Centered

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One of the purposes of meditation is to get the mind to be still and focused. The stillness has to do with calm. The focus has to do with concentration. And we hear the word concentration and it sounds like we have to tense up our muscles, bear down on things. But it might be better to think of it as being centered. Your awareness is centered. And ideally, ultimately, it’s going to fill the whole body. So you can’t tense up. But you do want to maintain a steady focus, which requires some patience and persistence. We may have read the descriptions of right concentration. It talks about pleasure, rapture, you settle down for a little bit and there doesn’t seem to be any pleasure, any rapture. It’s just the plain old breath coming in and going out. You wonder where that pleasure and rapture are going to come from. Well, they come from the steadiness of your gaze. It’s like planting a tree. You put it in the ground and you want a big tree. Well, if you try pulling on it to make it tall, to fit in with the description of good trees, you kill it. But if you neglect it, it’s going to die. So you have to look after it, but let it do the growing. You do the looking after. And as you get started in concentration, the test is figuring out which parts you’re responsible for and which part the mind will do on its own. And John Lee, my teacher’s teacher, points out that in the description of right concentration in the first level, there are five factors. You have directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation, rapture, and pleasure. Of those, the first three are the causes. The rapture and pleasure are the results. You don’t do the rapture, you don’t do the pleasure. But you do the directed thought, evaluation, and keeping your preoccupation single. So that’s the work to be done here. As for how quickly the results will come, you can’t tell them ahead of time. For some people they come quickly, and other people it’s more time-consuming. But in either case, the steadiness of your effort is what’s going to be important. So focus on your breath. Start to notice what feels good now, long breathing or short breathing. You can test them. Try them out. Then you can try heavy breathing. Try your light, fast or slow, deep or shallow. Do you get the right combination? Know your inner conversation about that. That’s what the directed thought and evaluation are. Sometimes people say, “How do you get started on directed thought? How do you get started on evaluation?” Actually, those two terms are the Buddhist description for how we talk to ourselves all the time. You direct your thoughts to a topic, and then you comment on it, whether it’s good or bad. Like it, don’t like it. Sometimes you ask questions, try to provide answers. So what you’re doing here as you concentrate is not that you wipe out your inner conversation. You bring your inner conversation to the breath. Get interested in the breath. Because the breath is not just the air coming in and out the nose. It’s the energy flow in the body. That’s going to have a big impact on the health of the body, and also on your ability to stay right here. If it feels good being here, it’s going to be a lot easier to stay. If it doesn’t feel good, the mind’s going to look for the first opportunity to leave. So ask yourself, what kind of breathing would be refreshing right now? Relaxing if you’ve been tense, soothing if your nerves are frazzled, energizing if you’re tired. Try to breathe in a way that brings the body into balance. And as I said, think of the energy in the body flowing wherever it can. In the beginning, it’s going to be most obvious in the areas, say, around the chest, or the abdomen, or in the head. But as you settle in, you begin to realize that there’s an energy flow that goes throughout the nervous system, out to the tiny, tiny nerve ends, out to the blood vessels, out to the capillaries, out to each pore. Try to expand your awareness to include all those parts of the body. If that range seems too large to begin with, you can try going through the body section by section. You can start down around the navel, just the area of the abdomen, and watch it for a while as you breathe in, breathe out. See what rhythm of breathing feels good there. If there’s any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax. So no new tension, fills up as you breathe in, you don’t hold on to any tension as you breathe out. And when there’s no tension, then the breath energy can flow. Then you move your attention up to the solar plexus. Do the same things, middle of the chest, base of the throat, into the head. Starting from the back of the neck, going down the shoulders and the arms. Starting from the back of the neck again, going down the spine, down the legs, out to the tips of the toes. Divide the body up into sections like this, and go through the sections systematically, as many times as you like, until you feel you’re ready to try an even larger frame of reference, which would be the whole body. Then try to maintain that sense of full body awareness. Sometimes you hear concentration described as “one-pointedness of mind.” “Citta segagata.” “Citta” means “of the mind.” “Ega,” “one.” “Aga” is the term that’s a little controversial here. Some people say it means “point,” but there’s no place in the canon where the Buddha calls it a “point.” “Aga” can either be the high spot on a mountain, the summit of the mountain, or it can be the ridge of a roof, anything that’s high up. It can also be a meeting place. And I think that’s the meaning that’s meant here, not so much the point or the highness or the height of the point. It’s more the quality of everything in the mind being gathered together right here. All your attention is gathered right here. Your thoughts are gathered right here. You’re trying to live in this spot in the present moment. And all the images the Buddha gives as analogies for concentration are full body awareness, like for the first level of right concentration. He has the image of a bathman. Back in those days they didn’t have bars of soap. They would have soap powder. They’d mix it with water and make a kind of paste or a dough that you would then rub over your body. And the job of the bathman would be to mix it. And he’d got to mix it in such a way that all of the bath powder got moistened and there was nothing that was dripping of it left over. And he said in the same