Self-Correct

April 10, 2025

The Buddha’s instructions for getting the mind into concentration are found in his description of right mindfulness. It starts by keeping the body in and of itself in focus. And the body in and of itself means just taking the body in its own terms, your direct experience of the body right here, right now. Without reference to how it looks to other people in the world, or how it is or is not able to do the work that’s needed to be done in the world. All the other issues of the world get put aside. Just the body on its own terms. And one of the ways of focusing on the body in its own terms would be to focus on the breath. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? Focus your attention there. And be alert to the fact that it may not be where you ordinarily might think you should be feeling it. We know the air comes in through the nose, goes down through the throat, into the lungs. But when the Buddha talks about breath, he’s talking about the flow of energy in the body. It’s not the contact of the air at the nose. It’s the flow of energy that allows the air to come in and allows the air to go out. But it also accompanies the sensations of the nerves, the blood vessels, all throughout the muscles of the body. Even down in the bones. I know people who say they can feel the energy in their bones. So wherever you feel it, focus there. The breath is a good place to start because it’s the most obvious movement of energy in the body. And the Buddha says then you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts that have to do with the world, especially liking or disliking what’s going on in the world right now, you just put them aside. Because right now it’s time for you to get to know your awareness here in the present moment. The breath on its own terms. And then you’re beginning to notice the mind on its own terms as well. As the Buddha said, when you’re focusing on the breath, you’ve got feelings right here. Feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. You’ve got the state of mind that’s alert and mindful of what’s going on right now. And you have qualities of the mind developing, particularly trying to develop equanimity with regard to the world. So all the foundations or frames of reference for your mindfulness are right here. Right here at the breath. So it’s a good place to focus. And as you keep focused here, the practice of mindfulness is going to require three qualities. Mindfulness itself, which, unlike you may have heard, does not mean just being aware of whatever’s happening or being non-judgmental about whatever you’re experiencing. It means keeping something in mind. Here you’re keeping in mind several things. One is the fact that you want to stay with the breath. And if any issues come up, you remember how you’ve dealt with those issues in the past. You may remember lessons you’ve learned from others or from your own experience that are relevant right now. Those are all the things you keep in mind. The second quality is alertness. This is the focus on the present moment, but it’s focused specifically on what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. Then finally, ardency, the desire to do this well. And that’s going to build off your alertness and your mindfulness. At the same time, that makes them right. Because you can be mindful of anything right now. You can be alert to anything right now. But if you’re really trying to do this well, you’re trying to maintain your focus where it should be, and anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you let it go. Either you simply note that something unskillful, a distraction has come up, and you let it go. Or if your mind keeps going back to it, you have to stop and think for a while. What are the drawbacks of that thinking? If I were to think those thoughts for a day, where would it take me? Would it take you to where you want to go? Or I can simply ignore the thoughts that come up, treat them like stray dogs that you don’t want, like the dogs down in the kitchen. Something must be attracting the dogs, whether it’s water or food. But if we didn’t feed the dogs, didn’t give them water, they wouldn’t come around. But it’s the same with your thoughts. If you don’t pay them any attention after a while, they leave. And like dogs, they may whine for a while and complain. But you just say, “I don’t need you.” And they’ll go away. Or you can notice the fact that when you’re thinking a distracting thought, it takes some energy. There’s going to be tension someplace in the body. Where is that tension right now? There’s a blockage in the flow of the energy. Can you relax that? What happens when you relax that? Or you can just grit your teeth, press the tongue up against the roof of your mouth, and make up your mind, “I will not think that thought.” Force it out. Lots of different ways that you can deal with distracting thoughts. It’s good to have a repertoire. It’s good to know that there are a variety of ways of dealing with them. And then find which ones work for you. All that is part of the effort of your ardency. When you’re with the breath, you want to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels. Don’t think of any sense of ease or well-being that comes with the breath. It’s spreading around. You don’t want to clamp down on your sense of the body, your sense of the breath. You want there to be a sense of freedom and spaciousness. You can think of the body being surrounded by space. Your awareness surrounds the body. It’s not limited just to the skin. It spreads out. And the breath spreads out as well. When you get really sensitive to the breath, you begin to realize there’s a kind of a cocoon of energy around your body. And you can focus on that. And think of that energy smoothing out, like taking a comb to it. And when you do this, you find that you’re shifting in from mindfulness practice into concentration practice. The description is different. The Buddha uses a slightly different vocabulary. But you’re building on the same processes. Your alertness and your ardency turn into what the Buddha calls evaluation. As you reflect on what you’re doing and doing some self-correction. This is an important part of the meditation. Learning how to observe yourself. It’s like learning a musical instrument. In the beginning, you just want to learn how to play the notes properly. But then you start listening to yourself play. And you begin to get some ideas about how to phrase the passage. What dynamics to use. The more you can listen to yourself, the better. There was a famous pianist one time who’s well known for his thoughtful interpretations of things. He was giving an interview and he was talking about, “What do you do when you listen to yourself play?” And it involved those same three qualities of mind. