

## Attention Regulation Skill Practice (Outline)

### Before beginning the practice

*Place, posture, eyes, duration:*

- Quiet, comfortable place to sit free from distractions. Try to use the same place everyday
- Hands comfortably stacked in the lap or on each thigh. Do not roll the shoulders forward
- Erect and comfortable posture. Eyes either closed or partially closed and gazing 2-3 feet forward
- Timer: try starting at 10-15 minutes. Increase time as you become more comfortable

*The objects of attention, the “teachers” of attention, and the 3 Regulative Skills:*

- Object of attention: the thing you place your attention on (breath)
- 5 things that hinder attention that we can also learn from (desire/liking, aversion/disliking, distraction, frustration, and sleepiness)
- When you notice mind wandering, use the 3 attention-regulating skills: Monitor, Disengage, Redirect
- Show yourself kindness as you are distracted – the mind is built to wander!

### Beginning – During the practice

*Establish “observer perspective” with the tool of attention:*

- General feeling of the body settling
- Detailed focus of a nearby object (in the room)
- Detailed focus of a distant object (far-side of the room or outside)
- Turn the tool of attention to the breath

*Watching the Breath*

*Counting:*

- Notice the effortlessness of breathing, one breath at a time, and the length of each breath
- Count each in- and out-breath (between 5 and 9 breaths before beginning again)
- Phases of each breath (beginning-middle-end of each breath)
- Meet mind-wandering with 3 regulative skills and show yourself kindness and patience

*Connecting:*

- Cycle of in- and out-breaths
- Spaces between each breath
- Sink into the rhythm of the cycle and spaces of breathing
- Notice the perpetual cessation of breath (each in-breath ends with an out-breath; each out-breath ends with an in-breath)
- Meet mind-wandering with 3 regulative skills and show yourself kindness and patience

### Ending the practice

*Take a moment:*

- When the timer goes off, notice your overall physical, mental, and emotional state. Is it different? How? What was easy? What was more difficult or what did you feel stuck on? Try to avoid assessing your “performance” as good or bad
- Make note of what you will try to work through and what you will need to adjust for next time
- Before getting up, take several deep breaths (breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, etc. 3-5 seconds each)

## Attention Regulation Skill Practice (Detail)

### Before beginning the practice

#### *Place, posture, eyes, duration:*

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit. It should be a place free of most distractions (although any noises you hear can be incorporated into the practice) and not too bright or dark lest you feel over-stimulated or become sleepy. You may want to choose a spot you can use everyday at the same time everyday – this may help your progress. You can choose to sit on the floor or in a chair. Sit with your back comfortably (not rigidly) straight – imagine you are a marionette puppet and there is a string attached to the very top of your head holding up your body (another image is to think of your head as a floating balloon and your spine as the string). This type of posture will aid in maintaining alertness, comfort, and clarity. Set your hands either palms-up in your lap (one on top of the other – e.g. the left hand holding the back of the right hand with both palms facing up) or palms-down on either thigh. Whichever you choose, attempt to stay there throughout the session. This practice is typically done with eyes closed but may be done with eyes slightly open with the gaze angled in the direction of a spot on the floor about 5 feet in front of you. If eyes are kept open, try to keep the visual focus in the air about 2 feet away from you (about the distance of reading a book). Try to set a timer for the session. Choose a duration you think you could manage with only some difficulty (if you don't think you will struggle with 10 minutes, try 15; if you could easily sit for 20, try 30). Remember, the difficulty of concentration practice is what we use to improve our concentration – bringing the attention back after it wanders is the way attention gets stronger. Using a timer will allow you to focus completely on your attention-building instead of wondering how long you have left.

#### *The objects of attention, the “teachers” of attention, and the 3 Regulative Skills:*

When strengthening attention, an object is chosen on which to place the attention. This object can be a physical object (like a picture or a shape) or it could be a mental object or sensation (like a thought, phrase, or feeling of the body). We will begin with the breath as the object of attention, but feel free to experiment! It may be obvious that distraction, frustration, or sleepiness may hinder the process of developing strengthened attention. Two other hindrances to attention development are not so obvious: desire and aversion (these could also be thought of as liking/wanting and disliking/not-wanting). Liking or not-liking what we notice during attention-building take our focus off of the object of attention and puts our focus on our response to the object. If we experience aversion toward a distraction or desiring to maintain a sense of joy or peace while practicing, we are losing our attention to those feelings rather than simply placing the attention on the object. These 5 hindrances of attention are also the teachers of attention. We learn to strengthen our attention by noticing when we are not paying attention (due to distraction, frustration, sleepiness, desire, or aversion) and move the attention back to the chosen object of attention (we will start with the breath). The way to move the attention back is comprised of 3 skills of regulation: *Monitor* (for conflicts in attention), *Disengage* (from the distraction), and *Redirect* (back toward the object of attention). These take practice and work interdependently.

I will not mention this throughout the description of the skill practices, but whenever the mind wanders (as it inevitably will), recognize the wandering as a result of one of the 5 *hindrances of attention objectivity and clarity*, utilize the 3 *regulative skills*, and guide the attention back to the chosen object of attention with self-compassion (self-kindness, patience, unconditional self-acceptance, and even self-forgiveness).