way, once there’s a sense of ease and well-being with the breath, you allow it to spread, to make it spread. Sometimes it goes on its own, sometimes it won’t go on its own. You can’t push it, you can’t force it, because you can’t open the channels. Wherever there’s any tension or tightness, holding things in check, just think of that loosening up. This is one of the reasons why we do this. We survey the body section by section to loosen things up in the head, in the neck, in the torso, in the legs, in the arms, all around. So the breath energy has an opportunity to flow. And when the breath energy feels good, it’s going to take a sense of well-being with it. This is another reason why you can’t push it. You can’t push well-being. Because as soon as it gets pushed, it turns into something else. So think of all the blood vessels, all the nerves in the body opening up, allowing the breath to come in, to nourish every part of the body. And then try to stay there. We read about the different levels of concentration, but there’s no need to go through all of them right away. In fact, you’ll learn a lot by staying just with one. And as the Buddha said, “You’re too much of a hurry to move on.” He compares you to an inexperienced, foolish cow. I’ve always liked that image. To what extent would a cow be experienced or inexperienced, wise or foolish? But in this case, the cow is foolish because it’s eating grass and it’s got water in the meadow where it is. It’s on a hillside. It looks over to another hillside and sees there’s grass over there, there’s water over there, and it wants to know what’s the grass there like, what’s the water like. But because it’s foolish and inexperienced, as it goes down its hillside, it gets stuck in the ravine between the two hills. It can’t get out, can’t get back to where it was, can’t get to the other side. The Buddha stops the image there, but you’re thinking about the wise cow. It basically stays where it is. It’s not the case that the higher levels are someplace else. The higher levels are here. In fact, everything you want to know from your concentration is going to appear right here, where your awareness and the breath meet. So get to know this spot really well. Be patient, be persistent. Patient not in the sense of waiting things to happen without you doing anything. You have to make sure that the causes stay right, that you are focused. You remember to stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out. Be patient in the sense that you keep on doing what needs to be done, confident in the fact that it will start showing results at some point. But if you try pushing it too hard, then the results get destroyed, which is why we say you have to be patient. So you’ve planted a tree. Water it, look after it. In other words, be mindful. Remember to stay here. Don’t wander off to other topics. Be alert to notice when the mind does wander off, you bring it right back, reminding yourself that no matter how amazing that thought may be, you can think of it some other time. The problem is usually the thoughts that distract us are not all that amazing. They’re just random things that come into the mind. But because you’re not interested in the breath, you’ll latch on to anything that comes through. Now try to make yourself more interested as you think of the breath as a whole body process. That will have an impact on the health of all the different organs in the body. And see it as a game, learning how to spread your awareness through the body. Maintain this full body awareness. Don’t let it shrink. It will have a tendency, especially on the out-breath, as long as you remind yourself. Everything down to your hands, everything down to your feet, up to your head, the whole body. Each breath coming in, each breath going out. Don’t squeeze the breath out. It’ll go out on its own. When it does come in, think of it refreshing the body. You’re not laboriously pulling it in. You’re allowing it to be refreshed. You’re allowing all the sensors in the body to be refreshed by the breath. And once the mind does settle down, you don’t have to go any place else. That skill is going to be to learn how to keep it there. This is where the concentration begins to become powerful. Because there will be other thoughts that will come in and say, “Okay, enough of that. Let’s move on.” And you say, “No.” There’ll be feelings coming up in the body that say, “It’s time to move on.” Well, no, not yet. You’re not going to learn about these things if you give in to them. It’s when you don’t give in, that’s when you learn. Where did they come from? What’s their reasoning? When you see that their reasoning is pretty bad, then they don’t have that power that they used to have over the mind. So even as you’re just getting the mind into concentration, some discernment will arise. And the process is how the mind creates little thought worlds for itself. How it enters into those thought worlds goes traveling for a while. And then the thought worlds burst like little bubbles. You’re left back here. You learn from your distractions, if you don’t follow them. You learn from your breath, as you do follow it. Because the things you need to learn about how to put it into suffering, the Buddha calls “fabrications,” what the mind creates, how it creates its experience in the present moment. You’re going to see that here as you create a state of concentration. You’ve got the breath, which is bodily fabrication. You’ve got the direct thought and evaluation, which are verbal fabrication. Then you’ve got perceptions and feelings. Those are mental fabrications. All of these things go together to make the state of concentration. And this is how you learn about those types of fabrication, by trying to do them skillfully. Otherwise, they’re just words in books, concepts. But here you see they’re activities that you’re actually doing. When you see them as activities that you’re doing, then you can get a better and better sense of what the Buddha’s talking about. When he says that you have to comprehend these things, to see where you’re clinging to them, how you cause suffering by clinging, how you don’t have to, you learn about these things first by being really good at using these fabrications to get the mind to settle down. Because it’s only when the mind is settled down that you can see things fairly and clearly, what they are. Then you can really do something about them.

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