

CHAPTER 3

Eleven Supports for Developing Concentration

*One need not rein in the mind from everything
When the mind has come under control.
From whatever it is that evil comes,
From this one should rein in the mind.*

—SAMYUTTA NIKĀYA⁶⁵

THE BUDDHIST TRADITION offers us a handy condensed list of eleven specific ways of supporting concentration.⁶⁶ Please reflect on each item, and consider how the practice of each skill might enhance the conditions for focus, calm, and concentration in your life.

1. *Cultivate cleanliness.* Your mind will be less distracted if your physical environment is clean, neat, and organized. When basic bodily hygiene and house cleaning are in order, fewer things will compete for your attention. Simple routines, like brushing your teeth, tidying your room, organizing your desk, filing papers, and generally keeping daily life duties well organized is one basic preparation for concentration. The *Vimuttimaggā* recommends arranging that your physical needs are supportive for concentration, such as suitable food, agreeable weather, and comfortable posture.⁶⁷
2. *Avoid extremes.* Develop a balanced attention through cultivating the five controlling faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration,

and wisdom as discussed in chapter 2. In particular, balance faith with wisdom, so that neither an excessively critical nor an overly gullible stance overshadows awareness. Also balance concentration with energy so that effort and focus grow stable together like a swift chariot drawn by horses of equal strength and endurance.⁶⁸ Strive to bring balance to any area of your life that seems to swing between the extremes of deficiency and excess.

3. *Choose a clear subject for meditation, and know your object well.* Develop clarity regarding both the subject and the object. For example, with the meditation subject of the breath, the object of attention might sometimes be the touch sensation, the nimitta, or the recognition of breath. When working with the meditation subject of loving-kindness, the object might be a dear friend, a squirrel, or all living beings. Fully embrace your meditation subject. If you work with the breath as the subject for meditation and someone were to ask you, “how do you experience the breath?” would you be able to describe the perceptions that you experience as the breath? Would you be able to clearly describe the specific object of attention? Be patient. Remain with your chosen meditation subject without succumbing to the temptation to switch to a new one when you feel bored, tired, or challenged. After concentration is well established, you may go on to incorporate a series of additional practices, but in the initial stages it’s necessary to remain clearly attentive to a single, distinct meditation subject, allowing the perception of that object to naturally become more and more subtle.
4. *Dispel sluggishness.* If the mind falls into dullness, actively enliven your attention by arousing three enlightenment factors—investigation, energy, and joy. The tradition offers many suggestions for stimulating these factors.⁶⁹ You might exert the mind by studying Dhamma, enhance interest by asking questions, gain inspiration by offering alms or performing acts of generosity, generate joy by reflecting on your virtue, inspire urgency by considering the fearful consequences of laziness, energize attention by changing postures or sitting in the

open air, avoid overeating which might cause sluggishness, and set your resolve upon the development of an alert, energetic, and joyful quality of attention.

5. *Calm the mind when it becomes overenthusiastic.* Occasionally you may need to restrain the surging energies that build with concentration. When rapture is intense, excitement and elation can overpower the mind like the swell of a tidal wave. Excessive delight will hinder progress. Learn to calm and channel the energies of pleasure. Don't let the jubilant energy of *jhāna* seduce you away from a composed presence. If you feel excessive elation or giddiness growing, feel your feet on the ground, take a few slower and deeper breaths, sense the body, and control your thoughts. Intentionally restrain, compose, and calm yourself. Channel your mental energy to develop tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.⁷⁰

6. *Encourage the mind when progress is painful or slow.* Lift the mind up when it becomes discouraged. You may naturally feel disheartened at times, so it is beneficial to know how to uplift your mind when you feel disappointed or frustrated. What might delight your mind without distracting you from your goal? What would inspire your practice and carry you just a little further along the path of awakening, even when you just don't feel like being aware? What actions or reflections have an encouraging effect for you?

You might be inspired by reflecting on Buddha's qualities, cultivating loving-kindness, reading passages from the Discourses of the Buddha or recalling quotes from your teachers, reflecting on your goals, sensing the power of previous acts of generosity, or reciting chants. Any of these activities might infuse a discouraged mind with energy.

