When the Mind Is Still

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One of your main tasks as a meditator is to keep up interest in what you’re doing. In the beginning that’s not hard. There’s a lot to be done. Getting the mind to settle down. Sometimes it takes a while. Takes some strategizing. What can you do to get the mind to be willing to settle down? Stay with one thing, the breath, with a sense of ease. And Chandrali gives some advice. You can notice where there are patterns of tension, where there’s pains in the body. And you ask yourself, how are they related to the breath? Can I breathe in a way that soothes the pains or dissolves the patterns of tension? That gives you something to do as you work through the body. You can start at the navel and go up the front of the body, over the head, down the back, out the arms, out the legs. Or you can start at the feet and the hands and work up to the center of the body. Or start with the feet, go up the legs, up the spine, up through the head. There’s work to be done. And when there’s work to be done, you can maintain interest. Especially if you have chronic diseases or chronic pains, you have a riddle to solve. And if your mind likes riddles, here’s a really good one. But then the problem comes when the mind actually does settle down and you don’t know what to do with yourself. And to lose interest, they get bored. Nothing’s happening. They blur out. There’s a sense of ease and you just go with the ease, forget the breath. You get into what’s called delusion concentration, where you’re quiet. Things are kind of hazy. You’re not really sure whether you’re awake or asleep. That’s not where you want to be. When you settle down, there’s work to be done. The main work is maintaining the sense of ease, the sense of stillness. As for what else you can do, the Buddha gives directions right there in his instructions on right mindfulness. You put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. So you decide that any other thought that comes up in the range of your awareness, you want to stop it in its tracks. Kind of like that game of whack-a-mole. A thought appears and you want to look for where in the breath, in your sense of the breath and the body, is there a tightness or a little knot of energy getting tangled up around that thought. Sometimes the tangle appears first, then you slap for perception. You say this is a thought about X or a thought about Y and then you run with it. By that time it’s too late. It’s not too late to stop the thought, but you’ve missed a lot of important points. You want to see how your thought worlds are formed. The best way to see how they’re formed is to try to stop them as quickly as you can. One image you can think of is a spider on its web. It’s sitting very still, waiting for the web to move. And when the web does move, it has to figure out where on the web did that movement come from. It runs over and finds a fly or something that’s flown into the web. Then it spins its web material around the fly and it goes back to its spot. That’s one image you can have. Another is just you zap the thoughts. As soon as there’s a stirring in the breath energy or the place where the breath energy and the mind meet, you try to dissolve it. So you have your home base someplace in the body. You’re fully aware of the body. And then you wait. What little stirrings will appear? Where will they appear? And how quickly can you sense them? How quickly can you dissolve them? And as you dissolve them, you begin to see there are certain steps that go into the formation of a thought. Sometimes a thought arrives ready-made from the past. Other times there’s a stirring and you decide, “I want to think about X,” and you turn it into a thought about X. And as you’re doing this, you’re learning some important lessons about the process of fabrication in the mind. You’re learning about becoming. Becoming is taking on an identity in the world of experience. Our major becoming, of course, is our identity as human beings in this human world. But there are becomings in the mind and they happen all the time. The thought comes up. It looks appealing. It looks intriguing. It has some allure of some kind. Even if it’s a thought about something you don’t like, something you’re worried about, there’s part of the mind that feels, “Well, I have to think about this, so I might as well think about it now.” And the appeal is that pulls you in. Then you’re a person in that thought world. And when that happens, as the Buddha said, you’re already entangled in the processes of suffering. You want to catch yourself before those processes form into a thought world, before you take on an identity in that world. That’s one of the reasons why we meditate, so we can see these preliminary steps more clearly. Without this stillness, they’re buried in all the background noise of the mind, all the background chatter. It’s when the stillness allows that chatter to calm down, calm down, that you can begin to see these things. So it’s in the process of creating a steady state of mind that you’re going to learn about