

Settling In

July 30, 2008

The mind is a compulsive wanderer. It has trouble staying with anything for any length of time, so much so that we think that that's its nature—just to keep going and going, thinking of this, thinking of that, checking out things over here, over there. We forget that one of the reasons the mind keeps wandering like this—is so compulsive about wandering like this—is that it doesn't have a good home.

It doesn't like staying in the present moment because it doesn't feel at ease in the present moment. A lot of what the meditation accomplishes is to create a sense of being at home right here, right now. The Pali term for this is *vihara dhamma*, a quality of the present moment that can be a home for the mind. So as you settle down to meditate, think of it as moving into a house that you want to make into a home.

What are the steps? The first thing is that you've got to start cleaning things out. This is why we focus on the breath. The breath is an energy that permeates the whole body. It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs; that's the effect of the breath energy in the body. The breath energy in the body is what gives life to your nerves, lets you know that you have a body, and allows you to move it around.

Now, a lot of that energy is very subtle. So to begin with, you focus on the parts that you *can* notice: the breath coming in, the breath going out. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths to see how deep and long breathing feels. If it feels good, keep it up. Try to maintain that sense of well-being. If it gets so that it doesn't feel good, you can change. Make it shorter, or have long in- and short out-breaths, or short in- and long out-breaths. You can make it heavier or lighter, even deeper, or more shallow. Experiment.

And even though you may not sense the breath energy in the different parts of the body, at least hold that mental label in mind that the whole body's breathing in and the whole body's breathing out. The energy can flow. If you sense any tension or tightness in the body, that's a sign that the breath energy is blocked. So think of it relaxing.

You can go through the body systematically. You can start at the navel. Watch that for a while until everything feels easy and open there, and then move up to the solar plexus, the chest, the base of the throat, middle of the head, and then move down the spine, past the hips, down the legs to the tips of the toes. Then

start again at the back of the neck and this time, go down the shoulders and the arms out to the tips of the fingers. If you're not sure if there's any excess tension, you might compare the left to the right side of your body. Which side has more tension at any particular spot in the body—say at the waist, in the hips, or down the legs? Which knee has more tension, which calf muscle, which foot? Whichever one has more tension, focus on relaxing it. Then go through the body again and again.

You're cleaning out this house, trying to make it a home. But in the course of cleaning it out, you're also connecting up the electric wires. In other words, you're energizing the body as well. But it's a still energy. Ajaan Lee calls it "cool electricity." It's not like the hot electricity of your greed, anger, and delusion. It's the cool electricity of awareness, being aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, so that your home is clean and bright.

Try to breathe in a way that gives you a sense of fullness. That puts food into your house as well. After you've been through the body several times, think of every cell in the body as being full of energy. It's not squeezed when you breathe in; it's not squeezed when you breathe out. The energy permeates everything but it doesn't disturb anything. It just keeps everything awake, alert.

In that way, you begin to move into your home. The next step is learning how to stay there. This is slightly different. Staying in the present moment requires a sense of balance. It requires a lot of alertness because it's so easy for the mind to shift off into other things, especially when you're at ease. It may seem paradoxical. We don't settle down in the present moment because it's uncomfortable, but then when we do settle down, the mind starts drifting. So you have to be very conscious of "whole body" every time you breathe in, "whole body" every time you breathe out. Think of your body as a big, wide television screen. Every now and then a little picture will form at some spot on the screen. A little knot of energy will develop, and if you're not careful, it'll turn into another thought world.

So think of your awareness as a spider on the web. The spider's in one spot, but the web extends throughout the whole body. So as soon as there's a disturbance in any part of the web, you go there, unravel it, and then come back to your spot—whichever spot in the body you find congenial as home base. You're still but watchful; you're still and alert. A thought of boredom may come up: "So what happens next?" You have to remind yourself that nothing happens next, at least not right now. Things will happen next, but they're not going to happen because your boredom is pushing you to go. You want the state of staying right here to ripen, to develop, and it's not going to ripen by your moving around a lot.

Move around just enough to make sure that no thoughts pull you out of this world of the *vihara dhamma*, this home for the mind, and into another wandering world. But that's it. The general antsiness that keeps you moving: You have to learn how not to give in to it, because part of the mind likes the antsiness. You feel that when the mind gets moving like this, then there's entertainment; there's fun; there's something new. But all that entertainment basically turns into dust.

Out of the thoughts you have in the course of the day, what percentage is actually useful, actually beneficial? A very small percentage, and everything else just wastes the mind's energy. So you want to give the mind practice in just staying very still and devoting its energy to protecting that stillness. The more you can stay here with the stillness, the greater the energy that develops. It's a different kind of energy from the wandering energy. It feels healthy, whole—healing for every sense of lack or discomfort in the body or the mind.

In this way, your home has food and medicine. It's a well-stocked home now. It's a comfortable home. But as with many forms of medicine like the creams you put on a rash, it takes time for the healing to go deep. So give this state of mind time. You're sitting here at the moment with no other responsibilities. There's nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to do. Try to be here at home in the body, at home with the breath, feeding the mind on a sense of ease—whatever sense of ease or rapture you can find. Maybe “rapture” can be too strong a word. Use whatever ease and refreshment you can find just by breathing whatever way feels *really* good right now.

Then once the breath feels good, try to maintain that sense of whole-body awareness. If it shrinks, you're likely to drift off. So work at keeping your awareness filling the body all around, in all directions. And whatever sense of pleasure comes up, you don't take that as your object. You know it's there, but you stay with the breath even as the breath grows still. It'll grow more and more calm, more and more refined. You don't have to pump the breath in. If the body needs to breathe more, it'll breathe more. But if it doesn't, there's a sense of ease that comes from not having to breathe very much. Allow that sense of ease to drench the body, to suffuse the mind.

Try to find the point of balance between the in-breath and the out-breath, and focus on that sense of balance. You find that it leads to a sense of lightness. See if you can maintain that sense of balance for the hour. If you slip off and start wandering around, start over again. See where in the body the breath energy is disturbed, where it doesn't feel comfortable or it feels forced. Try to develop as much sensitivity as you can to the sense of energy in the body. All too often, we

ignore it because we're interested in other things outside. But here's your chance to give it all the attention it deserves so that the mind *can* have a home.

If the mind is going to go thinking, tell it to think only when it really needs to. Otherwise, you're going to stay right here—rested, refreshed, nourished—allowing body and mind to heal from all the jouncing around and knocking back and forth that there is out there in the world. Give it some time and space of its own.