Contemplating the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha can remind us that for thousands of years people have cultivated these practices to free the mind from suffering—you can too! Reflecting on death may stimulate spiritual urgency and dispel procrastination or negligence. Inspire yourself to overcome challenges and strive for your highest potential.

When you are absorbed in *jhāna*, pain cannot arise, but before and after absorption, pain may sometimes assail you. Chronic or intense pain is exhausting, but you can learn to encourage the listless mind with purposeful urgency and faith. Become sensitive to early signs that the mind is becoming fatigued, overwhelmed, or withered by pain and respond to these clues by easing up or backing off. Respect your vulnerabilities, and face what is difficult a little at a time. Use walking, standing, or reclining meditation to provide some ease for the body while maintaining the continuity of practice. Awareness of pain can, in its own way, bring profound rewards. Facing the fact of pain conveys us toward an experience of peace and compassion that is deeper than what comfort usually affords; when we hurt, we are rarely complacent.

Especially when in a busy lay life, take a moment before you fall to sleep at night to cheer your mind. Reflect on your day, recalling acts of virtue and good things that occurred. If you can't think of anything good, then consider that at least there won't be any more problems to deal with today; perhaps that thought will cheer the mind before you fall to sleep.

7. *Maintain a continuously balanced awareness.* Apply effort that is neither forced nor lax. Sometimes an intensely vigorous resolve is required. Other times you'll refresh attention joyfully with the buoyant energy of enthusiasm. And there will be other times when you look upon your meditation object quietly with equanimity. Adjusting your energetic connection with the meditation object to bring the attention into skillful balance can be a bit like riding a bicycle—when you are on a bike, you are not fixed in a static central position but are continuously returning to balance as you adjust to the variously changing forces of movement, inertia, and gravity. A meditator who is skillful at maintaining a balanced, even, and equanimous attention on the object is likened to a charioteer whose horses progress evenly together.⁷¹

Your engagement with the meditation subject will invite a dynamic process of continuous adjustment. Self-assessment or judging, however,

can interrupt the momentum of concentration. Inhibit any tendency to judge how well the meditation is going, or to measure how close you are to absorption. If rapture begins to arise, don't dissipate it by rushing off to tell someone about it. When concentration begins to intensify, relax any excessive excitement that might otherwise interrupt the tranquility of the meditation. Remain alert; when you feel deeply still and calm, restlessness could re-arise and concoct stories starring your radiantly composed self who performs enlightened activities! When these habits and tendencies arise, balance your awareness, or they will pull you back into distraction.

8–9. Avoid distracted friends, and seek the company of focused friends. You don't need to search out a soul mate or expect that your friends and family will follow a meditative path. Social encounters do, however, leave impressions in memory that can ripple through the mind during later meditations. If your associates frequently engage in unethical activities or harmful speech, it may be wise to find new companions. If your friends don't share your interest in concentration, you might seek out a local meditation group to provide supplemental social support for your practice.

10. Reflect on the peace of absorption. Contemplate the peaceful and admirable qualities associated with the attainment of jhānas and liberation, and let the potential of this deep happiness inspire your practice.

11. Incline the mind to develop concentration. A clear resolve sets the direction for your development. Articulate your intention and recollect it. Recall that intention each and every time you sit to meditate.

➔ **MEDITATION INSTRUCTION 3.1**
Observing the Whole Breath

In your daily meditation, focus your attention repeatedly and exclusively on the whole breath. Observe the breath from the very beginning of the inhalation, through the middle, and to the end of each

in-breath and each out-breath. Direct your attention to perceive the breath at the spot between the nostrils and upper lip. As your attention dwells with the breath for some time without distraction, certain experiences associated with concentration may arise. When the breath is uninterruptedly known for a long time, the mind becomes light, buoyant, and bright. Perception of the size and shape of the body may change. Feelings of contentment, rapture, and happiness may flood consciousness. It is not a problem to notice these natural changes as subtle shifts in the background of awareness, but do not give your attention directly to these expressions of concentration. Many pleasant mental factors will develop, but if you follow each one, they will distract you from the simplicity of mindfulness with breathing and will stall the deepening of concentration. Consciousness can receive only one object at a time, so if you are observing changing mental factors instead of the breath, you are not sustaining attention on the chosen meditation object. Remain consistently and exclusively attentive to the breath, undeterred by hindrances, and unswayed by the pleasures associated with concentration. ←