

Tranquility, Insight, & Concentration

August 6, 2021

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. It might be at the nose, the base of the throat, the chest, the abdomen. Wherever it's clearest—that now the breath is going in, now the breath is going out—focus your attention there.

Then ask yourself if long breathing is comfortable. If it is, keep it up; if not, you can change. You could try shorter breathing; or in short, out long; in long, out short; fast, slow; heavy, light; deep or shallow. Try to find what rhythm and texture feels best for the body right now.

As for any thoughts that come into the mind, you don't have to pay them any attention. Just pay attention to the thoughts about the breath, because you *will* have to think about the breath as you're investigating how it feels, and how it might feel better.

Then, when you have a rhythm of breathing that feels good, maintain it as long as it feels good. If, after a while, it doesn't feel so good anymore, you can change again.

This is the nice thing about concentration practice. You're here to find an object that the mind likes, and then you want to stay with it. To keep on liking it, you may have to make some adjustments. But then, when there's a feeling of well-being in the breath, think of it not being confined only to the spot where you're focused. Think of it spreading out. If you want, you can move your focus around different parts of the body.

Start down around the navel. Watch that area of the body as you breathe in, breathe out, and, if there's any sense of tension or tightness there, think of it relaxing.

Then move up to the solar plexus, the middle of the chest, base of the throat, middle of the head; then down the shoulders, starting at the back of the neck; going down the back, through the hips, out through the legs. Focus, relax.

You can make this survey a couple times, and then see if you can focus your attention in one spot of the body and then spread your awareness so that it fills the whole body, so that you have a sense that the whole body's breathing in, and you're aware throughout the whole body; the whole body is breathing out, and you're still aware of the whole body. Don't let your awareness shrink as you breathe out. Let the breath find whatever rhythm feels best.

These are the basic steps in right concentration. This is *the* central practice the Buddha taught. His instructions are contained both in the section on right mindfulness and right concentration. As he said, the themes of right concentration are the four establishing of mindfulness. For example, the body: “Keep focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.” That’s his description for how you get the mind into concentration.

You focus on one topic, keep it in mind—that’s mindfulness; you’re alert to what you’re doing, and the results that you’re getting; and, as for ardency, you try to do this well. That’s the wisdom factor here. In trying to do it well, you’re trying to master this as a skill.

As for any thoughts of the world outside—what the Buddha puts under the categories of greed and distress—just put those aside. Then as you stay here, the mind settles down with a sense of well-being.

When the Buddha would tell people to go meditate, he’d say, “Go do jhana.” He never said, “Go do *samatha*,” or “Go do *vipassanā*.” Basically he’d say, “Go get the mind settled in concentration.”

But he also said that, in order to get the mind into concentration, you have to develop two qualities, which were tranquility and insight: *samatha* and *vipassanā*. Try to keep the mind calm and, at the same time, gain insight into the workings of the mind.

That’s what *vipassanā* is all about: seeing sankharas—fabrications. See how they arise; see how they pass away; see what makes them arise. If you go for something that’s not skillful, the question is, “Well, why? What’s the allure?” Then you look for the drawbacks.

In this case, as you’re trying to get the mind to settle down, you do want to see the mind in concentration in terms of sankharas, because concentration is something you put together. But, for the time being, you’re not going to be looking for the drawbacks. You’re focusing more on the allure.

You want to look for the drawbacks of anything that would pull you away. A thought comes in: If you can just ignore it, fine. Come back to the breath. If, for some reason, it becomes obsessive, then you have to turn and look at it. “Okay, why would the mind go for this? What does it like about it?” Sometimes it’ll lie to itself about the reason; sometimes it’ll tell the truth. But when you can see the allure, and you can see then the drawbacks of following that allure, then you can develop dispassion for it and can put it aside. That’s the insight side of getting the mind into concentration.

As for the tranquility side, working with the breath as we were working just now soothes the body, soothes the mind, and gives you a good place to settle in. You want to feel that you're in a place where you're stable, with a broad sense of awareness, so that the mind doesn't feel confined. You want to be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, thinking of the breath energies—flowing through the nerves, flowing through the blood vessels—as all flowing in coordination, so that this is a good place to stay.

