

Practical Advice for Concentration

A concentrated mind is a mind that can see itself clearly – and in that seeing, undo the causes of personal suffering and harms to others.

But this is much easier said than done, given the “monkey mind” handed us by evolution: to keep our ancestors alive, they developed a jumpy, vigilant, nervous attention that scans continually for threats.

So we have to actively train our attention. Which has great fruits for daily life – staying pres-ent in long meetings or conversations, working through projects – as well as for any kind of con-templative practice.

Here are some ways how, using the preeminent training of attention – meditation – with a focus on the breath. Feel free to shift that focus of attention to something else, such as a prayer, im- age, or phrase.

Fundamental Elements

Posture

Find a position in which you feel both comfort- able and alert. The four traditional postures are sitting, walking, standing, and lying down. If you are seated, try to keep your spine erect, with your chin slightly tucked in, and perhaps the tip of your tongue touching the palate. Relax your jaws, and your lips may part slightly.

If you itch, it's OK to scratch, and if your body starts to ache to the point of distracting you, it's fine to move. Some meditations call for perfect stillness, and they use the pains that usually arise – often intense ones – as skillful means for insight and detachment. Sometimes they work incredibly well, and people have amazing break- throughs. But frankly, I think that a lot of the time, it's just a needless pain in the knee or back or neck, and usually a distracting one to boot. If you can, find a position that doesn't hurt.

You can leave your eyes open or closed, and there are benefits with each style, so see what works for you. If your eyes are open, let them be re- laxed and fairly still, which usually means being unfocused, gazing somewhat downward, perhaps at a spot on the ground four to six feet in front of you.

If you feel sleepy you could open your eyes, stand up, or imagine bright lights.

Objects of Awareness

As noted above, there are many potential objects of concentrated attention, and you can find the ones that work for you.

Physical sensations are common objects since they help draw us out of the distracting chatter of the verbal mind. In particular, the sensations of the breath are routinely used because they are always present, coming and going, a bridge between the conscious and unconscious processes of the nervous system.

But for some people, especially those with a history of trauma, attention to body sensations can stir up frightening feelings. It's perfectly fine to shift to another focus of attention, such as an image (e.g., an actual candle burning in front of you, the memory of a peaceful mountain lake), or words such as: "Peace" or "May I be happy."

Further, if you have a temperament that tends to need stimulation, or which fatigues quickly on concentration – and that's just how it is, and no one's fault – it's fine (especially in the early stages of contemplative practice) to adapt practices to your own nature. For example, you could pay attention to the sensations of the breath throughout your body as a whole – which will be more stimulating. Or you could do more walking meditations, trying to stay aware of the sensations in your feet and legs (which usually means walking especially slowly). The point is the results – like a steadier mind, more sense of ease and peacefulness, more happiness – not any specific method.

Still, whatever your temperament, try to stay with one object of attention as much as you can, rather than shifting from object to object. That will help strengthen the muscle of your concentration. It's a little like aerobic training: find the most challenging level you can comfortably sustain, and then build from there.

From here on I will refer to the sensations of the breath around the upper lip as the object of awareness, but feel very free to substitute any other object you like for that one

A Simple Practice

Concentration is very simple: You just keep coming back to the object no matter what. The instant you notice your attention starting to drift – or having flown all the way to Mars – zip! you bring it right back.

This is different from what is often called "mindfulness meditation" (though, of course, concentration is an aspect of mindfulness) in which you rest part of your attention on your breath (or another object) while preserving an open field of awareness that notices the thoughts, feelings, etc. streaming through without getting caught up in them.

In concentration practice, you are trying to engage as much of your attention as possible – aiming for complete absorption – in the object, so there is little or no room in awareness for anything else. Compared to mindfulness meditation, it is more muscular in its feeling, more relentless in its continual regeneration of the intention to be with just the one thing, more radical in its immediate abandonment of any other object of attention.

Kindness toward Yourself

But, paradoxically, the deepest concentration is aided by a soft and yielding attitude – receiving the breath, rather than chasing after it – a relaxed body, and feelings of happiness, contentment, and peace. Finding this sweet spot – balancing diligence and relaxation, focus and good humor – is the art of concentration.

