

## Right Concentration

### The Eighth Factor in the Noble Eightfold Path

*When the Buddha knew that the householder's mind was ready, soft, free from hindrances, joyful and bright, he expounded the teaching special to the Buddhas.*

—The Buddha (MN 56.18)

The final factor of the Eightfold Path is Right Concentration. The preceding seven factors all provide important support for our ability to develop a stable, focused, bright and concentrated mind. With the development of Right Concentration, the Eightfold Path can then culminate in insight and liberation.

Right Concentration prepares the mind for deep understanding and profound letting go. This occurs when the mind is “ready, soft, free from hindrances, joyful, and bright,” as in the description above of the householder’s mind, which the Buddha recognized as ready for the most significant teachings. Recognizing the expansive and unhindered quality of this mind is the task of the third foundation of mindfulness. Using this concentrated mind for wisdom is the task of the fourth foundation of mindfulness.

When we know how a concentrated mind is part of the Eightfold Path, we can use the possibility of the peaceful, expansive mind as a guidepost along the path. Rather than straining with striving and expectations, we cultivate receptive readiness. We let go deeply so that the mind can be free of tension. By understanding the value of a soft mind, we are less likely to get tense as we practice. When we remember the need to become free of the hindrances, we are less easily taken in by their authority. And when we understand the role of joy and mental brightness on the path, we will be quicker to recognize and support these states.

As befitting the metaphor of a journey along a path, the practice of Right Concentration itself involves a passage toward increasingly tranquil states of mind. In the same way that Right Mindfulness is a journey of deepening self-knowledge,

Right Concentration moves us inward toward the experiencing of progressively deeper wellsprings of stillness and clarity.

With Right Concentration the mind becomes unified as it shifts from being scattered, disorganized, and agitated to becoming calm and centered. When agitated, the mind easily jumps between bodily sensations, emotions, moods, thoughts, daydreams, desires, external events, and our reactions to what we are experiencing. When concentrated, the mind settles down and stays centered and undistracted. As we relax into a focused attention there is a growing experience of unification, of feeling whole with all our faculties working in harmony.

The unification of mind that comes with concentration can be seen in how the different factors that come into play with concentration all work together to support greater concentration. Relaxation and wholeness generates a feedback loop: concentration and unification relaxes the body, and the relaxed body supports further concentration; when concentration calms and brightens the mind, the calm and brightness sharpens concentration further; when concentration evokes joy or rapture, the joy provides incentive to further deepen the concentration and stillness.

Cultivating concentration takes patience and consistent practice. For most people concentration develops slowly, perhaps even imperceptibly with daily meditation practice. It can be useful to assume that only twenty-five percent of developing concentration is the intentional effort to stay present and focused; another twenty-five percent of the practice is an attitude of equanimity and receptivity; and a full fifty percent of concentration practice consists of letting go and relaxing.

All meditation practices develop concentration. Some practices have this as their primary purpose, while other practices have concentration as a by-product. One of the most common ways of developing concentration in meditation is to focus on our breathing. Another approach is loving-kindness practice where one focuses on one of the three following aspects of the practice: the intentions of loving-kindness toward ourselves and others, the phrases repeated as part of the practice, or the feelings that arise while doing it. A settled, undistracted mind can also be cultivated by focusing on the changing nature of present-moment experience, without emphasizing any particular object.

Concentration in meditation is not a laser-like focus originating in the “control tower” in the mind. Rather we cultivate it by physically and mentally settling our attention onto the object of focus with real intimacy. It requires letting go of distracting thoughts instead of forcibly pushing them away. To do this it helps to calm whatever mental energy is involved in any thinking. Establishing a firm but soft intentness to then stay focused is also helpful. Balancing this intentness with letting go into the object of concentration is useful.

It is best not to concentrate with brute mental force. Instead we can use our discernment to discover how to stay focused in a committed, relaxed way. We can develop wisdom about the hindrances to concentration and other forces that distract us. Instead of resorting to unhelpful tactics like aversion or resistance in the face of distractions, we can learn more effective strategies for overcoming them, leading to more tranquility and unification.

It is also useful to explore how to enjoy the practice. Not only can concentration practice bring joy, it can also bring tranquility and peace, sometimes to a greater degree than is usually available in daily life. Even small amounts of meditative joy and peace are useful for encouraging greater concentration.