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. He didn’t use those terms, of course. But what he described fit in. You’re playing the piece and you have to remember what you’ve been playing so far. And what the direction of your interpretation has been so far. And then you’re alert right now to what you’re actually playing. And then you think about how to do this well. Which sometimes may correspond with your original intention for which one of the piece to be. And sometimes you begin to hear there’s something new you didn’t hear before. And so you explore that. If you tried this, where would it go? Or if you tried that, where would you go? So the performance is not just wrote. The performance is an exploration. Well, the meditation should be an exploration too. We hear so much about the kinds of insights we should be getting. But in the forest tradition I place a lot of emphasis on looking and seeing, well, what exactly are you getting? And what can you explore? What changes can you make? And what can you learn from making the changes? An important principle is learning how to self-correct. So you’re playing the piece and you find that you’re interpretations begin to go off course a little bit. Well, you bring it back. Or you can decide, well, maybe the new interpretation might be more interesting. You try that. But the fact that you’re reflecting on what you’re doing, passing judgment, that’s an important part of the practice. That all comes into the evaluation. So you direct your thoughts to your object of the meditation, which in this case would be the breath and the sensation of the breath in the body. And then you evaluate how it’s going. In the beginning of the evaluation it has something to do with just keeping the mind with the breath. But then it gets more precise. You begin to see individual events in the mind as they relate to the breath, as they relate to concentration. The Buddha has another analogy for this. He says it’s like a person sitting down looking at someone who’s lying down, or a person standing looking down at someone who’s sitting. In other words, you step back from your object a little bit and begin to notice, well, how is the mind relating to the object? What’s going on? This is the beginning of discernment. It’s not just looking, it’s also making adjustments. You’re learning how to self-correct. You can think of the monks in the forest tradition, out in the forest, miles and miles away from their teacher, dealing with the issues that are coming up, and they’re facing them alone. The question is, how do you not go off course? We learn how to self-correct. You get a clear idea of what you want to be doing. And then you notice, are you headed in the right direction or are you headed away? This comes from staying with the teacher to begin with. So you get a clear idea of the teacher’s sense of direction, of what’s proper and what’s improper in the practice. But then you have to take that out and develop your own powers of judgment, your own ability to self-correct. That’s how you take the practice into the world. Whether going into the world means going into the forest, into the wilderness, or if it means going back into human civilization. And John Foong tells of the time when he went to visit a John Lee in Bangkok. And John Lee had taken up residence in one of the monasteries there and was teaching. The monastery where he was staying was right next to the main railroad track going through Bangkok. And John Foong realized after a day or two that he had the skills for taking his meditation into the forest. But he hadn’t yet learned the skills to take the meditation into the city. This was a new set of skills that he was going to have to develop. Again, how you develop them, you don’t simply ask. You learn to notice what is pulling you away, what’s pulling you off course, and then how you can bring yourself back on course. So self-correction means passing judgment, but also using your ingenuity. You see something is wrong, what can you do to correct? There are times when you focus on the breath and the more you focus, the heavier and more solid the whole body seems to get. So it’s a time to think about the space element in the body. Think of your atoms as being mainly space. I read recently someone calling that into question, but still it’s a good image to hold in mind. There’s space permeating everything in the body. That would include your sense of the membrane surrounding the body. There’s space there as well. Space extends outside of the body. So you hold that perception in mind. That helps you to stop focusing on the perceptions that make things tighter and more solid. More tense. So you take the perception that you’ve got, you turn it inside out, you turn it around. See how that works. Or if there’s a noise disturbing you as you meditate, how can you let the noise be there without you’re disturbing the noise, as the Chan Chow would say? In other words, without you making a lot of commentary on it, without you feeling attacked by the noise. The perception I found useful is to think of your body as like the screen on a window. The noise is like the breeze going through the screen. The screen doesn’t shake, doesn’t waver. It doesn’t try to catch the wind. In the same way, don’t catch the noise and make comments on it. Just let it go through. Let it go through. You don’t have to be affected by it. As long as you hold that perception in mind, you can maintain your concentration in spite of the noises. So there are lots of things you can do to self-correct. This is how you make the meditation your own. This is how you make the practice your own. You’re passing judgment. But as long as the judgments are meant to be helpful, then you’re fine. Some people have trouble with their critical voice inside. You have to tell your critical voice, “We’re here to find happiness. And the happiness we’re looking for is harmless.” So any recommendations that would help in that direction are welcome. Any other recommendations that would pull you down, make you less confident in what you can do, are not welcome. That’s part of the mind that needs to be trained, along with everything else. But we do need this faculty for judgment, because if we didn’t judge our activities, we wouldn’t learn anything. We wouldn’t be able to develop any skill. And we certainly wouldn’t be able to self-correct. So commit yourself to the practice, as the Buddha would say, and then reflect. And then learn from your reflection and commit some more. That’s how the meditation progresses, and that’s how it stays on course.

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