It's important to be careful about pushing too hard with concentration, or getting attached to a specific result. Attitude is really important: Try to be heartfelt, emotionally open, relaxed in your body, intent without tension.

Getting annoyed with yourself or impatient will not serve. Relaxation and happiness are the immediate causes of concentration.

Striving and getting “self” mixed in (e.g., I’m doing this great, I’m doing this badly) just lead to suffering. In the Zen saying, we should be with our mind like the skillful rider of a horse, with neither too tight nor too loose a rein.

This kindness toward yourself is helped by a sense of perspective. If you think about it, the natural state of mind is wandering attention, open to all sorts of internal and external inputs. The reason for this is that, in evolution, the animals that over-focused or got all blissed out didn’t notice the shadow of the hawk overhead or the slither in the grass, and failed to pass on their genes.

So when you try to concentrate your attention on just one thing for many minutes in a row – whether it’s a chapter in a book or a meditation – you are asking your brain to do something that goes against its grain somewhat. You’re certainly not harming your brain with concentration! But you are indeed pushing it in an unfamiliar direction. All the more reason to be it nice to it, and thus yourself.

The Five Traditional Factors

Traditionally, five factors promote concentration – particularly to the point of the non-ordinary states of consciousness and contemplative depth known as jhanas.

- Applying your attention – This is the deliberate focusing of attention on an object, whether a teacher’s presentation, the sensations at the upper lip, or the interesting stillness between two thoughts. In psychology, this would be called the orienting response, such as when we bring attention to a sound that has startled us.
- Sustaining attention – This means staying with the object of attention. Sometimes the metaphor of rubbing is used, like two sticks rubbing together, staying in contact throughout. Sally Clough, a Spirit Rock teacher, combines applying and sustaining attention (especially applicable for the breath) into a single metaphor from ice skating: applying attention is like planting your foot, and sustaining it means gliding along; then at the end of the inhalation (for example), you plant your foot again (= focusing on the exhalation) and then glide along the length of the exhalation, staying in contact with every part of it.
- Rapture – A strong sense of bliss, felt particularly in the body, often with an energizing, upwardly moving sense to it.
- Happiness – Also a definite, unmistakable feeling, that sometimes shades into a quality of contentment or perhaps tranquility.
- One-pointedness – This is the mind brought to singleness, in which there is a kind of unitary state in which all elements of experience are experienced as a whole; there is often a sense when this factor arises of a kind of ka-chunk, of all the pieces coming together.

These factors can vary in their intensity from sitting to sitting. In particular, the factor of rapture can be experienced over time as a bit jangly and too intense, and give way increasingly to the factor of happiness.

Try to register a clear sense of each factor, so that you know what it feels like and can find your way back to it again. To an extent (and which usually grows with practice), you can invite, call up, or invoke each factor. Traditionally, you can say in your mind, “May rapture (or happiness, etc.) awaken (or arise, or be present).” If it comes, conditions are ripe. If it does not come, be patient and keep cultivating the causes of its arising and have faith that it will come.

Additional Aids

Here are some additional techniques that many people have found to be useful.

Counting

To help yourself stay with each breath, you could try counting each one, starting with 1 and going up to 10. If you lose track, just start over with 1. And when you get to 10, start over with 1. (You can also count down, from 10 to 1.) The counting should be very gentle, in the back of your mind, just enough to help you stay with each breath.

You may notice when you typically lose focus – commonly, around the fourth breath.

Noticing that, bring an extra intention to stay with the breath through that “threshold,” and then on the other side (say, the sixth breath) you may find it easier to get to 10.

If you like, you could set an audacious goal for yourself: ten counts of 10 breaths each, all in a row. Even highly experienced meditators may begin a sitting this way, to really focus their mind.

Noting

Or, to help yourself stay with the breath, let go of the counting, but gently note the breath softly in the back of your mind: “In...Out... In... Out.” Or: “Rising . . . Falling.” The noting should be very soft, with just a small part of your awareness involved with it, and most of your awareness with the physical sensations of the breath.

