Maintaining Interest

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When you meditate, you have to get both the body and the mind into position and to stay in position. The getting in position is not all that hard. Try to sit with your back straight, your hands in your lap, face forward, close your arms. That’s getting the body in position. Getting the mind into position means focusing it on the breath. Sometimes before you focus on the breath, you have to take stock of what mood you’re in so you can get the mood in line with the meditation. If you find that you’re feeling agitated, try to think in a way that calms you down. If you’re worried about things happening tomorrow or next week or whatever, what can you do to cut through those worries? Ironically, thinking about death sometimes helps to cut through a lot of worries. You realize that you could die before all those things happen and you wouldn’t have to be responsible for them at all. But then you have to think about what you’d do if you died. This is where another type of thinking is helpful. When you realize that whatever happens in the future—good, bad, indifferent—you’re going to need mindfulness, you’re going to need alertness, you’re going to need strength of mind. And how do you develop these qualities? Through the meditation. So you want to focus your attention back here, realizing that regardless of what happens in the future, the more mindfulness and alertness you can develop now, the better position you’ll be in. If you’re feeling sluggish, again, death is a good thing to think about. You realize that you may feel sluggish, but you’re going to be even more sluggish when death approaches. You’ll have less energy. You’ve got some energy now, so take advantage of it while you’ve got it. And if meditating for your own well-being isn’t enough to get you interested in meditating, remember that other people are going to benefit too—people around you, people you love. When you meditate, you’ll be less irritable. You’ll be stronger. You’ll be in a better position to help them when they need help. So you get the mind in the right mood, and then it’s a lot easier to settle down with the breath. You can settle anywhere in the body where it feels comfortable to stay focused and where the sensation of energy lets you know, “Okay, this is the energy of the breath coming in, this is the energy of the breath going out, and it’s the energy we’re primarily interested in here, not the air coming in and out of the lungs.” It’s the flow of energy in the body, because that’s directly related to the health of the body, and the sense of well-being in the body is going to be directly related to how easy it is to stay here. Because that’s the next issue. Once you’ve got the mind in position, once you’ve got the body in position, you’ve got to get them to stay in position. And that’s more difficult. But working with the breath energy is going to make it a lot easier. You’ve got to breathe in a way that feels good at the spot you’ve chosen. It feels energizing when you need energy. It feels relaxing if you’re feeling tense. Try to get a sense of what energy you need right now and allow the energy to stay in place and breathe in a way that doesn’t damage that energy, that actually helps to protect it. And then when the energy feels good, think of it flowing through the different parts of your body. Down the back, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms, all around your torso. And John Lee talks about the energy that flows from that down the front of the body, the energy that starts right at the sternum and goes down through your intestines and down to the bowels. There are lots of different channels that the breath can flow. So take some time to explore that. Because if the breath energy is flowing better, then it’s a lot easier to stay here. The fact that you’re sitting in one position for an hour or so is going to be a lot easier to take, because the flow of the breath energy helps the blood circulate. And when the blood is circulating well, you’re less likely to get numb or to get pains in different parts of the body. And as you’re sticking with the breath, you might want to notice what patterns of tension are pulling you out of good alignment, because it’s easier to stay here long periods of time. If the spine is well-aligned, which parts are being pulled to the right, which parts are being pulled to the left? Can you relax the tension that’s pulling them in those directions so things can settle in to a good equilibrium? In other words, you stay here not through brute force or just brute determination. You make little adjustments as you go along. You basically do maintenance work. Looking after the breath and the body keeps the mind occupied as well. Otherwise, it starts getting bored. And when the mind is bored, you know what happens. It’s going to wander off and find something more interesting. But here we are, dealing with the breath energy that keeps the body alive, keeps it healthy. There’s a lot to explore. If you can get interested in the breath in this way, it’s a lot easier to stay here. That’s what the Buddha called concentration based on attention or intent. You find it interesting to stay here, and it’s a lot easier to do it without a lot of pushing and willing and forcing things. You’re here because you’re exploring. And as the exploration moves through the body, you find there are lots of interesting things, lots of little details that you might have missed otherwise. You try to bring a questioning attitude to the meditation. I was reading once of a man who was saying that when he was young, his parents, who were immigrants from Eastern Europe, realized that they didn’t have much to offer him in terms of an inheritance or anything, but they were concerned that he’d get a good education. His mother, in particular, took a lot of interest in his education. Every day after school, she’d ask him about the day at school. But she didn’t ask him what he learned. She asked him, “What questions did you ask?” She was very wise. It’s in learning to ask questions that you see things that you didn’t see before. You open up new possibilities to yourself. This is part of the maintenance work, as well, as you keep probing and questioning and getting curious about what’s going on here in the present moment. Because if you’re going to see what’s important to see, you’ve got to stay here at the present moment. You can’t allow your thoughts or attention to go wandering off, to get out of position, basically. It’s by staying in position that everything in the mind that’s happening is going to have to show itself right here. All the ways that it causes self-suffering and when you can figure out when the suffering is necessary and when it’s not necessary. Now you can learn how to stop the unnecessary suffering. That’s something you’re going to discover right here. A lot of it’s already happening, but you haven’t been