

**Practice #4: Concentrate and Calm Your Mind**

*Chapters 19, 20, 21*

OVERVIEW

**[4] Concentrate and calm your mind**

**Keywords:** Calming the mind, Concentration

The focus of this practice is taming the "monkey mind" - that is, our distracted, wandering, restless minds and hearts. This is an absolute condition for developing spirituality. I understand "spirituality" to be: paying attention to the "scientifically non-quantifiable" aspects of ourselves and engaging seriously in the human quest for meaning, depth and transcendence. Walsh describes "spirituality" as "a direct experience of the Sacred."

**Sample Exercises:** Do one thing at a time with mindfulness; Take regular breath meditations; Transform interruptions into wakeup calls

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**1. Your Meandering Mind (Chapter 19, Page 147)**

Summary:

Our minds are naturally restless. An uncontrolled and untrained mind can have "an enormous toll on our spiritual and physiological well-being" (Walsh, 150). Training your attention and concentration is a valuable endeavor. The Great Religions from across the globe have offered solutions to the problem of concentration.

1.1 Key Points from Chapter 19

Can you tame your mind? **(Page 148)**

- The recognition of just how extraordinarily out of control our minds is shocking
- For almost the entire twentieth century Western psychology wrongly accepted the idea that "Attention can-not be continuously sustained" thereby severely underestimating our capacities.

How great religions solved the problem **(Page 149)**

- Buddhists have long compared the mind, lurching from thought to thought, to a crazy monkey leaping erratically from branch to branch. (This is often called "the monkey mind".)

- Western psychologists say attention cannot be sustained, but the great religions say that it can and must be sustained

#### Cost of Poor Concentration: **(Page 151)**

- An unconcentrated mind leads to an unconcentrated life. When you cannot focus the mind, it jumps from one thing to another leading to distraction and agitation. Great religions have concluded that we all suffer from a hyperactive attention which has severe psychological, relationship, and spiritual costs.
- Practicing “unwise attention” or filling the mind with violence, greed, and fear, will cause those qualities to grow within the mind itself.

#### Benefits of a Concentrated Mind **(Page 153)**

- By controlling attention, you can concentrate on, “specific people and memories in order to evoke desired qualities such as love and joy.”
- Mental “diet” affects mental health.
- Practicing “wise attention” and focusing on cultivating healthy states of mind can help benefit your psychological state.
- “What we concentrate on, we become; and once we can control attention, we can concentrate on anything we wish. This opens enormous possibilities.” (153)

## **2. Develop a Peaceful Mind (Chapter 20, Page 154)**

Summary:

Mastering attention is a slow process and can include specific methods like meditation and contemplation. Meditation and other concentration techniques have two key elements in common, they choose a focus for attention (such a breath or a prayer) and when attention wanders, they return it to the point of focus.

### 2.1 Key Points from Chapter 20

#### Meditation: A universal practice **(Page 155)**

- Many people think that <meditation and contemplation-practices that train attention in order to foster spiritual growth> solely as techniques of Asian religions.
- Meditation has been used for thousands of years in both the Jewish and Christian traditions.
- Meditation is a worldwide practice that has an honored place in the history and heart of all the great traditions.

#### Common Elements: **(Page 155)**

- Meditators choose a focus for attention (the breath, an image, a word, or a prayer)
- When attention wanders, they gently return it to this focus, again and again and again
  - This is the heart of the method: to return attention each time it wanders.
- This takes time to learn. Patience and Persistence are of utmost importance

**Exercise One: do one thing at a time (Page 156)**

- Our lives often feel fragmented from doing many different things at the same time.
- Choose a specific time of day to do only one thing at a time and focus your attention on each individual activity.
- This exercise is the basis of “voluntary simplicity.”

**Exercise Two: Transform Daily Activities into Sacred Rituals (Page 158)**

- Use simple activities as techniques for spiritual awakening.
- Select a particular activity and commit to doing it for a period of time with as much awareness as possible. Such as opening a door. (There are many useful books about this such as Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Happiness* and Jan Chozen Bays’ *How to Train a Wild Elephant*)
- This awareness transforms a normal activity into a sacred ritual and a moment of awakening.

