Starting Out Small

October 25, 2018

We meditate to provide a home for the mind, a place where we can feel secure, protected, safe. The problem is, the mind itself contains a lot of the dangers that we have to protect ourselves from. Which means we have to start out by finding a corner of the mind, maybe a corner of the mind, where we do feel at home, where we feel at ease. So we can have at least a toehold in the present moment where we feel safe. And we can withstand the power of a lot of the emotions that tend to be overwhelming. The breath is one way of working with the sensations in the body in the present moment. You start out with the meditation where you go along with it, to give yourself some company, and try to notice where in the body does it feel best. Where is the breath most prominent, or where is it most comfortable? And allow yourself to have that little spot as your home. Ultimately, we’re going to try to get the whole body to be ours, to be our safe place. But sometimes you can’t go too quickly. You have to start out with something small. It’s like lighting a fire. You have to cup it with your hands, and there’s going to be a little tiny, tiny spark. You’ve got to protect it. And if you give it enough protection, content yourself with having just that tiny spark for the time being. Because with enough protection, it’s going to grow. And as it grows, it can take over the fuel you’ve got. The same way when you start out with a small spot, and you get good at protecting it, then it’ll begin to take. And then you can think of that sense of ease spreading to different parts of the body. Some people, if they go too quickly into the whole body awareness, they lose their focus. It’s too weak. So you’ve got to go back to that one spot. Or you can try two. I knew a woman in Thailand whose technique for getting into concentration really fast was to focus on one spot in the center of the head and another spot at the base of the spine, and to think of a line connecting the two. She said it was like a wire connecting two poles of a battery. As soon as the two poles were connected, things lit up inside. So if you find that one spot is not enough to keep you occupied, try two. Or if you have trouble settling with the breath, another spot, using another topic for meditation, could be goodwill. You start with goodwill for yourself. Think about what that means. Realizing that the happiness you want to wish for yourself is not going to come simply by wishing. You’re going to have to understand the causes for your happiness. And be willing and able to act on them. That’s three things right there. The understanding, the willingness, and the ability. This is one of the reasons why the practice is work. First, you’re going to need to understand things, and having a willingness to put them into practice, and having the ability. And as you develop the willingness and the ability, then the understanding grows. But again, in the beginning it’s kind of small. But just the idea, “May I be happy,” shouldn’t be too hard to think. Then think about the implications. And then you start thinking about other people. Start with people who are easy to have thoughts of goodwill for, to begin with. People who you feel close to. People who you realize that their well-being is very closely tied up to yours, and your well-being depends on theirs. Then start spreading it out. And as you start spreading it out to people you are less familiar with, or people you don’t like so much, try to see if there’s anybody out there, any individuals or any groups of people, for whom you have trouble feeling goodwill. And stop and ask yourself, “Why?” Do you really want to see them suffer? And part of the mind says, “Yes, sometimes.” Ask yourself, “Why?” What would you gain? What would they gain? A lot of people, when they suffer, they don’t realize that they’ve been doing something wrong and come to their senses. They just start lashing out. And our efforts to create our idea of justice and have revenge in the world, that’s what keeps turmoil continuing. As the Buddha said, “Hostility isn’t ended by hostility, it’s ended by non-hostility.” In other words, you develop goodwill. So go down the list of individuals or groups of people for whom you find it difficult to have goodwill, and think your way through to the point where you say, “Okay, it would be in my best interest for these people to find true happiness.” Because imagine what the world would be like if everybody understood the causes of true happiness and were willing and able to act on them. It would be a very different world. But we’re doing the same thing. It’s not because we think that simply thinking is going to make it happen. It’s because we want to make sure that when we have dealings with other people, regardless of whether we like them or not, we’re able to trust ourselves not to try to harm them. Because if we harm them, that harm is going to come back on us. So it’s in our best interest to have goodwill for everybody, without exception. When you train the mind to have this kind of attitude, that can also be a good home in the present moment. Because the mind can settle down with us. Whether you’re thinking about the breath or not thinking about the breath, if the thought is easy, if the thought is comfortable, the breathing will tend to improve. You feel at ease in the present. You feel at home in the present moment. And you have the advantage, especially with goodwill, that the state of mind that you are developing is very large. See if you can bring that large state of mind to the breath. So both the thoughts in the mind are large, and the sense of awareness of the body is large. Because it’s only when these things are large that you can overcome the emotions that tend to feel bigger, the ones that get hold of your breath and then from the breath spread out through all the breath energies in the body. You feel surrounded by fear, surrounded by anger, or whatever the emotion is. But here you’ve got the emotion surrounded. You’re bigger. You’ve got a spot where you can step back, because there’s a lot of space in the mind. And you can realize that the emotion doesn’t have to take up all the space. That’s when you can watch it. And it’s when you can watch it from the outside like that that you get a lot of insight into it. Why it is that you keep going for that, what the pull is, what the allure is, as the Buddha calls it. But now you’ve got the advantage. Your goodwill is larger. Your awareness of the breath is larger. At this point, the breath belongs to you. It doesn’t belong to the emotion. This is how you create a sense of being at home in the present moment. You enlarge your awareness of the present moment. As I said earlier, though, you have to start out with something small. In John Lee’s images of trying to plant an orchard, if you try to plant the whole orchard all at once, sometimes a drought comes or a heat wave comes and kills all the trees. Because you were overextended, you didn’t have enough water for them. But if you start with just a few trees, take very good care of them. Make sure you have enough water to take care of them, even though there may be a drought or a heat wave. The trees will survive. They’ll give fruits. The fruits will have seeds. You plant the seeds. And bit by bit by bit, the orchard grows. And its growth is solid. So try to find a spot in the body in the present moment, or at least a spot in your mind in the present moment, where you can feel at ease, knowing that there’ll be other parts of the body and other parts of the mind that are not under your control right now. But that’s something you’ve got to live with. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, nothing to be fearful about. Just admit to yourself, “This is going to take time.” One of our major weaknesses in the modern world is that we don’t know how to take time for things. We want everything done yesterday. So we have to learn patience. Patience means taking the long view and giving yourself pep talks as you take step by step by step. The steps may seem small, but they add up. So at some point, that enlarged state will be your home. You’re no longer living in a little tiny shack. You’ve got a big mansion here in the present moment. And the fact that it’s larger can help you feel that you’re no longer overwhelmed by your emotions. You can surround them. That gives you the advantage.

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