

## *Into Position*

*September 4, 2021*

Get your body in position and your mind in position. The body in position: your legs folded, right leg on top of the left. Keep your spine erect, lower your shoulders to the back, place your hands in your lap close to your stomach, so that you don't lean over. Close your eyes. That's the body in position.

The mind in position starts first with thoughts of goodwill. You're establishing your motivation—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for those around you. You're going to look for happiness in a way that doesn't harm you, doesn't harm anybody else. So you want your thoughts of goodwill to spread in all directions to all beings without any hypocrisy, without any conflict. After all, you realize that true happiness comes from within. Which means that your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with anyone else's.

Then you look at the resources you have in here. You've got the body sitting here breathing, and you've got the mind thinking and aware. So you bring them together. You think about the breath and you're aware of the breath. And in thinking, you don't just think about the breath in the abstract. You keep reminding yourself to be alert to the breath, at the same time that you're alert to the mind.

Is the mind with the breath or is it about to wander off? Oftentimes at the beginning of the meditation you don't realize that it's going to wander off, and in fact you don't realize until it's been off for a while. Then you suddenly realize: "I was supposed to be with the breath, but now I'm someplace else." So you bring it back. Then after a while you realize you're off again.

Try to notice: What are the warning signs that the mind is about to leave? Watch for those. You find that you get quicker and quicker at catching yourself, to the point where the mind is about to leave and you can say, "No. You stay right here."

While you're with the breath, try to notice what kind of breathing is most comfortable. After all, you're going to be here for an hour. You want the mind to settle in. And it's going to settle in a lot more easily if it's comfortable.

So the breath is a good place to focus to create that sense of comfort, because you can change the rhythm of the breathing, the texture of the breathing. Make it long, make it short, make it fast, make it slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. There are lots of variations in the breath.

It's good to start with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths, and notice where you feel the process of the breathing in the body most clearly. Focus your attention there. Then try to decide how you know when a breath is comfortable or not at that spot. You try different ways of breathing, and you'll find that some ways of breathing are more congenial than others.

If you really get sensitive to the breath, you begin to realize that it's not so much the air coming in and out through the nose; there's a whole range of energy movements throughout the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out: the movement of the chest, the movement of the abdomen, the movement of the shoulders, the movement of the back. As you get more sensitive, you realize that it goes down the legs and the arms. Maintain your center of focus, but at the same time think of the breath as a whole-body process, and try to breathe in a way that feels good for the whole body. That's the mind in position.

The difficult part, both with body and mind once they're in position, is *keeping* them in position. With the body, you might find that your knee goes numb, your legs go numb, or there's a pain in your back, a pain in your hips. This is where it's useful to think of the breath energy.

The breath can flow down the back, out through the hips, out through the legs. Sometimes numbness in the legs is caused by a blockage of energy not in the legs themselves, but further up the spine. So you look at the spine. Start with the neck and go down. If there's any tension in the joints of the spine, think of it relaxing, relaxing as you go down the back. That can open up the blood flow.

A basic rule of thumb in the beginning is that wherever there's a pain in the body, don't focus your attention right there. Focus it on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable with the breath. Then, when you're coming from a position of strength, think of that comfortable breath sensation flowing in through the pain and out the other side. Don't let it get stopped at the pain. If you visualize the pain as a wall that the breath can't get through, that's going to aggravate things.

Think of the pain as being porous. After all, it's not a solid block. It's not even a solid of any kind. It's just little pinpoints of sensation, and the breath can flow in the areas between the pinpoints. That's keeping the body in position.

Keeping the mind in position is more difficult because the mind is more demanding and complex. The body simply asks to be in a posture where the blood flows well, everything feels comfortable, and it's okay. The mind, however, demands entertainment.

It may be pleasant to be with the breath for a while, but then it's not so interesting anymore. It's the same thing, over and over again: It comes in, and it goes out, then it comes in again, goes out again. You can never get it where it comes in three times and goes out once.

This is where you have to learn how to talk to the mind, and at the same time try to make the breath interesting because, after all, the breath is the force of life. It's what nourishes the nerves, nourishes the blood vessels, nourishes all the organs in the body. So if you know that you have any recurring diseases or recurring patterns of tension in the body, think of the breath going through those areas. Think of it as medicine to treat those conditions, and remind yourself that you're developing a skill.