noticing it, either because you haven’t been focused here or been focused here only intermittently. This is why it’s so important to make sure you maintain the meditation to stay in position and not just drop by for a visit every now and then. If your attention is here, everything is going to be forced to reveal itself right here. But they’re parts of the mind. It’s as if they were playing a game with you. When something interesting is going to happen, something that would change the power balance in the mind is going to happen, they try to distract you. They try to distract your attention over there, over there, over there. And you believe them. You look over there. In the meantime, they do their dirty work inside. Then you come back and you don’t know what’s happened. So if there’s an impulse to shift your attention and remind yourself that maybe something important is going to happen right now so I can’t afford even one second of distraction, then the work of staying in position here, maintaining the meditation, is really important. Yet all too often it’s the work we overlook. We get started and immediately want to go all the way to the insights that are going to dazzle and surprise, make huge changes in our lives. We don’t want to do the work in between. But it’s the work in between that enables us to develop the sensitivity and the interest and the ability to ask the questions that are going to give rise to those insights. All too often we hear about meditation techniques that guarantee you insight. All you have to do is note. All you have to do is scan. And the insights will come on their own. Don’t do anything else. Just stick with this one activity. But if it’s not done with a sense of curiosity, a desire to know, it’s not going to bring you any insights. The only insights you’ll get will be the prepackaged ones, the ones that you’re told to get. And you can confirm for yourself, “Ah yes, it’s just like what they said.” But how do you know? You probably created this situation to confirm what you already were looking for. Realized insight is going to surprise you. It can’t be. It’s not going to be prepackaged. It can’t be cloned. All you can do is put yourself in the right position and bring the curiosity to look around that position. And that’s where you’ll see the things that are interesting, the things that really will make a difference. So this concentration based on interest brings the ideal balance of what’s going to surprise you, stillness and discernment. So your job is to maintain interest. We, especially in the West, tend to have a very short attention span and a very short interest span. We work with something a little bit, and then we get bored and move on to something else. And we let our moods guide us. But that doesn’t get in the way. There are two big obstacles. There are some people who find it easy to meditate when everything is nice and comfortable, but then when they get sick or there’s trouble in their lives, they say, “Oh, I didn’t have any time to meditate,” or, “I didn’t have any energy to meditate.” Of course, it was precisely right then that they needed the meditation most. Meditation is not a luxury item or a luxury of pastime. It’s basically developing the skill to meditate. You’re going to need the alertness and the mindfulness so that when things get tough you don’t create unnecessary suffering for yourself. You have the alertness, you have the mindfulness you need in order to see where that suffering is and how you can avoid it, how you can abandon it, how you can put it to an end. Then there are other people who find it easy to stay focused when they’re sick because they’ve got to deal with the pain. When they’re going through a lot of suffering in life, they really hang on to the meditation. And then when things get easy, they just kind of drop it. I’ve known way too many people who come to meditation because of a death in the family or some other problem. They realize they’ve got to work through the problem. Then when the problem is done, they lose interest, as if that was the only problem they were going to have in life. And then they drift away. That too is a shame, because you need to work on the meditation. When your strength is good and things are well, you can have all that much more energy to devote to the practice. So an important element of maintaining the meditation or staying in position is not just staying in the position for the one meditation session, but staying in position throughout your life. Realizing that whether things are going well or things are going poorly, you’re going to need these skills. The mind is something you have to take care of. We polish our cars. We have nice things. We look after our nice things. We let the mind just fend for itself. The mind is your most important possession. You’ve got to polish it daily, look after it daily. Because you never know when you’re going to need it to deal with something really difficult. When you’ve got the strength and things are going well, you’ve got the energy you need to practice. So don’t let yourself get complacent. When things are not going well, you’re going to need whatever skills you have. Then maybe physically you’re not strong enough to be as focused as you would be when things are going well. But you don’t make that an excuse not to meditate at all. You’ve got to keep at it to whatever extent you’re able to. Because you need the mindfulness, whatever mindfulness you’ve got. You need whatever alertness you’ve got, whatever discernment, whatever concentration. So we can’t let our moods be in charge. We have to be in charge of our moods. In Thailand, they talk about meditation as your duty. It’s something you’ve got to do day after day after day. A lot of us here in the West don’t like to think of meditation in those terms. But again, think of it as what you’ve got to do. You’ve got this great mind, this mind that can do all kinds of things for you. Whether it’s a smart mind or not so smart mind, it’s still the great mind in your life. It’s the one that determines the course of your life. So you’ve got to look after it. It’s the same way you have a good pair of boots. You polish them so they look good and so they stay in good condition. It’s not just the good-looking part. It’s keeping the leather in good condition. You’ve got a house. You keep it clean. It’s like those hunters. In the past. And the hunters nowadays. Not the modern, everyday hunter who buys his stuff out of Cabela’s or whatever. But the people actually have to hunt in order to survive. They take very good care of their things, all their weapons, all their hunting implements. Often they spend more time polishing and cleaning than they do actually using them. Because the polishing and cleaning is part of the discipline. So you’ve got a good mind. Take care of it. It’s the only mind you’ve got. And don’t let your moods get in the way.

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