

## *A Skillful Attitude*

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Get your body in position. And get your mind in position.

Getting them into position is the easy part. With the body, you just sit up straight, your hands in your lap. Face straight ahead and close your eyes. That's the body in position.

Getting the mind into position means focusing it on the breath. Wherever you sense the breath or the process of breathing, focus your attention there.

And allow yourself to think of the concept of breathing in a wide way. It's not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the whole energy flow in the body. And wherever in the body you sense the energy that brings the breath in, the energy that lets the breath go out, you can focus your attention there.

Now, once you're in position, the hard part is staying in position, both with the body and with the mind. Sometimes the body sits in one position for an hour or two, and there will be pains here and there. Well, try to have the right attitude toward them. In the beginning, you don't have to focus on them. Try to focus on the comfortable sensations in the body instead.

Think of the pain as somebody shooting at something else, and you don't have to get into the line of fire. You can stand off to the side. In other words, as long as you don't think of the pain as happening to *you*, it's just something that's happening, say, in your leg or in your back or in your hips or whatever. You don't have to go down and get inside the leg or the back or the hips. You can stay with the sensation of breathing in other parts of the body. That helps you stay in position for longer periods of time.

And it helps to keep both body and mind in position if you learn how to allow the breath to be comfortable.

First off, relax all the joints of your body. Think of the joints in the fingers, the joints in the hands, on up the arms. Then start with the joints in the toes, come up the feet, up the legs. If you sense any tension in any of these parts of the body, allow it to relax.

Then focus back on where you were sensing the breathing. Allow that to relax as well. And notice if you have to adjust anything to keep that sense of ease going all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

The less tension you hold in the body, the easier it is to keep a position for a long period of time. You're less likely to cut off the blood to different parts of the body, so you're less likely to go numb or have pains.

And especially as you work up the spine: Allow the blood to flow through the spine area with as little obstruction as possible. You might want to start down at the tailbone and go up the spine, vertebrae by vertebrae, seeing where there's tension, allowing it to relax and disperse—as you keep your back straight. That'll improve the blood flow to your legs and your hips, and make it easier to stay in position.

At the same time, when there's a sense of ease in the body, the mind is a lot more willing to stay. It doesn't like staying with discomfort. So when you give it a good spot to stay here in the body, it's more likely to be willing to settle down and to find a sense of satisfaction, gratification, a sense of fullness in the body.

That's one way to help stay in position.

Another way is to have a right attitude. There will be voices in the mind that say, "This is boring. How about some entertainment? You've got a whole hour here with nothing else to do, you can fill it with all kinds of fun thoughts." Fighting off those voices requires right attitude: approaching all of this as a skill.

In other words, instead of looking for entertainment, you can ask yourself, "Can I keep the mind in one position for a long time? Can I master that as a skill?"

Once things begin to settle down inside, make it your sport to shoot down any thoughts that come in and create trouble. The first big troublemaker, of course, is the one that says, "This is boring." Why do you identify with that? If you see that thought coming in, shoot it down.

See if you can locate where in the body that particular thought is related to, because the ability to hold a thought in mind requires there to be tension someplace in the body that provides a landing place or a little platform for the thought to stay. Can you find that? It may be around the face. It could be in your neck, in your back, in your legs, your arms. It could be anywhere in the body.

And if you can focus on the physical side of the thought process, you can make it your sport. Just relax that spot. Zap it with good breath energy. And the thought will disappear.

This is the kind of satisfaction that comes from mastering a sport. You're not here just to enjoy yourself in the present moment or to enjoy the feeling of being here. There's also the enjoyment that can come from learning a skill, mastering a skill, seeing that you actually are getting better at it.

And as you meditate, you find yourself leaning more and more in that direction all the time.

As new challenges come up, try to keep yourself up for the challenge. When sloth and torpor come along, try to take it as a challenge: How can you get around

them? When sensual desire comes up: How do you get around that? All of the hindrances: How do you get around them? Try to figure it out. Take it as a challenge.

When you regard the meditation as a skill like this, you find that it becomes a lot more reliable.

And with your change in attitude, you're actually more primed to see things in terms of the four noble truths. There's a tendency to regard concentration practice and discernment practice as two different things, but ideally they should come together. And what are the four noble truths aside from a way of looking at your experience from the point of view of someone who wants to be skillful?

You see where there's discomfort or dis-ease—i.e., where there's something wrong—and you ask yourself, “What's causing that?” And then, “What can I do to undo that cause? Where am I being unskillful?” Because that's what craving and clinging are: a lack of skill in dealing with the issue of suffering. Whereas the path—virtue, concentration, discernment—is a skillful approach.

So in looking at the meditation as a skill, looking at the whole issue of where there's dissatisfaction, where there's discomfort, where there's dis-ease as something you can approach as a problem to be solved through mastering the skill: Those are the seeds of the four noble truths right there.

In that way, you've got discernment working with the concentration. And when the two of them work together, the results start spreading out in all directions, both as you're sitting here meditating and as you take the same attitude into your daily life.

Ajaan Lee talks about meditation as a skill over and over again. That seems to be his primary analogy.

He says it's like making a basket. The teacher can tell you the basic weaves. But in order to make the basket look good and be something you really want to use, you've got to watch yourself as you do the weaving, and then you've got to look at the results. If you don't like the results, figure out what you did wrong. And then you go back and make another one.

Other times, he says it's like making clay tiles. First you learn how to make basic clay tiles. You learn how to mix the clay and the sand together with the water and you learn how to fire them. Then, when you've got flat tiles down, you can start thinking of other things: curved tiles, tiles of different shapes, other objects you make out of the clay. In this way, a basic skill can become an art.

In another place, he says meditation is like learning about silver. Somebody gives you some silver, and the only way you're going to learn about what silver is good for is by doing things with it. Melt it down. What's its melting point? How

do you get rid of impurities? See what shapes you can put it into.

And as you approach these questions as skills to be mastered, you're basically learning from your own actions. At the same time, you start using your own ingenuity through this process of learning how to be observant of what you're doing, observing the results of what you've done, and then trying to figure out how to do it better.

When you have that attitude toward your meditation, the meditation develops. It becomes a skill that you can learn how to rely on in all sorts of situations.

So instead of meditating simply for the pleasure of having a nice quiet time or for a sense of physical ease, you want to develop a different attitude toward how you're going to find your pleasure, how you're going to take pleasure out of the meditation. It's the kind of pleasure, the kind of satisfaction that comes from a skill that's been mastered, a job well done.

When that's your attitude, your meditation is sure to progress. And it'll take you to places you never would have imagined.