Steady the Mind

February 11, 2012

Steadying the mind is one of the skills you need to develop when you’re meditating as you go through life—how not to get blown around by things. It’s listed in the Sixteen Steps of Breath Meditation. It’s one of the skills you have to develop around the breath, learning how to keep your mind steady all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. And that’s just the beginning. You want to learn how to keep the mind steady whether you’re sitting, standing, walking, lying down, whether you’re alone, whether you’re with other people. The Buddha talks about settling the mind in, and then when there’s a sense of stillness, this is one of the first techniques in steadying the mind, is finding something you really like being with. Try to keep your foundation deep, deep, deep down inside the body. There’s that story about John Lee getting other people to levitate. Apparently he couldn’t levitate himself, but he could get other people to levitate when he was meditating. One night the monks were sitting in a circle out under a tree someplace. And John Foong noticed that one by one the monks in the circle were rising up and staying off the ground for several minutes, and then very gently going back down on the ground. And then the next monk, up, off the ground for a while, and then down, going around the circle. And John Foong thought to himself, “He’s not going to make me levitate. He’s not going to make me meditate.” And so he thought of the earth element, going deep down into the earth. Actually, he focused his mind way down below where he was sitting, down deep inside the earth. And so John Lee was working around the circle, and finally came to the monk next to John Foong. Sure enough, he levitated, went up, and came down. And then John Foong felt this force coming up from under him, really, really strong. But he kept his mind concentrated deep down. He wasn’t going to let himself get lifted off. So he moved him around a little bit, but didn’t get him off the ground. And then it stopped. And then the monk on the other side, up, down. After the session was over, he said, as they were leaving, going back to their tents, John Lee looked at John Foong and just said, “Stubborn.” Just one word. And that’s part of how you get your mind to be steady, is to be stubborn. You’re going to stick with this one object, and you’re not going to let anything pull you away. The Buddha talks about training the mind by directing it and training the mind by not directing it. And both techniques work in steadying the mind and making it really solid. In other words, you give it something really good to stay with, something that you can stick with. That’s the directing. And as for other things that might distract you, you learn how to drop them as quickly as possible. Sometimes there are some hopes you have that this will work out or that will work out, and you’ve just got to say, “No, drop it.” Or you find this thing attractive, or you get worked up about how unfair things are in the world, or whatever the issue may be. You’ve got to get good at dropping these things. Whatever comes up, you just tell yourself, “I’m not going to go there. It’s not worth it.” So it’s the combination of the directing and the not directing that’ll get you settled down. So this is why an important part of the meditation is the discernment that reminds you why you are doing this, and why this is where you really want to stay. You want to think about the affairs of the world, your family, your work, the things you read about, learn about over the internet. You’ve got to develop a sense of sanghvega. The world is like an ocean. The waves are high and then they fall, and then they rise again, and then they fall again. You don’t really go anywhere. So no matter how good you can get things in your personal life, it’s not going to stay that way. It starts falling apart. You look at all the lives of the really good and great kings in the past and the end of their reigns. Everything began to just get frazzled. They were losing their grip, and everyone else wanted to develop their grip. And that’s kings. In the meantime, being a king, even being a great king, usually involves a lot of bad karma one way or another. So you end up with what? Nothing but a lot of bad karma that you’ve got to work with. As for relationships, you can get some really wonderful people that you can gain relationships with, but what happens? They die. Or you die. And a lot of times the relationship is not all that wonderful, and you spend a lot of time trying to make it good. In some cases, it’s going to become good, and in some cases the other person is just not playing along. You realize there are so many things in the world that you cannot control. Your past karmas place limitations on you in terms of how the situation outside can be improved. And so whatever the issue, whether it’s sensual desire, ill will, or any of the hindrances, you’ve got to learn how to cut them as quickly as possible. You’ve got to cut them as effectively as possible. That’s not directing the mind. In other words, pulling away from whatever the mind is going to. Remind yourself that no matter how much you may want to go in that