathing in and breathing out. Trust that that's enough, letting go of everything else. Then go of any judgments you have about how it's going, letting go of any thoughts or concerns at all. Seeing just breathing, just breathing in and breathing out, everything else relaxes and softens around it. Keeping the mind soft and committed to the breath, staying there, staying there, you might notice some sense of stillness that if you include that as part of the picture, part of what's going on. That stillness actually helps you to stay with the breath, stay focused.

If the mind leaves a breath very quickly after two or three breaths, goes into thought, then next time you come back to your breathing, try to have a little bit of strength or extra kind of effort or commitment to see if you can go further to four or five breaths, or eight, or nine, or ten. Stretch out how many breaths you can stay connected to. And then there's a way of ending the sitting. You can take one or two deep breaths. They can be a changer, which change yourself a little bit to wake up a little bit. And then spend a minute before you open your eyes, reviewing that sitting, not judging it, but go like a reporter. You just in out notices what, remembers what happens during that sitting for you, and then when you're ready and open your eyes.