

Practice Note: Practice as Kite Flying

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on May 19, 2010

One of the important aspects of meditation is becoming concentrated. The ability to get concentrated is in inverse proportion to how interested you are in your thinking. The more interest that goes into your thoughts or the images the mind makes, the less interest there is available for focusing on something like the breathing or loving kindness practice. The more energy that goes into thinking, the less energy there is available for concentration. The question is where do you put this wonderful, precious resource you have, of your energy, attention and involvement? In meditation we're choosing not to let the mind go off into the world of thoughts, but rather choosing some place to keep it centered, grounded, involved. We choose to get interested in that place, and to stay there the best we can.

Ideally, concentration involves steadying the attention on something like the breath, or on phrases of loving kindness. Is there a steadying or focusing in? There are many ways on focusing on the breath. If you've never done this before, one way that is often helpful for concentration is to focus on a small area for following the breath, which becomes the reference point for your attention – for example: a small area just below the naval, or in the middle of your chest, or perhaps the tip of your nose – some very small area that you're going to really hone in on, and surf on, or cruise on, or hang in on, or massage, or anything that will help you stay there in such a way that you're staying there, more than you're wandering off into your thoughts and ideas. You hang in there.

There are a couple images for staying put, staying present at one place, in focus and concentrated. One is flying a kite. In order for the kite to fly, the string has to be taut. If the string is too loose or gets slack, the kite will fall. If it's too tight, you can break the string in a strong wind. If a really a strong wind comes up in gusts, you let the string out, but you don't let go of the tautness; you keep it taut. If it gets loose, you pull the string in. You do the same thing with attention – you want to keep connected. I don't know if 'taut' is the right expression here, but you find just the right balance of attention. You keep the string attached from your mind to the point of your breathing. You want to keep it there with just right tautness – not slack, not tight as you stay with it. That's an image I've used which has been helpful for me.

Another image which someone else used, which she found it very helpful, was staying with the breath like riding a wild bronco in a rodeo. When she got the idea that she was trying to hang on and stay in the saddle of this wild bronco, then she was better able to hang in there with her breath.

I don't know what works better for you, but the idea is that it really helps a lot to get steady and focused, and to stay connected with one thing over a long period of time. Let the mind hone in, organize, and settle into the process, shedding or letting go of its concerns, its preoccupations with other things. Whether it's walking meditation or sitting meditation, concentration is a wonderful way to help the mind divest itself of some of its anxious preoccupations.