

Practice Note: Concentration – A Middle Path

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal February 22, 2017

One of the useful states of mind is a mind that is concentrated, composed, settled. A fair amount of meditation, in some way or other, involves concentrating your mind. “Concentrating the mind” means, first and foremost, not letting the monkey-mind have the upper-hand – not having the mind wander everywhere possible, except here and now, caught up in its thoughts. For many people, the practice of concentration is often a big challenge. Some people have a hard time doing it because the mind is so strongly interested in other things. And some people get tight because of the way they concentrate. They get stressed.

So it's useful to consider that concentration goes together with other factors. One of the primary supporting factors is that concentration goes hand-in-hand with being relaxed. I like to think of it as a *soft* mind. The art here is to also maintain a mind that is diligent enough to stay present – to stay interested in the breathing, or in the lovingkindness meditation, or in walking when you walk, or in whatever the focus is of the moment. The art is to be diligent, vigilant, committed, or devoted to staying present just for that, but doing so with a mind that's soft and relaxed.

A soft, relaxed mind by itself might lead you to drift off in thought. A concentrated mind, by itself, the way many people do it, can often help make the mind tense. So the idea is to do both at the same time. For people who are used to getting concentrated, keeping the mind soft may seem harder than just to practice concentration. For people who love a soft mind, it feels like work to be concentrated, and people don't want to work. But to hold the two together takes a certain kind of alert attention. If you have enough attention to watch yourself, then the concentration can stay soft – soft in the mind, in the body, and in the heart. And so you aren't tensing up around the eyes, or the mouth, or the hands. The whole body can stay soft. And more importantly, the mind stays soft.

It takes a while to get the hang of how to stay present. But the very practice of trying to do this, discovering how to do it, keeps you in the present moment. And it's worthwhile in its own right. But don't be so concerned about doing it successfully. For any meditation practice, focusing on doing it successfully limits how much you benefit from the practice. So you don't want to be too successful, because mindfulness meditation is one of those very unusual tasks where you want to do the best you can, but you don't want to be too successful too quickly, because a lot of learning is happening.

In meditation, one of the things to learn is to how to stay present – to not drift off or be lackadaisical or complacent – and also to keep a soft, relaxed mind, together with the diligence to stay there. Just stay with that, so there's some clarity that can develop with what's happening.

This morning, you might try to see what it's like for you, to bring these two together, and how they work together. When you're with your breathing, or with your walking, try to stay present and concentrated with what's happening, and also try to stay soft. And see it's like to bring those two together.