fabrication. Because you want to see fabrications as they arise, as they change, as they pass away. But you don’t want to arise and change and pass away with them. You want something that’s more solid. This is why John Lee says that when you’re doing concentration, you’re basically fighting against the three characteristics. You’re taking what’s changeable and inconstant in your mind, and you’re trying to make it more and more constant. Because when it’s constant, then you can see other things arise and pass away. If you arise and pass away along with them, you can’t see the process. You’ve got to have some constancy in the mind. And for this to last, there has to be a sense of ease. So you’re taking what’s basically stressful and you turn it into something easeful. Your sense of the body as you feel within. From within. There’s a fair amount of stress there, just in maintaining the body, keeping it going. But you’re learning to do that with a sense of ease. And these things that are beyond your control, you’re trying to bring them under your control. These thought worlds. You learn that you can control them up to some extent. That’s the important thing. Where is that extent? Where is the boundary? We’re not here just to give our allegiance to the Buddha and say, “Yes, he’s right.” These are three things that are built into the world, as Pastor Channon just now said, whether there’s a Tathagata arising in the world or not. There’s this quality of the Dhamma. All fabrications are inconstant. All fabrications are stressful. Dhammas are not self. But we’re not here just to affirm that what the Buddha said is true. Because as he noted, fabrications have their pleasant side. He said if they weren’t pleasant, we wouldn’t fall for them. We wouldn’t have passion for them. But if you focus on their pleasant side, that just aggravates the passion. You want to focus on their unpleasant side. So you can develop some dispassion for them. Why do you want dispassion for them? Because when you learn how to stop them, when you learn how to pull out of them, you begin to realize that they really are stressful. And you’re better off not getting engaged. That’s only when you can step out of fabrications like this, thought fabrications, the fabrications of states of becoming. That’s something that unfabricated will appear. That’s what we’re here for. We’re here to use those teachings on what are usually called the three characteristics to develop dispassion. So we’re not just sitting here, “Yeah, I think the Buddha’s right.” Or, “I’m not sure yet, but let’s keep working until I feel that, yeah, it’s right.” That’s called agreement through pondering views. The Buddha said you can’t really rely on that to guarantee the truth is something just because it agrees with what you’ve thought about, what you’ve generalized from your experience. Instead, he wants you to use his teachings and his tools to work on the problem, which is the craving and the clinging. The craving that causes suffering, the clinging that constitutes suffering. Learn how to let go of that craving so you can put an end to suffering. And the end comes when you find that something not fabricated is actually there, retouched by the mind. This is why when the Buddha gives his image of the two messengers, tranquility and insight, they come running into the citadel of consciousness, and they bring a message. The message is not the three characteristics. The message is nibbana. When insight has done its work, you’re going to experience something deathless inside. That’s what all this is for. But this means that you have to learn how to view your thought fabrications from the outside, so you don’t get sucked into them as you ordinarily do. That’s why we create the sense of stillness in the body, expansive awareness filling the body. With a sense of ease, and ultimately with a sense of stillness and equanimity, so you can see those processes from the outside, zap them. Learn how to stop creating a sense of identity around them or in them. That’s how the meditation works, but it requires a lot of patience. You think about the image of the spider, or the image of zapping, it relates to the image of the hunter. The hunter has to be very still and very patient, but very alert. Maintain interest in what he’s doing. If he gets bored, he starts fidgeting around, thinking about this, thinking about that, not paying attention to what’s going on. Then not paying attention, he’s going to miss the signs that there’s game. And the fidgeting around is going to scare the game away. So learn to be still. Learn how to take an interest in being still, and what you can learn, what you can begin to observe when you’re still that you wouldn’t observe otherwise. Those thought worlds that you used for your entertainment and for figuring things out in the world outside, you’ve got to learn how to pull out of them. And the concentration allows you to do that as you maintain it. So learn how to take an interest in maintaining stillness. And that way you can develop this skill.

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