A Practice of 61-Points to Sharpen Concentration
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We are trained from birth to attend almost exclusively to the external world. Steeped in the concept of linear time and the law of cause and effect, we develop the habit of turning our minds outward and allowing our attention to be directed by our senses. So, it is only natural that when we sit for meditation, our minds wander, drawn away by sense stimuli or by memories of past sensory experiences. Because meditation is the process of maintaining an unwavering, inward focus on an object, word, or physiological process such as breathing, preparing for meditation entails perfecting our ability to concentrate. If the mind can be made one-pointed, it may later be directed effectively. The 61-points exercise offers enough "movement" to capture the attention of a roving mind and train it to become inward and orderly.

Preparing for meditation entails perfecting our ability to concentrate. In this exercise, the student travels mentally throughout the body while reclining in the corpse posture. Appropriately, the traditional name for the 61-points exercise is shavayatra, "traveling through the corpse." Its origin can be traced to The Vasishtha Samhita and the ayurvedic text, The Sushruta Samhita.

What You Gain
The first and most noticeable benefit of 61-points is a deep and complete release of muscular tension. This exercise affects the physical body by working deeply on the pranic field and the nervous system. Systematic relaxations generally focus on relaxing muscle groups, but 61-points focuses on vital, nerve-rich points in the body, helping to balance the subtle energies and increasing mental harmony in the process.

The second benefit is that this practice trains the mind to be one-pointed. As you direct your attention in a systematic and orderly fashion for a definite period of time, you increase your ability to concentrate—a much underrated skill these days. A one-pointed mind is helpful in all areas of life, but it is indispensable in the journey toward self-understanding.

The third benefit from practicing this exercise is that it begins to shift the direction of your attention inward. In our daily lives we are rewarded for being attentive to external events, but to be successful in yoga practice, we need to learn how to turn the mind inward. The habit of directing the mind through the senses to objects of the world can be an obstacle to entering the internal realm if the mind stubbornly resists turning inward. Practicing 61-points is a means of redirecting the flow of the mind from the outward channel of the senses to the subtle inner levels of our mind-body connection and the vital energy that sustains us. This inward orientation increases self-awareness by heightening sensitivity to our internal states.

Starting Out
Shavayatra is an advanced practice. It is not commonly taught to beginning students because it requires experience with diaphragmatic breathing and systematic relaxation. If you are not familiar with these techniques, it would be advisable for you to gain some practical experience with them before attempting shavayatra.

Once you have acquired this experience with relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing, the next step is to master a shorter, preliminary exercise—31-points. This focuses on the upper half of the body, while 61-points encompasses the entire body. Practicing this truncated version is the first step in strengthening

the ability to focus your attention within the body. Because the mind has less opportunity to wander while traveling through only 31-points, you can develop a habit of steady focus by working with this exercise. This is crucial because shavayatra is effective only if it is done consciously. There is no point in doing it in a distracted state of mind or while feeling drowsy.

When you are ready to begin the 31-points exercise, lie in the corpse pose. Put a thin pillow under your head and cover your body to protect it from drafts. Take a few minutes to do a systematic relaxation. Observe your abdomen as it rises and falls with the gentle flow of your breath. When you are calm and centered, bring your attention to points 1 through 31, as outlined below, mentally reciting the number of each point and pausing there for the duration of one breath.

One way of developing mental endurance is to practice 31-points twice in succession every day; in other words, do the practice once and then repeat it immediately. Stick with this routine for two weeks or more before moving on to the 61-points exercise. Resist the tendency to rush into the complete practice. This preliminary work with 31 points is important; you will know you are ready to move on when you can travel through every point with full attention, day after day.

The Complete Practice
Like many other yoga practices, you must work with shavayatra systematically, with full determination and enthusiasm, if you are to realize its benefits. It is important to practice at the same time every day and to limit yourself to one session a day. Choose a time when you are certain you will not be interrupted; turn off your phone, and make sure no one will walk into the room while you are doing the exercise—an abrupt interruption will jar your nervous system more than it does when you are interrupted during other practices. If the room cannot be dimmed sufficiently, you can place an eye pillow or a black, folded cloth over your eyes.

