

Right Concentration!

by Lisa Hoffman

Who knew I would find Right Concentration so sexy?

When I first heard the term, it conjured up the image of a stern Zen master with a tight topknot facing a wall while meditating. I figured this was what I should aspire to and it felt pretty intimidating. As I learned more about Right Concentration, I discovered that this samurai-like figure represents fierce energy and commitment to meeting life exactly as it is. Intimidation gradually shifted into inspiration, especially as I discovered that this kind of focus is only one aspect of a flow of energy that *is* the present moment.

How does Right Concentration flow? Recently, I gave a talk at the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha, and found myself facing a group of about 20 that included someone I had dated, and someone I find attractive. I had ended the dating relationship, about which the woman before me had not been happy, and we hadn't seen each other since. I know that the other woman and I are wrong for each other, but how often does such knowledge override attraction? To make the scenario even more interesting, two members of the meditation group I lead were also there.

We started the evening by meditating for half an hour. As I sat, I felt how distracting the dynamics could be. My thoughts were pulled to the woman I had dated, the woman who made my heart flutter, and the fact that my meditation group members relied on me as an example of stability in meeting the present moment. The pressure was on! I brought my focus back to my breath, and then opened it up to embrace *everything* in that room and beyond. Then it was time for me to talk, and my topic couldn't have been more relevant: *Turning toward Everything*. The speaking experience was an extension of my meditation that night, with my focus shifting back and forth between the individuals and the entire group.

Right Concentration was among the Buddha's teachings after becoming enlightened. He taught the truth of suffering, its connection with wanting life to be a certain way, and that our relationship to suffering can shift. The Buddha's Eightfold Noble Path is a road map to this shift, and a point on the Path is Right Concentration. It is the kind of focus we bring to life, life brings to us, and the quality of engagement this focus creates.

It would have been very easy for me to ignore the two women I felt uncomfortable about and concentrate only on the others. This approach would have made it easier for me to deal with the situation, but it also would have cut out a big chunk of what was really happening. Of course, I could have focused primarily on the woman I was attracted to, or the woman I had gone out with, or both. Needless to say, that approach probably would have been less than helpful.

Right Concentration for me on this occasion meant my attention flowed from the individuals to the larger group, with my range of feelings also part of the experience. The larger group and the intention of the evening was primarily the foreground of my consciousness, and the individuals were largely the background, as were my feelings and thoughts. But nothing was left out, and it was a wonderful, edgy experience that was full of energy. It reminds me of how Thich Nhat Hanh talks about samadhi, or Right Concentration, in *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*: "To practice samadhi is to live deeply each moment that is given us to live... when you are deeply concentrated, you are absorbed in the moment. You *become* the moment."

It is possible to cultivate concentration as a skill and there are two meditation approaches that help. One is to narrow your focus on your breath, a candle, or a mantra (a short phrase that you repeat in your mind). There are many ways to direct your concentration; other examples are sound or sensation. This single-pointed practice develops your ability to become completely absorbed in the object of your meditation. Wisdom arises because this level of concentration can dissolve all barriers, creating complete connection with everything and everyone. When you become one with what's in front of you, you become one with the whole world.

The other method of developing concentration is to open your meditation up to everything. In Zen this is called shikantaza or *just sitting*. You are aware of the clothing on your body, the sounds in the street, your feelings and thoughts, the breathing of your neighbors. This kind of meditation nurtures deep connection with all beings and things in the opposite way that single-pointed practice does. You are taking in your entire environment and this panoramic view cultivates insight and wisdom because you are directly connected with the whole world.

The skills cultivated by these practices helped me to simply sit with reactions that came up on the night of my talk to the Lesbian Buddhist Sangha. The many feelings and thoughts arose and passed away and were only one part of a larger experience, grounded by concentration that moved from the single-pointed to the panoramic. Nothing was left out, from nervousness to pleasure, because of this flow. As Tony Patchell one of my teachers, says: "Concentration arises naturally and with little effort as thoughts and feelings fall away. Don't think of it as a 'solid' endeavor. You can sort of wind your way through your mental and physical activity and move to it."

This kind of movement certainly fit my experience when speaking with the group. So where does the samurai Zen master come in? For me, this resolute energy inspires me to keep sitting and to keep meeting life as it is, even when it is *seriously* uncomfortable, even painful. It has also motivated me to keep meditating over the years, even when I was convinced that my meditation was no good, when I thought I was getting it all wrong because thoughts and feelings kept arising. Eventually that concentration has helped to cultivate stability. The thoughts and feelings keep coming and going, I keep sitting, and life gets more and more interesting from this engagement.

So that's why I find Right Concentration so sexy. It's the movement, flexibility and heart of engaging with this life that is in front of me right now.

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