**Exercise Three: Transform Interruptions into Wake-up Calls (Page 160)**

- Interruptions of various kinds occur throughout the day. Instead of responding automatically, try to take a moment to relax or take a breath before continuing.
- Select one or two common interruptions to use as “wake-up calls” and then decide how to incorporate a moment of calm before you respond.

**Exercise Four: Three Breaths (Page 161)**

- The breath, according to many traditions, is connected to our “spirit and life force.”
- Paying attention to the breath is a common method of contemplation.
- Turn your attention onto your breath and take three long slow breaths, relaxing and letting go.
- You can add words to accompany inhalation and exhalation.
  - Example: Breathing in I smile, breathing out I relax. This is a wonderful moment

**Exercise Five: Take Regular Breath Meditations (Page 161)**

- Schedule times for brief breath-meditation into the day.
- They can be scheduled either at regular intervals or at times of transition or difficulty.
- They can be mindful breaths before a stressful event or calming breaths to start a new hour.

**Exercise Six: Sustained Concentration on the Breath (Page 162)**

- A more challenging meditation exercise as it requires sustained concentration.
- Find a quiet place to sit and turn your attention to your body and posture.
- Take slow deep breaths to assist with relaxation.
- Turn attention to the experience of breathing, notice the sensations and air flow.
- Select a sensation of the body, like the abdomen, to focus on.
- Your mind will naturally wander, each time return it to the object of your concentration consciously and gently. There is no need to scold yourself about this.
- Make sure not to struggle or fight the mind, but to treat it gently.

- At the end of the meditation see if you notice any clarity and calm that you cultivated in your daily activities.

#### Exercise Seven: First Breath Last Breath **(Page 164)**

- After practicing sustained breath meditation, you can add variation to the exercise.
- Imagine you are an infant just born into the world and taking its first breath.
- then imagine you are at the end of your life, taking your last breaths.
- It is a general exercise that helps you “practice for death;” this will allow for peace and stability of the mind which can help lead –when the time comes—to a more peaceful death.

#### Exercise Eight: Repeat the Name of God **(Page 164)**

- Meditations on sacred sounds, like the name of God, can be evocative and powerful
- Decide on a length of meditation and then begin a ‘sustained breath meditation.’
- Once the body is in a relaxed state, begin to gently repeat your favorite name of God.
- Repeat the name slowly and gently, allowing it to work its effects on you.

#### Exercise Nine: Contemplative Prayer **(Page 165)**

- Contemplative prayer is different from a request or dialogue, the focus is the repetition of a spiritually significant word, phrase, or sentence.
- Choose a line from a sacred text.
- Like the meditation on the name of God, repeat the phrase gently over and over.
- Continue to return your attention to the phrase.

#### Establishing a Routine **(Page 166)**

- With all the exercises listed above, establishing a routine that allows you to stick with it is important.
- Additionally, it can be beneficial to discuss your experience of the exercises with a wise friend, teacher, or guide.
- Contemplation and meditation are skills that take time to master.
- How much and how often should these contemplative sessions be done? In general, more is better. But it is better to start with a small, manageable commitment
- With contemplation, over time, the pleasures increase until eventually your contemplation, meditation, or prayer becomes a source of delight for you and those whose lives you touch.

### **3. The Higher Reaches of Concentration and Calm (Chapter 21, Page 168)**

#### Summary:

As spiritual practice deepens, concentration and calm increase. This yields an unshakeable and profound type of peace which the Buddha called, “the highest form of happiness.”

### 3.1 Key Points from Chapter 21

#### Continuous Concentration (**Page 169**)

- “As the capacity for concentration matures, the ability to give care and attention to each moment becomes increasingly steady and continuous”
- The goal is to have this culminate it into a “continuous, unbroken practice in which each moment and each activity becomes a means for awakening”
- A calm mind offers a clear mirror with which to look out at the world and in at ourselves. Less compelled by compulsive needs, less troubled by painful emotions, less perturbed by ethical lapses, and less disturbed by wandering attention
- Once a calm and clear mind is established, *you can then begin to awaken sacred vision*, the object of the next practice