You can also apply noting to other experiences, such as “planning,” “worrying,” “daydreaming,” etc. Acknowledging them in a neutral, matter-of-fact way can help you detach from them, let them go, and return to the breath.

Touch Points

It’s common to lose focus on the breath at the beginning or end of an inhalation or an exhalation. The absence of strong stimulation at that point makes it easy to lose focus – though that moment is an interesting window into your mind when there is a relative space or emptiness between thoughts or other stimuli. You might like to pay particular attention to that space, and see what you find there!

Additionally, you could gently touch your finger to something at the end of each inhalation and exhalation – such as forefinger to thumb, or thumb to knee – as a way to keep you present and watchful.

The Brain in a Bucket

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[This article is adapted from my blog for Psychology Today.]

Have you ever seen a real brain?

I remember the first time I saw one, in a neuro- psych class: the instructor put on rubber gloves to protect against the formaldehyde preserva- tive, popped the lid off of a lab bucket, and then pulled out a brain.

It didn't look like much, a nondescript waxy yel- lowish-white blob rather like a sculpted head of cauliflower. But the whole class went silent. We were looking at the real deal, ground zero for consci- ous- ness, headquar- ters for "me." The person it came from – or, in a remark- able sense, the person who came from it – was of course dead. Would my brain, too, end up in a lab bucket? That thought gave me a creepy weird feeling completely unlike the feeling of having my heart or hand in a bucket some day – which gets right at the specialness of your brain.

That blobby organ – just three pounds of tofu- like tissue – is considered by scientists to be the most complex object currently known in the universe. It holds 100 billion neurons (see the schematic illustration just below) amidst another trillion support cells. A typical neuron makes about 5000 connections called synapses with oth- er neurons, producing a neural network with 500 trillion nodes in it. At any moment, each node is active or not, creating a kind of 0 or 1 bit of information. Neurons commonly fire five to fifty times a second, so while you've been reading this paragraph, lit- erally quadril- lions of bits of information have circulated inside your head.

Your nervous system – with its control center in the brain – moves information around like your heart moves blood around. Broadly defined, all that information is the mind, most of which is forever uncon- scious. Apart from the influence of hypothetical transcendental factors – call them God, Spirit, the Ground, or by no name at all – the mind is what the nervous system does. So if you care at all about your mind – including your emotions, sense of self, pleasures and pains, memories, dreams, reflections – (and who doesn't?) then it makes tons of sense to care about what's going on inside your own brain.

Until very recently, the brain was like the weath- er: you could care about it all you wanted, but you couldn't do a thing about it. But new brain imaging technologies like functional MRI's have revolutionized neuropsychology much as the invention of the microscope transformed biol- ogy. According to Dr. Alan Lesher, CEO of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, our knowledge of the brain has doubled in the past twenty years.

These breakthroughs have informed – and been informed by – practical applications in psycho- therapy. For example, trauma therapies have been improved by research on memory, while the results of interventions such as EMDR have suggested new lines of investigation. Like other therapists, I feel clearer about a client's mind because more is known about his or her brain.

I'm also a meditator – started in 1974, at the tail end of college – so it's been inspiring to see something similar happening with contem- plative practice. Some of the most interesting

studies of brain function have been done on long-term meditators, the Olympic athletes of mental training. For example, experienced meditators actually have thicker cortical layers in the brain regions responsible for self-awareness and the control of attention.

This illustrates a fundamental point with extraordinary potential: when your mind changes, your brain changes, both temporarily – with the momentary flicker of synaptic activity – and in lasting ways through formation of new neural structures. Therefore, you can use your mind to change your brain to benefit your whole being – and every other being whose life you touch.

The new neuroscience, combined with the insights of clinical psychology and contemplative practice, gives you an historically unprecedented opportunity to shift your brain – and thus your mind – toward greater happiness, love, and wisdom.

With just a little understanding of your own brain, you can reach down inside the enchanted loom of your very being and gradually weave greater strength, insight, confidence, contentment, and loving intimacy into the tapestry of your life. That's the great opportunity here: your brain is not in a bucket, it's alive and pulsing with possibility, waiting for the skillful touch of your mind to guide it in increasingly wonderful directions.