## Beginning – During the practice

### *Establishing “observer perspective” with the tool of attention:*

As you start to feel settled, notice how your body generally feels in this position. There should be some effort made to maintain an erect posture, but the body should be generally relaxed. Notice little things like how the legs feel against the chair or the floor (depending on how you chose to sit) or how your lips feel as they touch each other. As you close your eyes (if you choose), imagine a small spot in the room you are sitting in (something like the very center of the room, the door knob, an outlet, the screen on the window, a mark on the carpet, etc.). While only visualizing it in your mind, focus on as much detail of the object as possible. Try to become absorbed by the visualized object. Imagine how that spot came to be – how it was made, how it changed and will continue to change over time – and imagine how it may cease to be the same spot in the future – as the materials wear away or change beyond recognition. Once you feel very familiar with that spot, imagine a different spot, but this time something outside the room you are in. Try a small piece of bark or leaf on a tree across the street, a tread on a car tire, one brick on the steps, a bug resting on the roof, etc. Try to focus on this new object as you did the first with all the detail and absorption. Notice how you control your attention and how it changes your experience. Imagine the attention as a tool that you can use to change your experiences in other ways too. Next, take the tool of attention and focus it on the breath. Consider the breath as being a post to which you tie a wild, wandering pet (the wandering mind) with the rope of attention. The rope will continually bring the pet back as it tries to bound away to chase whatever catches its eye.

### *Watching the Breath*

#### *Counting (phase, establishing a feel for each breath, and handling mind-wandering):*

Notice the breath moving in and out of the body. Notice that you do not need to make an effort to breathe: it happens all on its own and it happens all the time. Observe one breath at a time: first the in-breath; then the out-breath; then the next in-breath; and so on. Continue in this manner as you notice the length of each breath. If you notice you are attempting to change the breath, remember that you do not need to help yourself breathe, and try to release that attempt to control and continue watching without interfering with your own breathing. If it helps, visualize that a “tool of attention” (like a fishing net or a beam of light) is between you and the breath. Or think of your attention as a hand and the breath as a gently flowing stream of water. Dip the hand into a stream and feel the current lightly pressing against it. This is just noticing. This is observing the breath without interference. Taking each breath one at a time, you may find it helpful to count each breath – stay between 5 and 10 breath-counts before starting over. Also, begin to track the beginning, middle, and end *phase* of each breath as it connects to the next one. Tracking the phases of each breath will keep the mind busy while you count. As you notice feeling distracted, frustrated, doubtful in your ability, bored, etc., utilize the *3 regulative skills* to gently and lovingly guide the attention back to the breath. Show yourself kindness by mentally saying something like “It’s ok” or “This is the purpose of the practice”. If you feel like you are not doing it right, notice that feeling, accept that you feel it, observe what that feeling is like, and know that it is just a feeling or thought and not who you are. After that, observe it until it leaves. If this or another similar thought/feeling arises again, treat it the same way.

#### *Connecting (cycle and space):*

After experiencing each breath moving at its own length and duration, move to connecting the breaths by observing them in tandem – as one ends, another is beginning; as that one ends, yet another begins – this is the *cycle* of breathing. You are broadening your scope of attention at this point, so when you are met with the mind wandering, respond compassionately. Show yourself kindness, patience, and guidance. Imagine what an inspiring teacher/expert would say to you if he/she were in your mind helping you through the process. As you stretch your attention to capture the cyclical nature of the breaths, notice when this becomes automatic. When it does, try to notice (in detail) what it is like in the *space* between each breath, too. Try to find the rhythm of these things working interdependently – the cycle of breaths and the spaces separating each breath – and sink into the rhythm you find there. Finding this rhythm and sinking into it requires a movement from a broader focus to a more subtle: moving from noticing the broad cycles of in- and out-breaths to including the more subtle spaces or gaps between each breath. The characteristic quality here is to ultimately notice the perpetual *cessation* of breath – ceaseless ending always marks the beginning of each moment of breathing. Again, throughout this process, as you notice distraction, frustration, sleepiness/boredom, liking, or not-liking, respond with skill and self-compassion: monitor for distraction, disengage from the object of distraction, and redirect the attention back to the breath while maintaining an attitude of self-kindness and patience (as an inspiring teacher or coach would). Once your attention is back on the breath, sink back into the rhythm of the breath and continue...

## Ending the practice

### *Take a moment:*

After the timer has gone off and you have opened your eyes, notice your physical and mental response to what you just experienced. Notice any differences in your body, stress level, emotional feelings, pace and quality of thinking (racing thoughts, clear mind, or “spacey” brain), memories, and overall states of mind (well-being, anxiety, neutral feelings). Try to avoid assessing your “performance”. Being “good at” or “bad at” this skill is not important – the key is to maintain an attitude that allows you to continually return to the object of attention with non-judgment.

This time after you finish your session can inform you for the next time. Try to be discerning about what to try to work through and what to adjust during your next session. An example of something you might want to work through may be continual feelings of frustration – try to turn that frustration into a temporary object of attention. Watch it arise, sit with it until it dissipates, and then return to the breathing. On the other hand, if you felt like you kept falling asleep, you might want to adjust by altering your posture to ensure a sense of alertness. Whatever you do, remember that this practice is to be used as a tool to strengthen attention, not to judge how long you can focus on something. Each time you return the wandering attention, you strengthen it. Just like the hard part in working out is the part that is beneficial – continually lifting the weights after the muscles relax – the difficulty of returning concentration to the object of attention is the purpose of this entire exercise. So, as you think of all the ways you are distracted during your practice session, maybe even feel grateful for the opportunity to strengthen your attention by merely noticing the distraction, accepting it, watching it pass, and guiding the attention back to where you want it. Breathe in deeply a few times (breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, etc. 3-5 seconds each) before getting up and continuing with your day.