Settling In

January 14, 2012

We come to a place like this to find physical seclusion, to get away from all of our daily entanglements and responsibilities, and give the mind time to be by itself. But then it turns out when the mind is by itself, it’s not by itself, it’s got lots of people in there. Which is why the next step is to develop mental seclusion, to get everybody in the mind together on the idea that it would be a good thing to settle down, just be quiet, here in the present moment, to see what’s going on. As with any committee, there will be some people who don’t want to be seen. And they’ll create trouble. So you have to do what you can in the meantime to mollify them, to calm them down. This is why the meditation is not just a technique. You have to have some values to go along with it, values that can get everybody on board. And one of the things that everybody in the mind wants is well-being. Happiness. Pleasure. And so you remind yourself that if you want to find true pleasure, this is how you have to do it. You have to train the mind. And there’ll be some members of the committee that want some pleasure right now, and they’re upset that things aren’t going as quickly as they’d like. That’s why we reflect on the principle of karma sometimes before we meditate. We’re working here not only with our present intentions, but also with the result of some past intentions. And the results of some of those past intentions are going to come bubbling up at any time in the course of the meditation. Sometimes you may see somebody you harmed, or somebody who harmed you, or some memory from the past comes up. This is why we develop goodwill for everybody. And sometimes that, in and of itself, can be a very painstaking process. The word metta means just that. It means goodwill, a wish for happiness. It doesn’t mean we’re going to love people necessarily or even like them. There are people out there whose behavior really is despicable. And there have probably been some times in the past when you’ve been despicable. Things like that can come popping up in the mind at any time. So it’s good to have some practice in developing goodwill in a thorough and methodical way. Remind yourself that it simply means that you want people to be happy, to find a true happiness. And to find true happiness means that if people are behaving unskillfully or harmfully, they’re going to have to change their ways. That’s what metta is. A wish that people would change their ways for the better. Not that they just become happy however they are. But they come to their senses. They realize that if they’ve been harming people, they’ve got to stop. If they’ve been harming animals or any beings, they’ve got to stop. If they’ve been harming themselves, they’ve got to learn how to stop. Now, is that something difficult to wish for other people? There may be a part of the mind that would like to extract a pound of flesh first before people can find true happiness. But is that a part of the mind you want to identify with? There may be a part of the mind that would like to punish you and get a pound of flesh out of you. Do you want to identify with that when you realize you don’t have to? Or do you want to let those parts of you just go sailing? There’s a holiday they have in Thailand where they take candles and incense flowers and put them on a little float. In the old days, you got a piece of banana stalk that floats in the water. You decorate it. You take it down to the river and hope that all the bad things that you’ve done in the year can go down the river with it. You might want to hold that image in mind. You’re letting these parts of you that would like to get revenge or like to exert a little power through punishment, say, “I don’t want those anymore. I don’t need them.” Let them go floating down the river. So you might want to start with thoughts of goodwill first for yourself. Remind yourself that you really would like true happiness. And the question of deserving or not deserving doesn’t come up at all. It’s something that is available. You go through the list of people you like, people you’re more neutral about, and then you get to the people you don’t like. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and remind yourself, “Okay, this is for the true happiness of everybody, that everybody understands the foundation of true happiness.” The wish that people would do that is good for everybody. Whether it’s actually going to happen or not, that’s another issue. But at least you hold that wish in mind, because what you’re trying to do is to set your motivation straight. And also prime yourself so that when unexpected thoughts come up in the course of the meditation, you’re not knocked off balance. Somebody you forgot about or some incident in your life that you’d forgotten about suddenly may come up. You remind yourself of goodwill and then let it go floating down the river. Get back to your meditation, which is the breath. If the goodwill runs dry, come back to the breath. Try to breathe in a way that feels really good. This is important because it’s all too easy when we decide we’re going to stay in the present moment to clamp down. You’re going to strangle the mind and just keep it right here. Of course, that’s not going to work, because the clamping down creates a lot of energy imbalances both in the mind and in the body. So you’ve got to approach it gently. This is one of the reasons why we start with some of these reflections first. Reflection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, to gain a sense of inspiration. Sometimes we have to chant on aging of the mind. We have to chant on illness and death to gain a sense of sanguega, to remind us to be heedful. We can’t be lazy. We’ve got to work on this. But at the same time, it’s that wish for goodwill. Realizing that you can’t squeeze enlightenment into the mind or out of the mind. It’s more a process of nurturing, nourishing. It’s getting everything in balance here. So when you find a spot in the body where it’s easy to be aware of the breath, stay there for a while. And if you find yourself clamping down on that, try to open up the boundaries. Think of the breath energy coming in from all directions. This meditation method we’re working with, working with the breath energies in the body, was one that Lee worked on after he’d had a heart attack out in the middle of the jungle. He realized that one of the things that was aggravating his heart was the way the breath energy was coming in the body. Most often we think of it coming