We're very good at thinking about things in the abstract, thinking about things far away, but we're not that good about observing what's going on in the body and mind. We're not that good about allowing the mind to rest when it really needs to rest.

For us, usually, resting the mind happens simply when it falls asleep. That's resting, but without any alertness, resting without any mindfulness. It's not nearly as good for the mind as when you can rest but be alert and mindful at the same time. So see the value of this skill. And it *is* a skill. Have some respect for the quietness of the mind.

There's a poem by the Buddha about the various objects that a good practitioner should have respect for, and concentration is one of them. The poem goes on to talk about the triple training, and yet concentration is part of the triple training; the other parts are heightened virtue and heightened discernment. You may wonder why the Buddha has to mention concentration twice. Well, it's because it's easy to overlook.

It's very quiet. It doesn't have any brand-new ideas, although it does provide the basis for new insights into what's going on inside. That ability to step back and observe the breath, and to observe the mind observing the breath, is going to be an important part of keeping the mind in position, and of gaining insight.

As the Buddha said, the big problem in life is that we create unnecessary suffering through the things the mind does out of ignorance. But if we bring knowledge to those processes, we can turn that knowledge into a path to the end of suffering. That means that the insights are going to be about the mind as it's acting in the present moment. So get used to watching the mind right here and now.

When the Buddha divides breath meditation into four issues—issues around the breath, issues around feelings, issues around the mind, and issues around mental qualities—issues

around the mind start with learning how to be sensitive to the state of your mind.

Notice what kind of mood it's in, and then don't side with the mood. Leaf through your repertoire of ways of dealing with its different moods, giving the mind energy when it's tired, calming it down when it's got too much energy, comforting it when it needs to be comforted, being stricter with it when you need to be strict with it. A large part of discernment lies in learning how to read your mind and then make adjustments.

See that whatever state the mind is in right now as having potentials, rather than as something that's just given to you. After all, the state of your mind comes from your actions, both past actions and present actions. The past actions provide the potentials; your present actions actualize them, which is why meditation is all about watching your actions in the present moment, because they're going to make the difference.

You can have some good potentials coming in from the past, but if you're not skillful in the present moment, you can create a lot of suffering. Conversely, if you have bad potentials coming in from the past but you're skillful in the present moment, you can gain insight, you can gain understanding.

There are a lot of people who've gained different stages of awakening simply by watching pain—pain as a result of a past unskillful action. But as they analyze the way their mind reacts to the pain, creates more pain when it doesn't have to, how it can learn how to change its perceptions around the pain, then they can actually gain enough insight into the mind that they gain awakening, at least to some of the early levels. That's showing real skill in taking potentials from the past, regardless of what they are, and getting something good out of them.

You can gain insight from pleasure, you can gain insight from pain, insight from watching the perceptions of the mind. When you learn how to observe the mind properly and see particularly what it's doing that's causing stress that it doesn't have to do, that's the kind of insight that's really useful, because then you can apply it everywhere. In daily life, when illness comes, when aging comes, even when death comes, these are skills that will be useful. After all, aging, illness and death were the issues that motivated the young prince, who at that point was not yet the Buddha, to want to leave home to find the answers.

He wasn't looking for how to just *be* in the present moment or to be okay in the present moment. He was trying to overcome aging, illness, and death: a very bold aspiration. But it was because he was bold in his aspirations that we actually have the Dhamma now.

So the Buddha teaches us not only how to be here in the present moment, but also how to look at our lives in light of the fact that our actions shape our experience in this lifetime and the influence can go on into future lifetimes. And it's also possible to put an end to the cycle entirely.

The reason our meditation points us here in the present moment is not because the present moment is an end in and of itself, but it's where we can watch the processes of the mind and learn how to master them—giving us knowledge that will serve us in good stead wherever we go, whatever we encounter.

That's what the Buddha said was his duty as a teacher: to provide us with a basis for deciding what's skillful and what's not—encouraging us to be confident that skillful actions really do lead to good results, unskillful actions really do lead to bad results, and giving us the criteria for deciding which is which.

So he's done his duty as a teacher. It's up to us now to do our duties as students—taking advantage of the teachings he left behind.