A concentrated mind is a still mind, bright with awareness. As wonderful as this is, it is not an end in itself. Rather, for those walking the Eightfold Path, such a mind provides the clarity for deep insight and wisdom. In particular, deep concentration leads to penetrating insight into suffering and freedom from suffering. This in turn leads to a direct understanding of how much the Four Noble Truths are true and useful.

The Four Noble Truths stand at the beginning and the end of the Eightfold Path. At the beginning they provide the orientation for Right View. At the end the Truths are affirmed by the insights Right Concentration makes possible. With greater wisdom into the Four Noble Truths a person can then continue to walk the Eightfold Path with greater confidence and wisdom.

Additional Reading

- Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Right Concentration” in *The Noble Eightfold Path*
- Bhante Gunaratana, “Right Concentration” in *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*
- Gil Fronsdal, “Right Concentration” found posted at the [Audiodharma.org](http://www.Audiodharma.org) ‘Dharma Practice Series’.

## **Reflections and Practices: Right Concentration**

### **1- The Conditions for Concentration in Daily Life (Week 1)**

Recall one of the times of your life when you were especially concentrated in an enjoyable way. Was this episode associated with a period of your life, a particular activity, or a particular event? What external conditions fostered this concentration? What internal conditions within you supported this concentration? Which of the external and internal conditions did you have some choice over? Do you have some of this choice now? Is there a simple way that you could now recreate some of these conditions?

During this week put into place some of the conditions that support a more concentrated, calm, and alert mind. For example, you could focus on getting more sleep, exercise, free time, or relaxation. You could do more activities you enjoy or that nourish or renew you. Perhaps it helps to spend less time on the internet or watching TV. After doing this for a week, evaluate the benefits of this exercise versus the effort it took to put these conditions in place. Were your efforts worth it?

### **2-The Experience of Concentration (Week 2)**

This week, again recall times when you have been concentrated. This can be recently or long ago. What did it feel like to be concentrated? What did it feel like to be focused, centered, or absorbed? What physical body sensations and feelings came with the concentration? What was your mind or mind state at that time? Was calm or equanimity part of the experience? Were there any experiences of pleasure or enjoyment? What was your energy or vitality level like? Right after a period of concentration, how did you feel?

Focus on developing concentration in your meditation practice during this week. Make an effort to keep the mind on one object during the meditation period. If you are using the breath, you might count the breaths, from 1 to 10. If you lose count, simply start over at 1. As part of this emphasis on concentration, try to create conditions that support concentration. For example, do something relaxing or vitalizing just before you sit down to meditate. Consciously put aside concerns and pre-

occupations. As part of the concentration practice use any feelings, even preliminary feelings, of calm, stability, pleasure, enjoyment, or mental stillness as a kind of biofeedback to support further concentration.

### **3-Concentration and the Hindrances (Week 3)**

Becoming skilled in concentration includes developing wisdom about the hindrances to concentration. The five hindrances of desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and regret, and doubt are often listed as the primary obstacles to peaceful concentration emphasized in the Eightfold Path. If you are unfamiliar with the five hindrances, you can read my article “Hindrances to Clear Seeing,” which you can find on the article page of IMC’s website. ([insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/](http://insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/)). Spend some time considering which of the five hindrances is most common for you. Then read my article on that particular hindrance (also available on IMC’s website). Spend time this week reflecting on how you can reduce the power and frequency of these hindrances in your meditation and in your life. Consider ways you can let go of your most common hindrances. Talk with a friend about your experiences of the hindrances.

Continue last week’s practice of focusing on concentration during meditation. Notice which hindrances tend to be most common for you during this week’s meditation. Stay alert so that you can let go of thoughts connected to the hindrances as soon as they occur. Just before sitting down to meditate spend some minutes considering how you can set aside or overcome the hindrances.

### **4- Concentration and Wisdom (Week 4)**

The primary purpose of concentration is to facilitate deep insight and understanding. Spend some time reflecting on how being concentrated can help deepen understanding. In general, have you understood things better when you were concentrated and calm? How did the concentrated state contribute to your understanding? What can you learn from being concentrated that helps you become even more concentrated?

Over the course of this week focus your meditation practice on cultivating concentration. When you have become as concentrated as you think you will be during the meditation session, ask yourself what perspective on desire, aversion, clinging, thinking, and freedom you have from your current state of concentration. What does being concentrated teach you about the choices in the present moment that lead to being caught or that lead to being free?