Settle Down Now

May 28, 2013

There’s an all-too-common tendency that when you know you have an hour to meditate, it takes almost a full hour for the mind to settle down. It’s kind of an easy glide down into concentration. Then you have a few minutes of concentration, and then as the mind seems nice and still, the bell rings. That’s because the perception you have that, okay, you’ve got an hour, and the idea that work expands to fill the time allotted to it. So try to change that attitude, that you want to get in the concentration as quickly as possible. Most of us here have been meditating quite a long time. By now you should know that where there is a center in your body, where the mind feels comfortable, you can make the breath comfortable, and you have a sense that that center is connected to everything else in the body. Well, go right there. And then spend the rest of the hour staying there, maintaining that sense of comfort, that sense of connection. Some people say, “Well, I don’t know what to do with myself.” Well, what you do with yourself is learning how to maintain that, not get irritated by the fact that it doesn’t seem to be going anywhere. I mean, it’s a false sense of progress when you’re gradually settling down. Say, “Well, see, I’m settling down bit by bit by bit.” That’s progress. It’s not the case. You want to stay right here. Get here. Stay here. Maintain it. And then you’re going to have to deal with whatever else comes up that’s going to pull you away. But you’re coming from a good, solid center, and you’re developing one of the most important skills that carries the meditation out into daily life. That skill is the ability to reach your center when you need it. When there’s chaos going around, when other people are upset, when you’ve got a lot of duties, you’ve got to learn how to find a spot as quickly as you can and maintain it. And see how much you can maximize that sense of well-being right there. The difference, of course, is that there’s a lot more going on around you when you’re going through your daily life than when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. But this is the part of the skill that you can develop right now. And you can think of whatever voices there are in the mind that are going to pull you away from that center as being like the voices of other people, where you try to latch on to what they’re saying, or latch on to their intention. You say, “Nope, you’re going to stay right here. Keep this sense of center full.” Whatever feels really pleasant and energizing in that spot that you’ve chosen, just stay right there. Maintain that sense of well-being. And don’t let the other voices that are nibbling away on the edges of your concentration get very far. Think of the good energy in the center exploding out to the pores of your skin. It’s one of the words that Ajahn Fuen would use, “Explode.” It’s this constant explosion. There’s good energy right here, and it just keeps coming and coming and coming, if you manage it right. Once you’ve found it, all you have to do is maintain it. The difference is that between this and the skills you need when you’re out talking with people and dealing with your tasks of the day is that, of course, the body will be moving around. This is why we do walking meditation. It’s like you’re sitting here meditating, and when the mind finally gets still, it’s like you have a bowl of water in your hand, and it’s filled to the brim. And as long as you’re not moving, there’s no danger of any waves causing the water to slosh over the room. But now you’re going to get up and move around. That requires a certain amount of balance, a certain amount of poise. So yeah, that element of complexity. It’s like the old joke about the person walking and chewing gum at the same time. You’re walking and maintaining your center at the same time. Unfortunately, it’s not a bowl of water. You’re not going to get wet, but it requires the same amount of attention. And if you slip a bit, you can get back to the breath as quickly as you can, learning not to get distracted by the movements of the body. The fact that you’re coming to the end of the path, you have to turn around and go back to the other end. Not because your eyes are open, you’re going to be seeing things around you, but you don’t take them in. This is an important principle. There’s an awareness there, but you don’t have to go running after it. The Pali word aramanah literally means “support.” In other words, in your meditation, it’s your preoccupation. You’ve got your preoccupation with the breath. You don’t want to get preoccupied with the things you notice around you, the animals, while you’re doing walking meditation, the movement of the leaves, anything around you at all. You see these things, but you don’t dwell on them. You’re dwelling with the breath, dwelling with the center. So the movement of the body doesn’t interfere. That’s the way you can then transfer this skill off into other, more complex activities. Then you can finally add the other element, the other people around you. That’s probably the most disturbing thing to concentration, is having to do with other people. Because you do have to pay attention. You have to pay attention to what they’re saying and respond in an appropriate way. But you learn how to do that without leaving the center and without letting their words harm your center. That’s the added skill. And there’s a physical side to this. I’m just maintaining that energy in the presence of what people are saying. Do it the way you breathe, do it the way you hold the body, do it the way you hold and expand the energy. If the interchange is negative, try to expand the energy so that you’re fully inhabiting your body. You don’t want their energy to come and penetrate yours. Even if it’s positive, you want to maintain that sense of you’re inhabiting the body. You’re feeling that if you can somehow take on the other person’s misery, you’re being more sympathetic. All you end up doing is ruining your own energy, weakening yourself, and you have that much less strength to offer the other person. And you can be aware of where they are and sympathize, and yet not internalize their energy. This way there’s more continuity between what you’re doing and what they’re doing. You’re doing it as you’re sitting here and as you go through the day and then coming back to the next time you sit. But in particular, try to master the skill of getting quickly into place and staying there. Because of course there will be times as you go through the day that you’ve lost your center and all of a sudden you’re going to need it again. And if it takes you half an hour to re-inhabit the center and re-inhabit your body, in the meantime a lot of damage can be done. In terms of what you’ve internalized from other people and the foolish things you tend to say when you’re not really centered and alert and mindful of what you’re doing. When instead of coming from a position of strength, you’re coming from a position of weakness. To remember this is an important skill in the meditation—the speed with which you can find your center and fully inhabit the body. It’s an active energy, nourishing energy, that gives you the strength you need in order to do and say and think the skillful thing when you need to, which is all the time.

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