Settling In

September 26, 2015

In Jhansan Thailand, we’d often say that when you sit down to meditate, you’re getting the body in position and you’re getting the mind in position as well. They draw a parallel between the two. I’m going to check to see if your mind is not leaning forward or leaning back, leaning to the left, leaning to the right. Forward and back, of course, refer to the past. The future and the past. Left and right, refer to things that you like and don’t like. Try to put all those things aside and just be right here with the breath. Be as fully in the present moment as you can. You want to occupy your whole body, from the head down to the toes, the toes back up to the head. As you breathe in and out, think of the whole body breathing. Think of the pores of your skin as little holes that the breath energy can come in and out. So there’s no part of the body that’s not bathed in breath energy. If you’ve been able to get your mind to sit up straight, it’s not that hard to stay with the breath. The problem is that sometimes we’re leaning forward, sometimes we’re leaning back, to the left or the right. That’s when you have to stop and think, “Why am I leaning to the future? Why am I leaning to the past? What’s pulling me in those directions?” If it’s issues of the future, you can remind yourself that you really don’t know what’s going to happen in the future. What you do know is that you’re going to need more mindfulness, more alertness, in all situations. So rather than thinking about the future, develop those qualities right here, right now. Then you’re taking care of the future as best you can. If you’re thinking about something you’re looking forward to in the future, you can also remind yourself that death could come at any time. It doesn’t consult anybody else’s plans. It doesn’t ask, “Is this a convenient time to die? Do you have anything else you want to do before we go?” It just comes. So that’s something you have to prepare for as well. Again, the more mindfulness and alertness, the more concentration you can develop, the better prepared you’ll be. If you ask for issues in the past, remind yourself there’s nothing you can do to go back and change them. They’re locked in place right now. So whether they were good or bad, there’s nothing you can get out of them anymore. The love of God is just right here. As for things you like and dislike, the liking it either be through greed or lust. So you may have to think in ways that’ll counteract the greed and counteract the lust. This is why we have the contemplation of the body. You contemplate your body, you contemplate other people’s bodies. In the case of your body, you might find that there’s an issue that you have around either liking the way you look or not liking the way you look. And you remind yourself the looks there are only skin deep. Once we take the skin off, everybody’s equal. This might be called a healthy, negative body image. And no matter how good looking you get the body to be, it’s still just a body. It’s got livers and kidneys and stomachs. All kinds of uninteresting and undesirable things inside. This applies to your body, it applies to everybody’s bodies. So what’s there to get worked up about? What’s there to desire? As for greed, you can ask yourself these things that you want. To what extent do you really own them, even when you get them? And to what extent do they provide real happiness? How many things have you gotten in the past that made you permanently happy? Well, nothing. There was a little bit of satisfaction, and then you got bored. There are some things that provide comfort. But you begin to realize that for a sense of comfort you don’t really need all that much. That’s one of the reasons why we have that reflection on the requisites. Just enough food, just enough clothing, just enough shelter, and just enough medicine to take care of genuine needs. And beyond that, it becomes a waste. I mean, the money you spend on things like that, you can’t devote that into a better purpose. Your opportunities for generosity get limited if you’re constantly getting, getting, getting. So you think of the things that you like and you realize it’s not worth cluttering up your mind right now. As for the things you don’t like, again, why get worked up about them? Here you’ve got an opportunity to meditate, develop some good qualities in the mind. Why are you feeding on bad food? It’s usually from the past. This is why we have the reflections on the Brahma-viharas, goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. They’re aimed more and more toward the equanimity. Especially when you’re meditating, trying to get the mind with the breath, they aim more and more at the equanimity. There’s only so much you can do for people outside. If you really want to make a change, then the world starts right here with the mind. So these are different ways of thinking to bring the mind in the present moment with the right attitude. Jon Stewart would often talk about how, when you start meditating, you want to start with the right attitude. Many of us want to think, “Well, we’re meditating in order to get the right attitude.” But what he was saying, of course, is that if the attitude isn’t right right now, then you meditate for the purpose of making the attitude right, and then you can apply it to your contemplation of the breath, contemplation of the body, the bhutta, or whatever your topic is. So thinking in this way is a vital part of the meditation. The ways that the mind is thinking, especially the things we pick up from the culture around us, are often very hard just to drop so you can get into the present moment. Because a lot of those things have to do with your motivation for wanting to meditate and your extent to which you want to devote time and energy to the meditation, and your values about what’s a good use of your time. The different members of the committee inside have lots of different ideas about what’s a good use of your time right now. So you want to nip a lot of