Staying in Place

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Getting the mind in position is not all that hard. Simply notice where you feel the breath, and there you are. You’re in position. What’s hard is staying in position, trying to maintain an interest in the breath all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, with each breath as it comes, and in between the breaths. You want to stay right there. And it’s to be expected that the mind is going to wander off, so don’t be surprised. But try to be sharp and notice when it’s about to go. Try to nip it in the bud. Otherwise you find yourself in another world someplace. And the qualities you’re trying to develop as you meditate just don’t get developed. So this is where you want to be as alert and ardent as possible. In other words, alert to what’s going on and then ardent in doing it right. This is why in the forest tradition they spend so much time trying to get you to notice things, the little things around you, the little things you do. Make sure you do them well. I was staying with a Jon Fuen. One of my jobs was to keep his hut neat, and he never told me where things were supposed to be. He told me when I put them in the wrong place, but he wouldn’t tell me where the right place was. So I’d have to watch carefully. When he was putting things in the right place, what was the right place? I had to learn by being observant and not by having everything explained, which is a necessary talent to develop. Because when you’re sitting and meditating, you can have somebody sitting on your shoulder and say, “Okay, don’t focus there. Try to focus over here.” You’ve got to notice for yourself what’s working and what’s not working. And notice when the mind is beginning to inch away, getting itself ready to go someplace else. There are many layers in the mind where it makes its decisions about what it’s going to do. Sometimes one little decision is made and the mind goes now, and then it pretends like nothing’s happened, and then a few minutes later you’re off. So you’ve got to be very careful, be very observant, be very alert to the subtle movements of the mind. As for ardency, that means you try to do this as carefully and as well as you can. When you notice that the mind is about to inch off, what are you going to do to keep it from doing that? If you try to clamp down on it, that may make it even more inclined to want to go. So one thing you want to do is try to pay as much attention to how the breath can be made more comfortable. What kind of breathing would feel really gratifying, really satisfying right now? What are the body’s breath needs at the moment? How does the breath change when you consciously try to focus on it? In what way is the change for the better, and in what way is the change for the worse? You have to catch it. As it changes, and then figure out if there’s something that’s better when you’re not focused on the breath. How do you maintain that sense of ease or openness or allowance that feels better? When the mind has slipped off, you want to catch it as quickly as possible and then bring it right back. There’s a skill in bringing it back. Again, you can drag it unwillingly, which means it’s not going to stay very long. It’s not going to wait for the next opportunity to run off like a child who’s been caught. You have to figure out how to get the mind more interested in the breath, willing to come back. Again, one way is to give it at least one really good breath as soon as you come back to it, to remind it that this is a really good place to be. Try to notice which parts of the body seem to be starved of breath energy. How about the little muscles in your face? Are they getting enough breath energy? The muscles of your scalp, in your neck, your shoulders, in the arms, in the wrists, all through the hands, the back of the hands, in between the fingers, the places that tend to get neglected when we think about breathing. Down through the body, all the way down to the toes. Give the mind something to do. This is both work and play at the same time. In other words, working through the patterns of tension and using your imagination and figuring out new ways to breathe, new areas of the body to nourish with breath energy. This is called concentration founded on interest, intent. In other words, you pay attention to what’s going on. You get yourself interested. You try to engage your imagination. You begin to see that the present moment is not just a given. You play a role in shaping it, so why not try new, imaginative ways of shaping it so it’s better, more interesting, a better place to be? The Buddha gives a list of four different ways in which you can get your attention. The first is desire, i.e., the basic wanting to train the mind, wanting to get it to settle down. As he said, the desire has to be just right, not too energetic and not too lazy. If it’s too energetic, you just start thinking about all you want out of the concentration without actually doing it. If there’s not enough desire, then you’re going to find something else to get interested in. So you might want to give yourself a little pep talk sometimes. It’ll help motivate the concentration, motivate your practice, remind yourself of why this is a good thing. And then remember, if you want to get the results, you have to focus your desires on the causes, which are the very basic actions we’re doing right now. We’re trying to keep the mind with the breath, trying to bring it back. Many people get discouraged when they see the mind wandering off. I don’t know how many people say, “I can’t meditate because my mind is wandering all the time.” It’s like saying you can’t take medicine because you’re sick. When the mind is wandering, you learn how to deal with it. You just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, don’t give up. And after a while you find that it’s more and more inclined to stay. Whether that’s a short while or a long while, that’s not the issue. The fact is that you’re