The Eightfold Path
The Eighth Factor: Right Concentration

When the Buddha knew that the householder Upali's mind was ready, soft, free from hindrances, joyful and bright, he expounded the teaching special to the Buddhas.
MN 141.30

The final factor of the Eightfold Path is Right Concentration. The preceding seven factors on the path provide important support for developing a 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 Upali's mind when he received the Buddha's most significant teachings.

Knowing that cultivating a "ready, soft, free from hindrances, joyful and bright" mind is part of the concentration factor of Eightfold Path can guide us along the path. Rather than straining under expectations, we can cultivate receptive readiness; plus, understanding the value of a soft mind protects us from getting tense with the practice; remembering the need to become free of the hindrances reduces the authority of these mental states; and understanding the role of joy and mental brightness can encourage us to recognize and support these states.

Upali experienced his concentrated mind while listening to the Buddha. However, in practicing the Eightfold Path, most people develop Right Concentration through meditation practice.

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. Similar to how Right Mindfulness is a journey of deepening self-knowledge, Right Concentration moves us inward to experiencing progressively deeper wellsprings of stillness. On the Eightfold Path, mindfulness and concentration work together: mindfulness provides clear awareness and concentration infuses mindfulness with peace.

With Right Concentration the mind also becomes unified as it goes from being scattered, agitated, and discursive to becoming calm and centered. When agitated, the mind easily jumps between sensations in our bodies, emotions, moods, thoughts, daydreams, desires, events around us, and our reactions to what we are experiencing. When concentrated, the mind settles down and stays undistracted. As we relax into a focused attention our physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts join together to support a unified attention. A feedback loop then operates: when concentration relaxes the body, the relaxed body supports further concentration.

Part of the delight of concentration is the progressive silencing of discursive thinking. The energy that usually goes into thinking becomes increasingly available for heightened clarity and peace. It can be a relief to be free of the incessant chattering in the mind.

Cultivating concentration takes patience and consistent practice. For most people concentration develops slowly, perhaps even imperceptibly, with day-to-day 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; twenty-five percent of the practice is an attitude of equanimity and receptivity; and a full fifty percent of concentration practice is letting go and relaxing.

All meditation practices develop concentration. Some practices have this as their primary purpose, while with other practices concentration is a by-product. One of the most common ways of developing concentration in meditation is to focus on breathing. Another approach is loving-kindness practice. A concentrated 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 it is physically and mentally settling the attention onto the object of focus. While establishing a firm intentness to stay focused is helpful, 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 aversion or resistance to distractions, we can learn to calm whatever mental energy is involved with them. When letting go of distractions it can be helpful to simultaneously letting go *into* the object of the concentration.

It is also useful to explore how to enjoy the practice. Not only can concentration practice bring joy, it can also bring peace, often to a greater degree than is 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. This 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, it leads to penetrating insight into the Four Noble Truths. And because concentration softens mental rigidity and fear, it facilitates the letting go and freedom that this insight shows is possible.

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.

Gil Fronsdal

When the Buddha knew that the householder Upali's mind was
ready, soft, free from hindrances, joyful and bright,
he expounded the teaching special to the Buddhas:
suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path.

MN 141.30