So to get the mind into concentration requires some insight and it requires some tranquility: not only insight into the distractions, but also insight into what you're doing.

You realize that you have to have a perception in mind—an image in mind that you hold—of how the breath comes in, how it goes out. There are different images you can use, some of which will be more conducive to a sense of ease and well-being than others. You experiment to find out which are which.

And you have to talk to yourself, especially in the beginning. After a while, when the mind really settles in, then you can put the internal conversation aside. But you still have the sankhara of the breath, and the sankhara of the perception, and the feeling of course—the feeling of well-being. It's all right here.

But for the time being you're trying to nurture these fabrications to create the path. As the Buddha said, the highest of all fabricated dhammas is the noble eightfold path. And the heart of that path is right concentration. So it is something you put together, and you try to do it well.

If there's any disturbance in the mind, ask yourself, "Is it coming from within or without?" Things coming from outside you're going to let go. If it's a disturbance from within, you want to let that go as well, but sometimes it requires some understanding. This is where you bring in some more insight. Why would you hold on to *that* disturbance? As you let go, let go, let go in this way—through understanding—the mind settles down to deeper and deeper levels. And of course, as the mind gets more quiet, your insight gets sharper as well.

So all these processes—tranquility, insight, right concentration—go together. They form a unified path. The more you can keep things together like this, the more settled the mind will feel, the more at ease, the more grounded.

This will be an important ally as you get deeper and deeper into the mind, because you begin to gain some insights into parts of the mind that you've hidden from yourself, and part of you may feel threatened. You don't like seeing yourself in that light, because you're going to be seeing your greed, you're going to be seeing your anger, you're going to be seeing a lot of your petty emotions, and you want to not be bowled over by them. This is why you want the sense of deep well-

being that comes from concentration. It's as if it lowers your center of gravity, so that you're not easily tipped over by things.

So the concentration is essential. As for developing tranquility and insight, it's going to be a matter of leaning in one direction and then leaning in the other in terms of the questions you ask. As the Buddha said, to foster tranquility you ask questions along the lines of, "What can be done to get the mind to settle down, to achieve unification, to really indulge in this sense of being at ease with a sense of oneness?" As for insight, it's more a question of figuring out, "What's the fabrication going on here in the mind?" and how to view that in a way that's helpful for developing the path and then for letting go of anything that gets in the way of the path.

So, as you work with the breath, sometimes you'll be leaning toward insight, sometimes you'll be leaning toward tranquility. The Buddha gave sixteen steps in all for breath meditation, and the general pattern throughout the steps is that you see how things are fabricated in terms of the body, in terms of the mind; you learn how to energize that fabrication; and then you calm it down. Seeing in terms of fabrication: That's the insight. The calming is tranquility. It all goes together.

Now, for some people there will be more of an emphasis in the beginning on insight. Others will have more of an emphasis on tranquility. Others will be developing the two together. But you need both to get the mind into concentration, and then the concentration provides the basis from which both of these qualities can develop even further.

It's a practice where everything comes together, comes together right here, so bring your full attention right here. Anything that would pull you away, you don't have to get involved with at the moment. No matter what duties and responsibilities you have in the world, you *do* have this duty to your mind.

All too often we let the duties of the world get in the way, because other people push them on us, and they seem very pressing and urgent. But you have to remember, the well-being of your mind is your most important priority, because only if the mind is in good shape can you handle other responsibilities well. So make sure that you take the time every day, every day, to look after this most important responsibility.

And learn to find some joy in doing it, too. As you work with the breath energy, you'll find that there are knots of tension in different parts of the body. If you're patient and get more sensitive to the breath, you find that you begin to untie those knots, and a sense of well-being goes deep, deep, deep inside—something that no outside activity can provide. It's a state of genuine well-being.

And this is just the path, to say nothing of the goal. This is why the Buddha said his teaching is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. The words of the teaching are good—they're inspiring. The actual practice gives a deep sense of well-being. And the goal is even better still.