not giving up, you’re not giving in. You remind yourself that this is something you really want to do. You want to get your mind under control, because if it’s not under control, who knows what’s going to happen in your life? Lots of people whose lives would be going very well if it weren’t for the vagrant thoughts in their mind that begin to take over and then destroy whatever they’ve created. Then at the end of life, when the body is weak, usually there’s a turmoil around the person who’s going to pass away, and they’re trying to keep their mind focused so that it goes in a good direction. This ability to deal with distraction is going to be a very important skill to have at that point. So you’ve got the opportunity now to work on it. Another way of developing concentration is through persistence or energy. Just give it all the energy you’ve got right now. Keep at it, keep at it. Remember, you’ve got to figure out a level of energy that you can maintain for the hour. Some people throw themselves into the first five minutes, and when nothing happens they get discouraged. You have to keep reminding yourself, “Just this breath, just this breath. Stay with this breath right now.” You don’t have to think about how many more breaths are going to be in the hour, how much more time is left in the session. Time takes care of itself. It moves without you having to move it. All you have to do is stay with this breath right here, right now. And then when another one comes, you stay with that. It’s not much, but the effect is cumulative. In other words, it builds up over time. What’s important is that you don’t let your efforts flag, and at the same time you don’t calculate the fact that you’ve got a whole hour here where you can just kind of gradually settle down. Get the mind to settle down maybe ten minutes, five minutes before the end. You’re not getting the most out of the hour. You want to get the mind down right now. A good practice is giving yourself five-minute meditation breaks. Remind yourself that five minutes is not much, so you’ve really got to be sincere in what you’re doing. And you’ll find that the mind can settle down a lot more quickly than you would have thought. Or you can get it to settle down at the beginning of an hour. And part of the mind says, “Well, what am I going to do then? We just keep it here.” Remind yourself that it’s not going to involve a lot of thinking. It may seem kind of dumb sometimes just to sit here with the mind quiet, but it’s an important skill to develop. So allow yourself to be dumb for a while. It’s not really dumb. It’s just the part of the mind that wants to think about things. It creates issues. So you have to be persistent in not listening to it. The third quality is the one I mentioned earlier, the quality of interest. Really paying full attention to what you’re doing. Realizing that you’re going to be learning about the mind, and at the same time you’re learning about the energies in the body. And that’s useful knowledge to have. There’s plenty to experiment with here, plenty to notice, plenty to watch, if you watch carefully and don’t let yourself get distracted. Because right here is where your life is being shaped and the intentions of the mind—the intentions. These are the things that shape your life through your thoughts, through your words, through your deeds. And don’t you think it would be good to take an interest in how this happens so you can prevent vagrant thoughts from taking over your life and direct your life in a good direction? Working with the breath is good for your health, it’s good for the health of the body, the health of the mind. There are a lot of good benefits to be had if you watch carefully. So this is another way of developing concentration, by taking an interest in what you’re doing. The fourth way is similar to the third, which, when you notice what’s going on, then you realize, “Okay, I’ve got to do something about this.” And you have to use your ingenuity, you have to use the power of your intelligence to figure things out. When things are not going well, what can you do to change? What can you change? What will have a good effect? You have to be willing to experiment. You use your powers of intelligence to judge what’s working and what’s not. In this way, you’re using your discernment to get the mind to settle down. Sometimes the tree is in the middle of a field and you don’t have to use a lot of ingenuity in getting it down. All you have to do is figure out which direction you want it to go and you cut it appropriately, and then it goes. But if you’ve got a tree in the middle of a forest and its branches are entangled with the branches of other trees, then you’ve got to use your ingenuity. Which branches do you have to cut? How are you going to cut? Which direction are you going to put the first cut so the tree goes down in the direction you want it? That’s concentration based on your intelligence. So there are various ways to get the mind to settle down and to stay settled down. It can be desire, persistence, your intent or interest, the power of your intelligence. These are all called bases of power because they give the mind power. You discover that concentration really does make a difference. It changes the balance of power in your mind. It’s out of fruiting your energy away with random thoughts of the day. You’ve got a good place to keep it, keep the mind. And it builds a kind of energy as it stays steady. It builds a momentum. So you can resist all the things that would pull you away. You look at the affairs of the world and they seem awfully trivial in comparison to what they used to be. Because basically you need less from the world. You’ve got a good source of happiness, a good source of well-being, a good source of power here in the mind. So try to use these qualities to get the mind to settle down and then to stay settled down, and to stay in position. They make a huge difference in your life.

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