A Gift of Stillness

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John Lee tells of the time when one of the very senior monks in Bangkok was ill. This was a senior monk who had not felt very friendly toward the forest tradition. So John Lee went to visit him. After bowing down, he went and sat cornered in the room and meditated. The old monk could feel the power of his meditation. He thought that John Lee was consciously directing the stillness to the old monk. So he asked John Lee, “What are you doing?” John Lee said, “I’m making a gift of stillness.” The monk said, “Well, whatever it is, keep on doing it. It feels good.” So every day he went to visit him. He did the same thing. And eventually they started talking. And over time he was able to get better. He got the old monk to meditate and actually got him to do quite well, which changed the old monk’s attitude towards the forest tradition totally. This is a good story about the power of stillness and making a gift of stillness, how much it can do for the world. Of course, it does a lot for you as you’re doing it. But it can help other people, too. Just the aura that you give off, the calm that you give off, can have a soothing effect on the world. But first you have to have the patience to let it have a soothing effect on you. We want peace of mind, and sometimes it’s really difficult for the mind to settle down. Yet all too often, once it’s there, we start to get impatient. What’s next? What’s next? A little voice chirps away in the mind. And you’ve basically got to breathe through that voice, obliterate it. Because the mind needs stillness. And stillness is like medicine, just as John Lee was able to make the gift of stillness and really help the old monk recover from his illness. In the same way, our own minds, our bodies, need stillness as medicine. So do what you can to make a sense of ease grow here in the body so you can use that to settle down. And then you’ve got to train yourself to be able to stay with it and not blur out and not get impatient. The blurring out tends to turn into torpor, which you don’t want. This is one of the reasons why it’s recommended that you go through the body section by section, working with breath energy here, breath energy there, trying to figure out areas where you haven’t been paying much attention to the breath energy. Sit down in the spaces between your toes, between your fingers, in between your eyes, the base of the spine. Go through the body and see if there’s some section that’s been ignored, that you’ve been neglecting. Give the mind work to do in the stillness. And when it’s done its work, then you can settle down with a little more clarity. Then see if you can maintain a full body awareness everywhere, everywhere, everywhere, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. This is one of the best ways of keeping the mind from getting distracted. If you’re getting torpid, as for restlessness and anxiety, sometimes you have to argue with the mind. Because it will tell you, “You’ve got to think about this, you’ve got to think about that, you’ve got to worry about this, worry about that.” The first line of defense is to remind yourself that by training the mind here, you’re developing a form of what they call inner wealth, noble wealth. At the very least, your ability to deal with the mind here in the present moment develops your discernment. And as you get more discerning about your own mind, it’s a lot easier to get more discerning about things outside as well. And as for things you have to plan for, things you have to worry about in the future, only a few things are really for sure. Aging, illness, and death are for sure. Everything else is pretty uncertain. And if you make too many specific plans for one thing, or are anticipating one set of circumstances, then if another set of circumstances comes up in its place, all your plans are for naught. But you’ve got to remind yourself that whatever the situation, you’re going to need alertness, you’re going to need mindfulness, you’re going to need the ability to stay focused to use your discernment. And those are things you’re developing right now. So what you’re doing as you stay here in the present moment, getting the mind to be still, is not a waste of time. You’re actually preparing yourself for every eventuality. Because, of course, when aging, illness, and death come, these are precisely the skills you’re going to need. When the doctors say, “Well, there’s nothing more we can do,” what do you turn to? You have to turn to your own discernment. Figure out, “Okay, here’s pain, here’s illness. How can I be here and yet not suffer from them? And how can I not suffer from leaving?” And your ability to fend off distraction is going to be one of the main skills you’re going to need at that time. So you’re doing everything you can right now. You’re preparing well for the present and for the future. So allow that thought to calm you down. Then as for things that need to be done out in the world, if you come from a position of stillness and strength, you’re going to be a lot more effective. A lot of people want to take on the world. They end up burning themselves out because a lot of their desire to change things is based on anger or it’s based on a mind that is not still at all. That kind of program to change the world doesn’t have staying power. You want to come from a position of stillness and strength and maintain that stillness and strength. So here you’re sitting without obstacles at all. The question is, can you maintain your stillness here? Because when you’re dealing with other people and dealing with situations out there, you’re going to need a lot more stillness and a lot more focus than is required right now. So when the mind says, “This is boring,” or “This has not accomplished anything,” remind it, “No, this is a gift of stillness.” Medicine is like a medicine that you put on your skin, and you have to let it sit there for quite a while so it can do its work. It’s like a cream for a rash. Your mind has lots of rashes. John Lee once compared restlessness and anxiety to a kind of plant that creates a rash. So you need the cream of concentration to cool your skin, heal the rawness of the rash. And however much time it takes, well, that’s the time you can devote to looking after your concentration, protecting it, hovering around it, learning to see it as something valuable. Because this, too, is a form of inner wealth. This is the food. It keeps all the other strengths inside strong. So give yourself this gift of stillness and remind yourself that it’s a gift of stillness for the world. You can dedicate it to specific people. Tonight we’re meditating. Dedicate our meditation to the king of Thailand. It’s his birthday tomorrow morning, or it’s actually his birthday right now in Thai time. And then you can dedicate it to anyone else you want to, as well. Because a stillness doesn’t have specific boundaries. It can spread out in all directions. And as John Lee commented, it has a strength that only those who develop it can really understand and really appreciate. So do what you can to learn how to appreciate it yourself.

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