Settling In

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Another way of translating the word for concentration, samadhi, can also be centering. And it’s good to think of this as a process of centering, settling in. Because all too often we can think of it as an activity in which we strive and try to go higher and higher up the ladder. And sometimes that can create misunderstandings. You try to keep pushing on, “Well, what’s next? What’s next? What’s next?” Well, what’s next is right here. It’s simply a matter of settling in more and more solidly, more and more securely. You’re not going anywhere else. You’re settling in right here. The progress is just a question of being more and more solid, more and more secure. One way of guaranteeing that is to try to be comfortable. Think of it as settling into a big overstuffed chair. There may be a lump here and a lump there. So you try to smooth it out. You shift around in the chair until you finally get the spot that’s just right. And you do that automatically. You don’t think of it as striving or pushing yourself. It’s simply a matter of being very sensitive to what feels good, what doesn’t feel good. And that helps you to settle in, get more and more centered. There was a woman one time who was on a meditation retreat with a jhansuva, and she complained that her meditation didn’t seem to be going anywhere, and that she couldn’t turn back. She couldn’t stop doing the meditating, but she seemed stuck. And the jhansuva’s question was, “Well, where are you going? Where are you trying to go?” It’s simply a question of being more and more here. So again, it’s not a strange place or an unexplored place, although here often is very much unexplored for us. We settle in only briefly and then jump up and run away. Then we come back to sit down again, and we jump up and run away. So we don’t get a sense of what’s really going on here. We don’t get this perspective from this spot, which is how insight happens. So when people ask you, “Where are you in your meditation?” the answer should be, “I’m right here.” And that’s all that’s needed. Because what you’re going to do is learn more and more what it means to be in a place, to be right here. The mind is constantly creating places. It’s called becoming. And then you settle into those places. That’s birth. And oftentimes those places are not really here at all. They’re often some imaginary world. But what we have right here is a type of becoming as well, this state of being which you’re a human being right now, inhabiting this body, inhabiting this mind. And what you want to do is be able to get really familiar with it. That’s why we have to stay here. Because ultimately, even this sense of being here, of having a place, it’s something that you’ve added on to what you’re actually experiencing. There’s an element of, as he said, passion or desire. It may seem an awfully strong word, but it’s there. We’re taking our stance here. We’re inhabiting this body. It’s ours. And if anything happens to this body, well, it seems to be happening to us. We’re really attached. And once you’re in a place like this, you’re open to all the changes that can happen to this place. So we’re going to look into it to see if this is a place where you really want to be. It’s not a question of saying, “Well, I don’t like it here. I would rather be over someplace else.” It’s the whole question of taking a place, of being here. Of having a here and having a there. That’s a function of passion and desire, of clinging. And no matter what you cling to, even if you’re clinging to the idea of being the knowing, there’s still clinging. There’s still a sense of place, and you’re still open to the processes of change, whatever kind of change can happen. The only safe strategy is to not identify yourself with a particular place. But that requires a lot of subtle attention to the process of how you identify with a place, what you do, and how you allow your consciousness to land someplace and then proliferate out of that place. So first what you have to do is cut down on the proliferations. Try to be here as much as possible, with as little elaboration as you can manage. In the beginning, it’s going to require a certain amount of elaboration. That’s part of the path. As you deal in directed thought and evaluation, getting the breath comfortable, getting the body comfortable, settling in. But then you can let go of that and just be with the breath as it is, be with the body as it is. You get more and more used to being here, what it means to be here as opposed to someplace else. You try to notice the movements of the mind as it settles in and as it leaves and as it comes back. Because that’s where the process of desire and passion, clinging, will play itself out. That’s where you’ll see it. So when the mind leaves, gets distracted, don’t get flustered when you realize it. Just notice, “How does it go? How does it come back?” Because you’re going to learn some important lessons there. A common image of the mind is like a horseshoe crab, the type that doesn’t have a shell of its own, and so it moves into the shells of other shellfish. When that particular shell gets destroyed, well, it moves on to another one. So you’re here to watch the mind both as it’s settling in and as it’s moving. But you can see the movements clearly only when you really are settled. And you find that there’s a part of the mind that really is here all the time, and then there’s another part that moves. Once you get in touch with the part that’s here, then you can watch the movements, but not move along with them. That’s how you gain insight into the process of the mind. It’s happening here all the time. So if you want to see anything, you have to get really firmly established here. Get used to being here. This has to be your home, the place where you settle, the place where you’re centered. Then when there’s even the slightest movement from that center, you’ll know. Then you’ll see when that movement causes stress, when it causes suffering. And you’ll also see how it’s not necessary. That’s the important part. Because we live with stress and suffering, but something deep down inside tells us that it’s necessary. This is the way things have to be. Well, it’s simply the mind’s lack of skill. If it were really skillful, it wouldn’t be creating any suffering. That doesn’t have to. And when you can see that, that’s how your skill develops. And where are you going to see it? You’ll see it right here. This is why when we’re meditating, we’re not striving to put ourselves out on a limb someplace. We’re just settling back, settling back, settling back into right here. So that we really know the spot for what it is.

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