How to Leave Concentration

April 12, 2025

As you’re sitting here trying to get the mind into concentration, the natural thing to talk about is how to get in, what to let go of as you leave the world outside, how to focus, how to work with your breath, how to work with your mind or your awareness right now, so that it’ll be willing to settle down. It’s very rare that we talk about how to get out of concentration or how to leave concentration. But it’s an important skill as well. The Buddha listed it as part of mastery of concentration. And if you think superficially, you might say, “Well, that’s the easiest thing to do, is to leave concentration.” That’s one skill you’ve gotten down. But actually there are skillful and unskillful ways of leaving concentration. So let’s assume that you’ve had a good hour of meditation. Now the time is to get up and go someplace else. You’ve got to protect your concentration. You’ve got to protect your mind, because you’ve gotten it into a very sensitive place. In some ways you’ve let down a lot of your defenses, because the mind’s busyness is one of its defenses. That’s been let down. You’re staying with one object. You’re sensitive. You’re open to the object. You’ve got to protect that state of mind, because it can very easily get invaded. So the first thing you do is you stop and think about the hour that’s passed. When did the mind settle down? When was the concentration strongest? When was the sense of well-being strongest? Where were you, folks, focused? What was the breath like? What had you done leading up to that? Can you remember? If you’ve been ardent, alert, and mindful as you get the mind into concentration, you should be able to remember at least something about how you got there, where you were focused. Just assume that that’s your natural place to focus the mind. And the next time you sit down to meditate, try to recreate those conditions. The way the breath goes, where you’re focused, what steps can get you there. See if it works again. Sometimes it will, sometimes it won’t. Because after all, the mind is a very complex phenomenon. To become a skilled meditator, you have to realize there are many different ways of getting it to settle down. But it’s good that you try to notice, well, what worked this time? Because it may work again. That’s the first step. Second step is to think of whatever sense of well-being you’ve had in the concentration. You dedicate it to others. Spread thoughts of goodwill. May other beings find the same peace in their minds, in their hearts. Let that be the attitude you bring out of the concentration into the world, an attitude of goodwill. You can also dedicate the merit of your meditation to someone who’s passed away, someone for whom you feel gratitude. If they have any way of knowing of the goodness you’ve done through your concentration, through your meditation, you’re happy to give it to them. And if they rejoice in that, if they approve of what you’ve done, then that becomes their merit. There’s a wide misunderstanding about what it means to transfer a merit. You don’t really transfer it. You dedicate it. And if the other person knows, then their approval becomes their merit. So you’re trying to bring goodness into the world from your meditation. But then you have to realize, as I said, the mind is in a very sensitive place. You have to go through life like a turtle. A turtle’s body is very sensitive, which is why it needs that hard shell. So you have to learn how to maintain a shell of mindfulness as you leave meditation. Remind yourself that your awareness of the body, as you feel it from within, your awareness from breath energy, is still there. It’s trampled as you leave meditation. The visual field comes flooding in. You start thinking about this person, that person, this job, this duty, what has to be done here, what has to be done there. Issues in the world outside. And they squeeze your body awareness up into a little corner. It’s like a grasshopper that I had to dissect in biology in high school. They had these enormous grasshoppers that they would send out. Soaked in formaldehyde. And you got to dissect them. Well, mine happened to be a female, and she had lots of eggs. And her intestines and everything was squeezed into a tiny part of her body. That’s what usually happens to most of our sensitivity to the inner part of the body, or the body as we feel it from within, as we engage in the world. It gets squeezed in tiny little places. So trying to assert that awareness, it’s still there. Make that the framework as you deal with the world. Don’t let the world trample it. And use that sense of bodily awareness as your post. There’s an image the Buddha gives in the Canon. Your six senses are like six different animals. There’s a bird, there’s a dog, there’s a crocodile, there’s a hyena, there’s a snake, a monkey. And you tie them to leashes, and then you tie the leashes together. And if they don’t have a post to which they’re tied, then they’ll pull one another here and there. Usually it’s the crocodile that pulls all the other ones down into the river where they die. What you need is a post. The Buddha says mindfulness of the body as you go through the day. And based on that, you can exert some restraint over your senses. In other words, when you look at something, you have to be very clear about why you’re looking. You listen to something. Why are you listening? Who’s doing the looking? Who’s doing the listening? Is greed doing the looking? Lust? Anger? If so, these things are going to get strengthened in the mind. Then you have to clean them out again. But if you have a sense of well-being in the body, that’s the post. Breath energies in the body are good. It may be too much to ask yourself to be clearly aware of each in-breath and out-breath, but you can be aware of the general quality of the breath energy. Try to maintain it with a good quality. That sense of well-being makes it a lot easier not to go running after things. In the Buddha’s image, the animals will pull and pull and pull at the post, but if the post is firm, eventually they have to just lie down right next to the post. Or another image you can use is keeping your mind on a leash. Keep it on a short leash. Right next to the breath. If it’s on a long leash, it’s like a dog on a long leash. It’ll wander around. It’ll take the leash and wind it around people’s legs, around lampposts, around trees. You have a long, complicated process of trying to get it back, unwinding all the places that it’s wound the leash around. But if it’s on a short leash, it can’t wind around anything. Which means the next time you meditate, right here where you left the concentration to begin with, you didn’t really leave it. That’s the whole point. You try to maintain those activities of mindfulness, alertness, and hardensing. Remembering that you’ve got to keep watch over your mind. Be alert to whatever random thoughts are coming up. The rules of life don’t really change that much. If you think of life as happening within the context of your practice, there are other responsibilities you have to take on, other things you have to think about. But take on only the things that are really necessary. Otherwise, think of yourself as meditating as you go through the day, the secret meditator. And no one has to know that you’re meditating. One of the reasons why when we’re practicing walking meditation, we don’t walk very, very slowly. We try to walk at a normal pace. If you go out into the world, you can walk at a normal pace and be mindful at the same time. So you’re ardent, alert to what you’re doing. The ardency there, of course, means that anything unskillful comes up, you’re going to deal with it right then. You’re not going to wait until the next time you meditate. Because things can happen between now and then. So basically, you’re meditating as you go through the day. Whatever things come up that are unskillful, treat them as disturbances in your concentration. Otherwise, there’s no room in your mind for things like that. That’s the attitude you’ve got to have. That’s your shell to protect this sensitive center. So the proper way to leave meditation is not to leave it, but to carry the skills into the world. Because that’s when you’re going to need them. It’s not the case that defilements come up only as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. There are lots of opportunities out there, which means you have to be extra vigilant. But you do it with a sense of well-being, with a breath. So it’s not a burden. That’s how you leave.

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