Stillness Isn’t Enough

May 24, 2012

For some people, getting the mind to settle down is easy, and for others it’s hard. But whether it’s easy or hard is not the main issue. It’s what you do with it once you’ve got it. The problem, if it’s hard, is that sometimes people give up before they get there. And for people for whom it’s easy, they just stay there, don’t really put it to much use. So if you find that you’re having trouble getting the mind to settle down, remind yourself that there are people for whom it’s going to take time. And the fact that it doesn’t settle down immediately doesn’t mean that you’re doomed to never get it to settle down. It simply means that you’ve got to cut your way past all the attachments to keep it from settling down before it can really settle into place. Ajahn Mahaprabhu gives the comparison between a tree out in the open in the meadow and a tree in the forest. If you try to cut down the first tree, it’s pretty easy. Figure out which direction you want it to go, and there’s no great entanglements, nothing that’s going to keep it from falling. You cut it, and it goes right down. The trees in the forest, usually its branches are entangled with the branches of other trees, which means that you’re going to have to cut off some of the branches first before you can get the tree down. In other words, you have to use your discernment to see where you’re entangled, but things keep pulling you away from the breath, but things keep pulling you away from really settling down with the breath. You’ve got to learn how to think about them in a way to develop some dispassion. Issues concerning lust, issues concerning anger, issues concerning your family ties. Sometimes it’s family ties that are the hardest ones to stop thinking about because you feel like you’re being irresponsible or cold-hearted. But that’s not the case. If you really want to be helpful to your family, you’ve got to train your mind. Otherwise, you just keep adding your greed, aversion, and delusion to their greed, aversion, and delusion. And things just go, as I say in Thay, swimming around through birth, aging, illness, and death. So use your ingenuity to think about the various issues that have you entangled and try to lop them off one by one by one until all the branches that are connecting you with these other trees are cut away. Then you can bring your tree down. The advantage of this kind of concentration is that in getting the mind to settle down, you’ve been using your discernment. And so you’re ready to use your discernment as it’s still. In other words, the question of where there’s still an attachment here, where there’s still suffering or stress here. Often when the mind is still, the word suffering is too strong. This is when stress comes in and is useful. The mind is primed to look for these things. And there’s a discernment that’s part of the concentration. In terms of the text, it’s tranquility and insight. These are developed in tandem. As there are passages where the Buddha said, if you want the mind to really settle down in right concentration, it requires both insight and tranquility. These two qualities of mind have to work together. Sometimes one will come first, but you want them together. So if you’re mind is having trouble settling down, at least take heart that by the time you do get it to settle down, you’ll have the insight there in the concentration. And things will be able to maintain their balance. In cases where it’s easy for the mind to settle down, this is when you have to stir up your discernment. In other words, simply making the mind still is not going to get you to the end of the path. After all, before the Buddha, there were many, many people who had attained jhana, who had developed psychic powers. The canon talks about these people with psychic powers who knew their previous lives. Still, they didn’t gain awakening, which means that the stillness on its own is not going to get you there. It requires discernment. And discernment doesn’t come simply from making a resolution. On the one hand, it is true that you want to be determined on getting beyond the concentration. But the determination on its own, again, is not going to fill the bill. You’ve got to ask questions. This is why the Buddha paid so much attention to which questions were worth asking and which ones were not. The ones that are worth asking are the ones about stress. What’s causing the stress? What can you do to put an end to it? And the role of concentration. Concentration here is to give the mind the strength it needs to ask these questions, to probe around, and also to give you a point of comparison. When the mind is still, you can see its movements a lot more clearly. If it’s been moving around all the time, then you would be able to distinguish which parts of the mind are moving, which ones are not, or when they’re moving, when they’ve stopped moving. At the same time, you don’t have that sense of well-being that allows you to see subtle levels of stress when they happen. If the mind has a high level of stress that it carries around all the time, then it’s not going to see the more subtle levels. It’s like going around making noise all the time. You’re not going to hear subtle noises. If there’s a mouse in the room, you have to sit very, very still and be very, very still. You have to be very, very quiet before you can hear the sounds of the mouse so you know which wall it’s in, when it’s moving around, when it’s not. So the stillness is necessary as a part of gaining real discernment. It requires some discernment to get the mind to settle down. But for the really subtle levels of discernment, the mind has to be very, very still. Once it’s still, then you can start asking questions. There are several ways of doing this. One is looking at the mind in concentration itself. See where there’s still some stress in your concentration. Another is to notice what happens when the mind leaves concentration. Where do you notice the level of stress rising? Particularly here, we’re looking at mental stress. And it’s not just that the mind leaves concentration. It’s that things outside are complicated and we’d rather hide away in the stillness of our concentration. There’s something about the mind that takes on the outside complications and brings them inside. That’s what you’ve got to look for. When they talk about people getting stuck on concentration, it’s usually because they believe that