in from the front and then pulling it down into the lungs. That was just aggravating the damage that had already been done to his heart. He found that by thinking of the breath energy coming in the back of the neck, right at the spot where the base of the skull meets the neck, and then allowing the breath energy to go down the back, it brought a great sense of relief. So look at your own condition and see where the breath energy is coming in. It’s coming in in a way that’s actually aggravating any sense of discomfort in the body. And then think of the breath coming in from the opposite direction. I heard of one case where a young boy had just been undergoing open heart surgery, and he came out of it and he was in a lot of pain. And a nurse who’d been training in this method went to talk to him and his older sister. The older sister was also a nurse, and she was feeling at her wits’ end. Nothing the doctors could do to help alleviate the pain. And so the meditating nurse listened to the problems and told the kid, “Okay, now breathe through your butt.” He’d been pulling that breath energy down from the top to down through his heart, and it was painful. So allow yourself to think of the breath energy coming in and out of the body. There are ways that you normally wouldn’t allow it, or you wouldn’t even think it was possible. But it is. The breath energy does come in and out. It suffuses all the nerves in the body. I know when I had malaria in Thailand, again, I found that by thinking of the breath channels opening up in different parts of the body, it relieved a lot of the pain that came from the fact that the muscles of the body were starved of oxygen. And some of them were getting overworked, so that each breath was painful. So allow those muscles to relax. Basically, you don’t have to think of other muscles doing the work. If you relax the ones that are normally doing the work, you’ll find that within a couple of breaths, other muscles will come and pitch in. Or you can deliberately think of the breath coming in from places where it normally wouldn’t. This is so that the mind has a tendency of forcing things in the body in line with its cartoon ideas of what’s happening in the body. This is how you can counteract that. Because what you’re trying to do here is allow the mind to settle down with the body in a way that both of them feel at ease. The energies in the body are not distorted, and the mind has a comfortable place to stay. It feels nourished, it feels refreshed, just by being here together with the body. Years back, when I was first meditating with the Chan Fung, I’d hear him use the phrase “catch the breath.” I found myself subconsciously actually trying to catch the energy, force it in a certain direction. And then one day I noticed that it was a lot easier if you just allowed the breath to go through without catching it at all. So, being Western, I went and complained to him, “Why do you tell us to catch the breath? That’s when you let it go and do its own thing.” That’s what it feels like. And he laughed and said, “Well, that’s not what I meant by catch.” Catching for him meant that you just stayed with it, stuck by it, and learned from it what felt good and what doesn’t feel good, and allowed the mind’s ideas to adjust to what feels good in the body. Because, as with any friendship, you have to listen to the body and the body has to listen to you. But if you’re forcing the energy in the body in ways that are distorted, the body will probably do it for you for a while, but it’s going to be painful. So if you’re going to stay together, you have to listen to how the body reacts to the way you focus on it, and then adjust your focus so that you can stick with the breath but not distort it. There’s a lot to learn right here, in this territory in the present moment that you’re trying to inhabit. It’s like moving into a house. The house may not be in the best shape, but you work on fixing it up here, fixing it up here, and it gets more and more livable all the time. And you also learn about the strange nooks and crannies in the house, and how to make the best use of those. So as we settle in here, it’s not just a matter of clamping down. We’re being dictatorial. We’re developing a friendship. We’re developing a long-term relationship. So you listen to the body, you listen to the breath, and you offer them suggestions. Because it’s not the case that you’ve never been here before. You’ve been manipulating the breath energy subconsciously since who knows when. We all do it. And here we’re trying to do it in a way that’s conscious, in a way in which we give it our full attention. And because we’ve been mistreating it for so long, it’s going to be surprised and, at the beginning, may not seem to welcome our full attention. But if you show it that you really mean well, and you want to settle in and make this a long-term relationship, it’ll begin to respond. And if you pay careful attention, it’ll show you that it can do some things that you wouldn’t have thought possible. So this is both a process of learning from people who’ve done this before about what might be possible, and at the same time noticing that your body and your mind have their own peculiarities. Then you try to bring both kinds of knowledge into a good fit so that you can gain a sense of well-being simply by sitting here breathing, and the parts of the mind that want instant gratification will be mollified for a while. That’ll allow you to do your work. So this committee of the mind will begin to work together at the same time that it’s learning how to work together with the body. It’s only when you can settle in here for long periods of time that you can see the things going on in the mind and the body that you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. This is why concentration is so important for discernment. We can learn the wisdom that comes in the books. But if you haven’t actually seen it in action—and it is something that is in action. The word Dhamma doesn’t mean just teaching. It also means action. There’s an action of the mind. There are actions of the body. These are the Dhammas we want to learn. So to see these actions, to see these movements of the mind and the body, you have to make yourself very still and very much at ease being still. So give this issue here, the relationship of the breath and the mind and the body, your full attention, because it will reward you if you do. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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