The Trick to Staying in Place

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The first step when you meditate is to get your body in place, your hands on your lap, face forward, close your eyes. Hold your body erect, not ruler straight like a soldier, but erect so that you’re not putting any pressure on the front of your body. That’s your body in place. The next step is to get the mind in place. Focus it on the breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it’s going out. This involves two things. Mindfulness, which is keeping this in mind, remembering to stay with the breath. And then alertness, watching the breath as it comes in and goes out. See what it’s like. That’s the mind in place. The hard part of meditation is keeping the mind in place. Focus on the breath, and after a while it gets bored. Something else comes up. Anything else can come up and seem a lot more interesting and worthwhile. And suddenly you find that you’ve gone with it. You were hardly even aware that it was there, and suddenly you’re in a different world. And so you have to bring yourself back. The trick to staying in place is to make the meditation interesting. There are two ways of doing this. One is experimenting to see what kind of breathing feels best right now. What does the body need? Does it need long breathing? Does it need short breathing? Deep? Shallow? What would feel really good right now? Are you sensitive to the needs of the body? This is an area of our awareness that we tend to block out. So it may take a while to gain sensitivity here to what really feels good, down through all the energy channels in the body. If you notice any tension in different parts of the body, think of it relaxing all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and see what that does to the breathing process. That’s the second part of this. Realizing that breathing is part of a whole body process. It’s part of what they call the wind element, the energy that flows through the body in many different levels. And they’re all related. The in-and-out breath is also related to the way the energy flows through your legs, through the different parts of your torso, through your head. You can experiment to see what ways of breathing would feel best, say, for the head, what ways of breathing feel best for the back, the stomach, the chest, the arms, the hands, the fingers, down through the legs, down through the toes. You can play with this. Basically, there are no right or wrong answers here. You’re not being tested. That’s the important part about play. John Fuehring used to say that you should play with a meditation. Not in the sense that you play around with it in a desultory way, but you try to enjoy it. Don’t be too grim about what you’re doing. Find an element of enjoyment. After all, pleasure and rapture are factors of right concentration, and you’re not going to find them by being grim. So allow yourself to play with the breath. You may make mistakes, but that’s par for the course. It’s like picking up a guitar. The very first time you strum a few strings and the sounds are kind of strange. But if you get interested in what sounds can be created with a guitar, after a while you begin to get more systematic about it. It’s still play, but you are more organized. You observe. You learn from what you’re doing. This is important, this element of play, because it’s one of the best ways to get a handle on cause and effect and how they operate in the mind and the body. On the one hand, you’re not being forced to do this. You’re here of your own free will. On the other hand, nobody’s going to grade you on the answers. So you can experiment as much as you like. Explore cause and effect without any fear of being punished. The only punishment is simply when you breathe in such a way that you force things too much and it starts getting uncomfortable. You can breathe in ways that give you headaches. You can breathe in ways that get the energy in the body pretty weird. But you just chalk that up to experience and move on. In this way, you gain a sense of confidence in how you handle cause and effect in the mind and the body. This confidence has its profound side. It’s not just playing around. You will learn important lessons. After all, here in the meditation, we’re here to learn to overcome ignorance. Classically, they describe ignorance as ignorance of the formless. It sounds pretty abstract, but what it comes down to is what you do. What are the results of what you’re doing? What do you do that causes stress and suffering? What do you do that brings an end to stress and suffering? If we’re going to see the four noble truths, we have to learn how to see cause and effect right in our immediate awareness. This is where it gets tricky. In a lot of the areas of our lives, we don’t like to look at cause and effect. In other words, we may have some very unskillful motivations for doing things, and we don’t like to admit it to ourselves, so we put up a wall. Or we’ve made mistakes in the past, really hurt other people, really hurt ourselves. We don’t like to think about that either, so we put up other walls. In this way, we’re very ignorant about cause and effect in our own actions. Yet the only place you’re going to learn about cause and effect is in your own actions. So you have to be more open to learning about things. And when you start out by playing with the breath, this is a good way of getting more confident. As you get more and more skilled at breathing in a comfortable way, a way that feels good, that enables you to stay with the breath for long times, because it’s both interesting and enjoyable. If you notice that you have any stress disease, or any sort of habitual patterns of tension or tightness in the body, you can learn how to breathe in ways that loosen them up. And this game you play with the breath, this experimentation, actually starts having really visible, important results. You feel more comfortable in your body. You feel more at home here in the present moment. And you’re more eager to learn about cause and effect. You feel less threatened about cause and effect. When the mind gets more comfortable in the present, it gets more willing to look into some of those less skillful motivations and look into some of those less skillful results in your actions. That way, you begin to see the connections. When you act on that kind of motivation, when you act on greed, this is what results. There are going to be problems. When you act on anger, these are the results. When you misunderstand things and act on delusion, you learn later, “Oh, what I thought was x was really y. What I thought was y was x.” You see the connections between the unskillful motivation and the unskillful result, and you can learn from them. At the same time, you can learn from your skillful ones. Be willing to learn from them. When you really get smitten with something, what happens as a result? Well, there may be pain later on. This is what Ajahn Swatton means when he talks about using stress in order to get rid of the cause of stress. In other words, you really see there is a connection. You give in to some unskillful desire, and there are going to be negative consequences. You know this not because somebody told you, but because you actually see the connection. So the next time that particular desire comes up, you can remind yourself, “Do you really want to go there? Remember what happened the last time?” The fact that you learn this from your own observation makes it a stronger argument. You also begin to see that when unskillful ideas come up in the mind, you don’t have to give in to them. Just because an unskillful thought is there doesn’t mean that you are responsible for it or that you have to carry through with it. It’s just there. Notice that it’s there. You don’t have to get upset about it. You don’t have to feel guilty or ashamed about it. But also know that if you acted on it, there would be problems. And you can breathe around it. After all, every thought that stays in the mind has some meaning. There’s a connection with the body as well. There’s going to be a little pattern of tension, maybe in your neck, maybe in your legs, any place in the body at all. And if you see the tension that arises together with a thought, you can dissolve the thought away by just breathing through that tension. So you don’t have to suppress the thought. You don’t have to express it. Just breathe right through it. You’ve got another choice. So these are some of the implications that come with learning how to play with the breath. It helps you stay with the meditation. It helps the mind stay in place, get a sense of feeling at home here. And you begin to get a sense of confidence in this issue of cause and effect, the way the body and the mind interact. Once you gain confidence, then you can begin to deal with some of the areas of the mind that you really don’t want to look into. But you really have to, if you’re going to learn anything, if you’re going to overcome ignorance. And you really see how the way you do certain things and think certain things and say certain things really does cause suffering. That’s how you put an end to suffering. So allow yourself to enjoy the breath. Use your ingenuity in breathing. Make the breath more comfortable so that it encompasses the whole body, soothes the whole body, creates a sense of well-being inside. Because that both puts you in a position where you can learn things because the mind is more still, more steady. And it also gives you the tools that you’re going to need in order to learn deeper things in the mind, more subtle areas of cause and effect. So you may be playing around, but it has a serious purpose and has serious consequences. Serious not in the sense of being grim, but serious because they really do make an important difference in your life.

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