them in the bud, especially the ones that are going to pull you away from being right here. So you have to have arguments ready, because they have their arguments, they have their reasons. And if you’re not ready for them, they can sound pretty convincing. If you’re ready for them, you can see right through them. It makes it a lot easier to get past distraction. So do your best to get your mind in position. Then when you’re here, then you can start exploring. How’s the breath energy in the different parts of the body? You want to get as fully aware and as fully into the body as you can. Try not to be too focused just on one spot. You want the awareness to fill the whole body as the breath comes in, the whole body as the breath goes out. Because that’s when you can say you’ve got mindfulness immersed in the body. There’s a whole sutta devoted to this topic. It starts with the basic steps of mindfulness and then moves into the steps of jhana. It’s got the different analogies. It has similes to describe right concentration. And they all involve full body awareness, full body ease, full body rapture. And then the ease and rapture get stronger. And then the rapture gets so strong that you don’t want it anymore, so you drop that. You focus in on a more subtle and refined energy here in the present moment that gets you a sense of ease. Then you refine your focus even further to the point where the breath stops. Put your fully in the body. And whatever ease or awareness is, you want those things to fill the body all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Make it so that your range of awareness doesn’t have any in and outs. The breath can have in and outs, but the awareness doesn’t have an in and out. In other words, it doesn’t expand and contract. It just stays full, full, full, right where you’re sitting here. This awareness is because it is all around and focused at the same time. That’s the kind of awareness that’s ideal for watching your mind. Because even as the mind settles down like this, there’ll be little thoughts nibbling away at you. Sometimes they’re more, sometimes they’re less. We talked about this today. Sometimes your past karma gives you this huge influx of lots and lots of thoughts. They’re not thoughts you’re looking for, they just happen to be there in the background. So you want to be careful to see to what extent are you encouraging these things. In order to watch yourself, to figure out what’s the past karma here, what’s the present karma, you have to be very, very still to catch the movements of the mind as it flows out after things, as it encourages things, as it gets curious about the thoughts. If you get the breath energy really nicely combed out, think of it like combing your hair. You comb all the snarls out of your breath energy so everything is really nicely raked and combed. And when there’s a little bit of another snarl developing, you’ll notice it immediately. And if you watch the process, you begin to notice, okay, first there’s a little snarl, a little stirring there in the energy, and then you slap a perception on it and it becomes a thought about this or that or whatever, and then you can run with it. The slapping of the perception, that’s the beginning of present karma there. So the extent to which you’re out looking for things, that’s present karma. And that’s what you want to put aside. To do that, you have to be very, very still and alert all around. Because these stirrings can happen anywhere in the body. There’s a voice that says, “This is this, and that’s that.” That can be any member of the committee, and they seem to be in different parts of the body as well sometimes. So you want to be able to see these thought processes in action, see the steps in action. So you begin to notice if there’s anything that you’re contributing in the present moment, you can stop it and see what happens then. You see your level of awareness gets more sensitive, and you see even more subtle things going on in the mind. This is why the Ajahn says you can’t really separate insight from concentration, or discernment from concentration. The two have to go together. And even when the insights do come, you have to test them. Because sometimes an insight is just right for that particular moment, that particular time, but it’s not a general rule or general law. Not necessarily. Sometimes they are. So you’ve got to test these things. We were talking earlier today about people who try to get in touch with the devas of various plants and whatever. Hoping that they’ll get reliable knowledge that way. You can’t even trust what’s coming up in your own mind, even when it’s very strongly concentrated. How can you trust anything outside? To trust yourself, you have to keep being very rigorous with yourself. Something comes up and you have to say, “Okay, I’ll take that on for the time being, but I’ll have to question it. Is this really good? Is it really true?” In John Lee’s test, to ask yourself, “To what extent is the opposite true?” In Kiananayon’s test, you have to say, “What happens when there’s an insight in the mind? What’s the next mental moment following on that?” Because some things that come up in the mind seem to be good, but the way you treat them, the way you put them into your patterns of action, can distort them. So you have to be careful. You have to watch very carefully. That’s another reason why you try to make this awareness as continuous as possible. To watch all the steps, even the steps of discernment. So as you’re getting the mind into position, there are many levels of subtlety. You take care of the gross levels first and then the more subtle ones. You take care of the more subtle ones and you find others that are still more subtle. But as you do this, you find that the sense of well-being, the sense of stability, the sense of being more in control in here, gets stronger and stronger. Your understanding of what’s going on gets more subtle. And this is all for the good.

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