

Practice Note: Gliding into Concentration

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 6, 2013

Concentration is a partner to mindfulness practice – they work well together. Cultivating concentration is very useful. Concentration overcomes a distracted mind, and allows the mind to stay focused and present.

One of the common focal points for concentration and mindfulness is breathing: breathing in, breathing out, and trying to hang in there for several breaths in a row. Then we try to extend being in *touch* with the breath for longer and longer.

The word ‘touch’ is very important. Some people try to approach concentration as a mental activity – as if you were up in a control tower, with the gaze of the inner eye looking down to keep the breathing in focus. But to be in touch means being more intimate – being in contact with the bodily experience of breathing. The experience might be of the air moving in the nostrils, through the chest, or in the belly. You are in touch, in contact. It is as if you are feeling the breathing within the experience itself – as opposed to being removed from it, and watching it.

Some people, when they try to get concentrated, do so by holding the mind’s attention. But when you hold something in a fixed way, it tends to make the mind tight or brittle. It doesn’t help it become softer, or more focused in a nice way. It’s like riding a bicycle, and holding yourself rod still – you aren’t going to go far. Or imagine riding a surfboard and not moving, but just standing there holding yourself. That doesn’t work, because as the wave changes, you need to shift your weight, and move with the waves in a fluid way. Movement and fluidity help with stability.

So rather than holding the attention on the breath, or on the feet during walking meditation, an interesting approach is to *slide* onto the breath. When you are on a slide, you are in touch with the slide the whole time. Especially as you breathe out, imagine not that you are holding the attention there, but that you are sliding along on the changing experience. Or gliding on it. Or riding on it as on a surfboard. Or flying on it with your wings spread. You’re catching and riding the updraft. You don’t expect to glide or slide forever, but you slide for as long as you can catch the ride.

Then you glide on the breath again. It might be easier for the mind to soften and relax if you can glide into the breath in this way – rather than fixating or holding the mind there for many breaths in a row.

You are willing for the mind to wander off for a moment, but then you get back on and go for the next ride. Slowly try to extend how long the ride goes, so that the ride is not just one breath, but two or three – like catching updrafts over and over again. There is the rhythm of breathing in and out. There are changes in the sensations. And you are riding those changes, being fluid – catching this one, and then that one. You ride it, glide on it, and you’re in touch.

The same is true with walking meditation. You kind of catch the sensation of the foot stepping, and you ride and glide with it, rather than holding it.

If this makes sense to you, gives you a different perspective, or helps you understand a little differently, that’s fine. Then you might try doing it to help you get more focused and connected. Don’t worry if it doesn’t make sense to you – it is just a peculiar metaphor that I am using for focusing. If it doesn’t work, please don’t feel burdened by it.

But if it does work, and you’re riding the breath – especially on the out-breath, or as you put your foot down when you’re stepping – see if part of that ride can be letting go. When you go down the

slide, you let go of everything. So let go, especially as you ride the end of the out-breath. And see if you can let go of your thoughts, and let go of any tension in the body. Your riding – and the mind – get softer and softer, quieter and quieter. Over time, perhaps it will be possible to connect together a whole series of in-breaths and out-breaths. Just stay there – that's what you do.