direction, it’s going to leave you hungry in the end. There’s so much that you cannot control out there. It’s better to focus in on areas that you can control and find something that’s not going to leave you hungry. There’s a sense of sanghvega, a sense of being chastised, a sense of dismay over the hopes that you had or the plans that you had, what you wanted the world to be like. One of the most effective ways of developing good, strong concentration is to learn how to just drop those things. Not with a sense of depression. But just a sense that there’s a better place to look for happiness. Depression is when you don’t see any possibility of happiness anywhere at all. That’s not what we want. We want to focus our attention in the area where it really is possible. That brings it back into the mind, here in the present moment. Because you do have freedom of choice. You don’t have a wide range of choices outside, but you do have the choice of responding in a skillful or unskillful manner and shaping your mind state in a skillful or unskillful manner. That’s something you do right here. You’ve got the breath, you’ve got your directed thought and evaluation, which you ordinarily use for all kinds of things. It’s basically the linguistic part of the mind. You’ll use that to bring the mind to stillness, both by figuring out ways of dropping anything that’s going to pull you away from the concentration. So you don’t put up these big sails that allow any little breeze to blow you away. You cut through the sails. And then you take that directed thought and evaluation and you apply it to the breath. You apply it to how the mind is staying with the breath. You create this intention in the present moment that you’re going to stay here, and you’re going to learn to explore the breath. That’s how you use directed thought and evaluation to get interested in what you’re doing. That’s a way of steadying the mind. To be steady, you have to just drop all thinking. But often it’s more effective if you learn how to think skillfully, both in dropping outside things and in developing an interest in the breath. So you’ll have these tools ready when you need them. In other words, sometimes it seems that it’s very easy to settle down with the breath, no problem at all. It’s very easy to get distracted. You get careless that way. And then there come days when the mind won’t settle down at all. Something’s got to work out. And if you haven’t had experience in working through the issues of that sort, it’s very hard to get the mind to settle down, no matter how easy it was in the past. It’s a really important part of the skill here. It’s not just getting focused and staying focused, but it’s learning how to cut through all the things that would pull you away. In John Lee’s comparison to vines that would pull a tree down, you’re learning how to cut, cut, cut, cut, cut all around. That’s one way of getting the mind to be really still. You think about how foolish you’ve been in the past in focusing on this, that, or the other thing in hopes of happiness. And deep down inside you knew that it wasn’t going to give you true happiness, but you went ahead anyhow. When you confront yourself with that, that can be an effective way of getting the mind to just sit up straight and stay right here. Then you work with the breath in a way that allows it to settle down. So there’s a sense of solidity and stability, whatever sense of well-being or ease or perfection or refreshment or rapture may arise. Allow yourself to indulge in it, as the Buddha said. Don’t be afraid of getting attached to the concentration. It’s allowing yourself to really appreciate how good it can be. That’s going to make it even more stable and give the mind a magnet that’ll draw it in so that you’re content to stay right here. Then, as for the restlessness that may come when you say, “Well, what’s next? What’s next? How can I start going on to the next stage?” That’s another one of those vines that you’ve got to cut for the time being. The path develops by developing the concentration and getting really good at keeping the mind here, keeping it steady, and catching even the slightest little inclination to move away. That, in and of itself, develops insight. And that’s how your insight grows, through getting the mind to be steady and stable. So even though settling the mind comes under the heading of tranquility or peacefulness, or calm meditation, there’s got to be a certain amount of insight. The Buddha always likes to portray insight and calm as working together. One of his images is of a swift pair of messengers. They run together down the road. So keeping the mind steady and being very, very skilled at learning how to work together and how to look for the things that’ll pull it away, that’s how the tranquility and the insight develop together. You don’t have to go peering up ahead or looking back over your shoulder to see where insight’s going to come from. It’s going to come right from this stability right here. So work on keeping it strong. Because this is the path. Every other little path is just a vine that pulls you down. This is the path that leads out.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2012/120211_Steady_the_Mind.mp3>