

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 enough 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 in 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, goes out, to see what it's like. That's the mind in place.

The hard part of the meditation is *keeping* the mind in place. You focus on the breath and, after a while, the mind gets bored. Something else comes up. Anything else can come up and seem a lot more interesting and worthwhile, and suddenly you found that you've gone with it. You're hardly even aware that it was there and suddenly you're in a different world. 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? 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 any parts of the body, think of it relaxing all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. See what that does to the breathing process, because that's the second part of making the meditation interesting: realizing that breathing is part of a whole-body process, part of what they call the wind element, the energy that flows through the body in many different levels. They're all related. The in-and-out breath is related to the way energy flows through your legs, through your arms, through the different parts of your torso, through your head. You can to experiment to see what ways of breathing would feel best, say, for the head, what ways of breathing feels 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, because basically there are no right or wrong answers. You're not being tested. That's an important part about playing. Ajaan Fuang

used to say that you should play with the meditation, not in the sense fooling around with it in a desultory way, but you try to enjoy doing it well. 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. Explore. 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, 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're 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. And two, 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 that when you breathe in such way that you force things too much, 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 to handle cause and effect in the mind and the body. And this confidence has its profound side. It's not just playing around. You're learning important lessons. After all, here in the meditation, we're here to learn to overcome ignorance. Classically, they describe ignorance as ignorance of the four noble truths. It sounds pretty abstract, but what it comes down to is what are you doing, what are the results of what you're doing: what are you doing that causes stress and suffering, and what might you do to bring an end to stress and suffering?

So if we are 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 because in a lot of areas of our life, we don't like to look at cause and effect. In other words, we may have some very unskillful motivations for doing unskillful things, and we don't like to admit them to ourselves. So we put up a wall. Or we may have made mistakes in the past, really hurt other people, really hurt ourselves, and we don't like to think about that, either. So we put up more walls. In this way, we're very ignorant about cause and effect in our own actions. Yet the only place you're really going to learn about cause and effect is in your own actions.

So you have to be more open to learning about things. 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, that enables you to stay with the breath for long periods of time, because it's both interesting and enjoyable. If you notice you have any stress, feelings of dis-ease, 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. This game you play with the breath, this experimentation, actually starts having visible important results. You feel more comfortable in your body; you feel more at home in the present moment. You're more eager to learn about cause and effect. You feel less threatened by 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 unskillful results in your actions. In that way, you begin to see the connections. For example, when you act on that kind of motivation, when you act on greed, this is why the result is going to be a problem. When you act on anger, these are the results. When you misunderstand things and act on delusion, you learn, "Oh, what I thought was x was really y , what I thought was y was x ." You see the connections between the unskillful motivations and their undesirable results, and you can learn from them. At the same time, you can learn from your skillful motivations, too. Be willing to learn from both.

When you really get smitten with something, what happens as a result? There may be pain later on. This is what Ajaan Suwat means when he talks about using stress in order to get rid of the cause of stress. In other words, you see directly that there is a connection. You give in to an unskillful desire, and it's going to have negative consequences. You know that, not because somebody told you, but because you actually see the connection. The next time that particular desire comes up, you can remind yourself: "Do you really want to go there? Remember what happened last time?" And the fact that you learned 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're currently 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 connection with the body as well. There's going to be a little pattern of

tension, maybe in your neck, maybe in your legs, anyplace in the body at all. If you detect the tension that arises together with the thought, you can dissolve the thought away by just breathing through the tension. So you don't have to suppress the thought, and you don't have to express it. Just breathe right through the tension. You've got another choice.

These are some of the ramifications that come with learning how to play with the breath. It helps you stay with the meditation, helps the mind stay in place, gives a sense of feeling at home here. You begin to gain a sense of confidence in this issue of cause and effect, the way the body and the mind interact. Once you gain confidence, you can begin to deal with some of the areas in 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. When you really see how the way you do certain things and think certain things and say certain things does cause suffering—and you don't have to do things in those ways—that's how you can put an end to suffering.

So allow yourself to enjoy the breath. Use your ingenuity in making the breath more comfortable, so that it encompasses the whole body, soothes the whole body, creates a sense of well-being everywhere inside. 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 you're going to need to learn deeper things in the mind, subtler areas of cause and effect.

So you may be playing around, but it's playing that has a serious purpose and serious consequences—serious not a sense of being grim, but serious in the sense that they really do make an important difference in your life.