The 61 Points
1— Point between the eyebrows
2—Hollow of the throat
3—Right shoulder joint
4—Right elbow joint
5—Middle of the right wrist
6—Tip of the right thumb
7—Tip of the index finger
8—Tip of the middle finger
9—Tip of the fourth finger (ring finger)
10—Tip of the small finger
11—Right wrist joint
12—Right elbow joint
13—Right shoulder joint
14—Hollow of the throat
15-26—Repeat points 3-14 on the left
27—Heart center
28—Right nipple
29—Heart center
30—Left nipple
31—Heart center
32—Solar plexus (just below the bottom of the breast bone)

33—Navel center (2 inches below the physical navel)
34—Right hip joint
35—Right knee joint
36—Right ankle joint
37—Right big toe
38—Tip of the second toe
39—Tip of the third toe
40—Tip of the fourth toe
41—Tip of the small toe
42—Right ankle joint
43—Right knee joint
44—Right hip joint
45—Navel center (2 inches below physical navel)
46-56—Repeat points 34-45 on the left side
57—Navel center (2 inches below the physical navel)
58—Solar plexus
59—Heart center
60—Hollow of the throat
61—Center between the eyebrows
Because you must be alert throughout the exercise, select a time when you are not tired; avoid practicing before you go to bed at night if you feel too drowsy. A good time is early in the morning, after your asana practice, and before meditation. Practicing after hatha yoga will bring the body to its optimum condition of balance, alertness, and relaxation and will prepare you to take full advantage of this powerful practice. Some people prefer to practice just before lunch or in the late afternoon. Experiment and discover what works best for you.

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Like the 31-points exercise, 61-points is done in the corpse pose. Begin with point one at the center between the eyebrows on the exhalation, mentally repeating “one.” Keep your focus there while you inhale; on the next exhalation shift your awareness to the hollow of the throat, while mentally repeating “two.” Inhale and then move to the right shoulder joint on the next exhalation, while mentally repeating “three.” Continue traveling through the body in this manner,
following the sequence given below—shifting your attention as you exhale, and holding it at the point as you inhale.

Some people find it easier to learn the 31- and 61-points exercises by listening to an audio recording. Using a recording allows you to familiarize yourself with the points while actually doing the practice; you can concentrate fully on each point without worrying about whether you are going to remember where to go next. It will also help you avoid distraction. However, listening to a recording directs the attention outward through the sense of hearing. For this reason, if you choose to use a recording, do so only in the beginning stages of your practice.

Troubleshooting
When you first begin working with the full practice, you may find it difficult to focus and concentrate the mind. This is natural; shavayatra induces a state of deep concentration and relaxation, and you may notice the mind wandering or feel your awareness drifting toward sleep. It may be easy to count to 61,

but doing it very slowly in a supine position, while mentally traveling through the body, will challenge most people's ability to remain alert and focused.

If you experience difficulty, there are three options. The first is to limit yourself to 31-points until these tendencies pass. The second is to increase the pace at which you are traveling through the body. Spending less time focusing on each point will help to curb the mind's tendency to wander. Instead of focusing on each point for one full breath, try exhaling at one point, and inhaling at the next, continuing in this manner. If you still find that you are fighting to keep from daydreaming or are drifting towards sleep, the third option is to stop and try again the next day.

Wandering attention is an indication that you have reached your capacity. It is better to honor your capacity and terminate the exercise than to develop a habit of letting the mind drift or of struggling with the mind. The relaxation and revitalization that flows from this exercise is the result of consciously controlling and directing the mind. If you allow yourself to develop the habit of drifting off to sleep, you are merely practicing sleeping. After the practice is over, stretch and then get up immediately; resist any temptation to roll over and go to sleep.

Reaping the Rewards

Not everyone takes to the practice of 61-points, at least not immediately. Most of us who struggle with inertia will find that, after a few minutes, a still body leads to a dull or drowsy mind—especially while lying like a lifeless corpse. But practitioners who are still alert and attentive after a few minutes of systematic relaxation will be able to appreciate the depth of relaxation that can come from this practice. Many will find that focusing on this progression of vital points is a markedly different experience than merely relaxing muscle groups.

Some practitioners actually feel transported by this practice. They emerge feeling refreshed and revitalized in a way they never thought possible. It's no wonder that this technique is used as a preparation for yoga nidra, the advanced yogic technique of remaining conscious as the body rests in deep sleep. For aspiring yogis who struggle for a few minutes of repose, 61-points is a good place to start.