NR Staying in Position

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Get into position for the meditation. There are two sides to the process. The first is getting your body in position. Place your hands on your left, your right hand on top of the left. Sit up straight, face forward, close your eyes. Then you want to get the mind in position. To do that, you focus on the breath. Try to notice where you feel the breathing process. It can be anywhere in the body. Choose a spot where you have sensations that tell you clearly that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. Allow the breath in that spot to feel comfortable. That’s getting into position. Both sides of the process are easy. The hard part is staying in position. In terms of the body, often the body isn’t used to sitting still for such long periods of time. There are bound to be pains here and there. So what you can do is learn how to use the breath to help the body stay in position. When you breathe in, think of the breath flowing throughout the entire body. In addition to the in-and-out breath, there is the breath energy flow through the nerves, through the blood vessels. As soon as you breathe in, it’s gone all the way through the body. It’s that fast. Hold that perception in mind. If you find any parts of the body where the breath energy feels blocked, think of it as getting untangled. Think of that blockage dissolving. Or you can breathe around it, breathe through it. Whatever way you find helps. Keep the breath flowing, keep the blood flowing. Let this perception cover the whole body. Sometimes a pain in one spot of the body may actually be related to a blockage in another spot. For instance, pains in the hips, pains in the knees. They often come because some place in the spine the blood isn’t flowing properly. So think of the breath going in all the way down the spine, not the legs. If pain still arises, no matter how you breathe, they stay there. You don’t have to focus on them. Try to find one part of the body, or as many parts of the body, as you get comfortable, and give your full attention to those. In other words, you don’t have to claim the whole body is yours. If a pain wants to have your knee, let it go ahead and have the knee. Make sure that you get out of the line of fire. And then as your chosen spot gets more and more comfortable, you can think of the comfort spreading from that spot to go down through the pain. But keep your primary focus in the comfortable spot. If the pain gets so unbearable that you feel that you have to move, give yourself five minutes and then move. In other words, don’t move immediately. Give yourself some time to work on your other skills. Otherwise, the pain will take over your meditation. That’s keeping the body in position. Keeping the mind in position means that whatever else comes up in the mind, you don’t go after it. When a thought comes passing in, just let it go passing on. You don’t have to chase it down. You don’t have to complete it all too often. A half-finished thought arises in the mind, and for some reason we feel compelled to finish the thought, as if we’re somehow responsible for accounting for all our thoughts. But to keep the mind with a breath, as soon as you notice a thought, drop it. Drop it in mid-sentence. Don’t pay it any attention. You’re not responsible for pushing it out. It’ll go passing on on its own. In other words, the less you get involved in the thinking, the better. And again, it helps to keep the breath as comfortable as possible, although the comfortable breath does have one big drawback, which is that people sometimes get drowsy when the breath is comfortable. After all, our normal experience of comfortable breathing is right before we fall asleep. So as soon as you find the breath getting comfortable again, spread your awareness to fill the whole body. Survey the body to see where the breath energy feels comfortable, where it doesn’t, and how you can take your comfortable breathing and help the different parts of the body that don’t feel so comfortable. This gives the mind something to do, keeps it busy in the midst of its comfort, and that way it can stay awake. And then maintain that intention, both to keep the body in position and the mind in position. That’s probably the most difficult part of the meditation. This is where mindfulness comes in, your ability to keep remembering with each breath, “Stay here, stay here, stay here,” and not letting other intentions move in and erase your first intention. So getting into position is not the hard part. The hard part is staying in position. And if part of the mind says, “What’s next?” say, “This is what’s next.” In other words, you don’t gain insight by developing concentration and then dropping it. You gain insight by learning how to maintain the concentration in the midst of different circumstances, in the midst of different temptations, to go off thinking about something else. That’s how you start understanding the mind. In the forest tradition, Ajahn Khamdi once said, “It’s like being a hunter. The hunter has to be very still but very alert.” You know, for example, that the hunter has to be very alert. This is a path that rabbits go down. You want to get a rabbit. And so you sit near the path. You have to be very careful not to make any noise, because otherwise you’ll scare the rabbits away. But if you’re so still that you start falling asleep, the rabbits will go right past you and you won’t know it. You have to be very still, very still, very still, so that you can hear the slightest motions in the leaves. And with experience you begin to recognize what’s the sound of a rabbit, what’s the sound of a lizard, what’s the sound of whatever else might be coming along. But this ability to stay still and alert, that’s the basic skill of maintaining the mind in concentration, and it’s also the basic skill that will allow insight to arise. I once talked with an anthropologist. He was telling me that when anthropologists go into villages, they try to learn every skill that the villagers have mastered, so that they can get an insider feel for the culture. And one skill that no anthropologist has ever been able to master anywhere is the skill of hunting. We in the modern world seem to have lost that, because hunting isn’t just going out and being violent. It requires training the mind in being still and alert, to realize that this is the hardest part of the meditation. But it’s also the most essential, otherwise you’ll never catch the mind. So once the mind is in position, get it to stay in position. It’s all very simple, but it’s not easy. The trick lies in learning how to find a point of balance between your alertness and your stillness, and then learning how to maintain that balance. And it’s to be expected that you’re going to fall off, but learn how to get back on, back into balance as quickly as possible. So this balanced state of mind, centered but full throughout the body, with the breath comfortable, the mind awake. It becomes more and more your second nature, your normal way of operating. Vasuki talks about the state of mind at normalcy, and this is what she means. Still, balanced, alert, not leaning into likes or dislikes, not wandering off after your thoughts and defilements. The mind at normalcy is the mind that’s still and alert. For most of us it’s not normal, but that’s because we’ve been developing other skills, other habits. So take this opportunity to bring the mind to normalcy, and keep it here, because right here is where all sorts of interesting things will begin to appear. You’ll begin to see the processes of the mind as it forms a thought, as it drops a thought. You’ll see more and more clearly the point where you choose to go with a thought. You’ll see where that little decision is made. When you’ve dropped your intention to stay with concentration, you’ve decided you want to go off with something else, and you realize you don’t have to go off. It is a choice. The more you can bring the mind to stillness, the more refined your concentration, the more you can make that choice consciously. In other words, the opportunity comes to either stay with the breath or go someplace else, and you learn how to stay, stay, stay. Keep making this choice to stay here. In the process of mastering that skill, you get a lot of insight into the mind.

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