the concentration is perfectly still and fine, with no problems at all, and it’s the world outside that is disturbing. As Ajahn Chah once said, when there’s a sound while you’re meditating, it’s not the case that the sound is disturbing you. You’re disturbing the sound. In other words, you’re the one that’s complaining about the sound. The sound is just doing its own thing. And the same is true about the other issues in the world that may be disturbing you when you leave concentration. They’re just doing their own thing. You’re the one that’s taking them in and making them a burden on the mind. This is what you want to see. So don’t expect that the stillness on its own is going to solve the problems. And don’t be disappointed in it if it doesn’t solve problems. It’s not supposed to solve all your problems. It’s just giving you the place where you can work, clearing away your workspace so that there aren’t other things interfering. And you can watch very clearly what’s going on in the mind. In the case of trying to look for stress while the mind is settled down, you can start analyzing your concentration. There’s a feeling here. There’s a perception, the perception that holds you with the breath. Of course, there’s a sense of the body in the way you experience the breath, the thought constructs that evaluate things. And then there’s the consciousness of all this. All the aggregates are right here. And they’re here in a very pleasant form. But there still is stress in that pleasure. So try to take things apart in this way. The aggregates are a very useful form of analysis because all too often when we approach a problem, the thought is, “Well, there’s something wrong with me.” And there’s that big “me” right there, which is the problem. And then you don’t know how to tackle it because everywhere you attack it, it’s you, you. Or the “me, me, me.” But if you learn how to take that sense of “me” apart, because there’s a part that’s made out of form, perhaps, or a part that’s made out of feeling, or any of the five aggregates, or any combination, you’ll learn how to analyze the problem in those terms. The aggregates may sound kind of foreign, but if you think about them in terms of how you feed, because that’s what the stress is all about. It’s feeding on the aggregates, the clinging. Trying to gain sustenance from these aggregates, that’s where we suffer. And if you think about them in terms of a feeding analogy, form is, on the one hand, the form of the thing you want to eat, the object you want to eat, and then of course there’s the form of your body that needs sustenance. Feeling is the feeling of dis-ease when you’re hungry and pleasure when you’re full. Perception is your perception of what out there is edible and what’s not. Perception of your own hunger. Are you hungry for sugar right now or are you hungry for salt? Perception is what will label that hunger. Then there’s thought constructs, the way you think about what you’re going to do in order to get the food, or once you’ve found the food, how you’re going to fix it so that you can eat it. And then consciousness. These functions of the mind apply not only to eating physical food, but also to the emotions and thoughts and other things that we feed on mentally. So if you notice a problem, try to take it apart in these terms. Look for the stress in any of these activities. And then ask yourself, “Well, what are you doing to feed on these things? What are you doing to add to that stress or add unnecessary stress to what’s already there?” If we could simply get the mind still and then magically have a determination, “May I have true insight, may I be liberated,” we’d all have been liberated a long time ago. Gaining insight means learning how to be observant. This is one of the qualities that the Buddha said he was looking for in any student—someone who’s truthful and someone who’s observant. That was the sort of person he wanted to teach the Dhamma. He didn’t ask that you have a natural talent for getting the mind still or not. It was a question of, “Are you truthful and are you observant?” If you’re observant, then you’ll see things. You’ll learn how to see the proper things, the useful things. So reflect on the questions you bring to the practice. Because they make all the difference. And do your best to be observant of what’s going on. Observant here means looking at your experience directly, not in terms of what people outside tell you you should be experiencing. Like the question today, “What would scientists have to say about this idea of breath flowing in the body?” They have no way of measuring this kind of stuff. It’s your experience of the body directly. Look at that. Because that’s where the suffering is happening. Again, your pain, your suffering, they can’t tell. When you go to a doctor, the doctor always has to ask, “Where does it hurt?” They can’t put you in a scanner and say, “Oh, there’s pain right here.” They can see inflammation. They can see things that would normally be associated with pain. But there are many cases where people have what looks like the kind of inflammation that would be painful, but they’re not feeling any pain. Or vice versa. The doctor can’t find any reason why there’s pain, but you feel it. It’s the same with all the other properties of the body—earth, water, wind, fire. We’re not talking about physical elements here. We’re talking about the qualities or properties of how you experience your body and who you’re going to trust. Are you going to trust these scientists or are you going to trust the Buddha? He taught these things as useful tools for observing what’s going on in the body and in the mind so we can put an end to suffering. Scientists and the people who speak for science have all kinds of other agendas going on. So try to take the Buddhist tools and figure them out. See how you can use them in understanding where you’re feeding, where you’re causing yourself unnecessary stress, and how you can stop causing that stress. When you see there’s stress, it’s not the stress that you’re going to abandon. You’re going to abandon the cause, the activity you do that raises the level of stress in the mind. So keep these questions, keep these issues in mind, because these are the ones that turn your state of concentration into a workplace where you can actually do the work of the path and come up with something really special. you

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