

Insights

June 14, 2011

To get the mind to settle down, you have to do some surveying first. It's like figuring out where to build a house. You go and sit in one spot on your property, see what it would feel like to have the house there. Maybe you like it, maybe you don't. So you try another spot and then another spot. Then you realize there's really no spot that's perfect, so you decide to work on the ones that seem most promising. You scratch away the leaves, the boulders, the roots, whatever, that make it uncomfortable. You may have to do some bulldozing until you finally get a spot that's okay. That's when you can settle down.

So in the beginning in the meditation, you find yourself having to circle around the body. Focus here a bit. Focus there a bit. Work on different patterns of tension in the different parts of the body, because as long as you're here working with the breath energy, working with the sensations in the body, you're where you're supposed to be. You're zeroing in on the spot where you want to settle. Then when things feel good enough, you can settle down.

Once you've settled down, you find that sometimes there's a little more work to do—because as your awareness gets more sensitive, you see things that you didn't see before. So you survey again and do a little more cleaning up work. Take care of the details. Take care of the subtle patterns of tension and then you can settle down again, because the greater the sense of ease and well-being you can get in the body, the fuller the breath can feel. The more expansively you can get that sense of fullness and ease to spread throughout the body, the easier it will be to stay settled for longer and longer periods of time, trying to establish your sense of the body as your frame of reference.

And you want the whole body as your frame of reference. If your concentration is just in one spot and that's the only kind of concentration you have, then you're in trouble. As soon as you move from that spot, your concentration's gone. That's the kind of concentration that's hard to take out into the world.

What you want is a combination of having one spot as your focal point, but the whole body as your frame of awareness, your frame of reference. It's like the candle here in the front of the sala. Its flame is in one spot, but its light fills the whole room. The light in the room is what actually allows us to see things, to read by, if you wanted to read, because the flame is steady. If you put the book right into the flame, you'd burn it up. So the light that fills the room is what's actually useful. Still, without the one flame, you wouldn't have the light.

So it's a combination of having one spot that's predominant in your awareness—a spot that feels at ease, that feels comfortable—and then having a whole range of your body as the larger frame of reference. That kind of concentration you can carry around, because even if the spot wavers a bit, you've still got that larger frame as your foundation. As you get more skilled, you

find that if there's no other issue coming up, you go right to that spot and try to maintain it as you walk around, as you work in the orchard, as you work in the kitchen, as you deal with other people. The more you can keep that one spot going, the better, because it's the combination of the one spot and the larger frame that really gets you solidly based.

And it's important that you learn how to keep this going, because it's in keeping it going that you develop your foundation for insight. You have a state of mind that's primed to produce insights.

We have this tendency, as we're meditating, and it's a good tendency, on one hand, to realize we're not here just to get the mind still. We're trying to gain insight into its workings, and particularly insight into how it's causing stress and suffering for itself. That's why we're often sitting here waiting for the insights to come. But then the problem is that when an insight does come, you begin to wonder, "Is this genuine insight, or is it not?"

The immediate test is if it enables you to see into some suffering you're creating for yourself right here, right now, and enables you to let go of it. One of the really basic skills of the concentration is to help with that letting go. In other words, as you're staying with the breath, you can see a thought beginning to move out, and you want to be able not to go with it. In other words, there goes the thought, but you're still right here with the breath. You'll see that the thought only goes a certain distance and then it disappears, because you're not chasing it down. You're not decorating it. You're not keeping it going. The act of chasing it down is actually what keeps it going. If you can step back from the thought, it can end on its own. This ability to step back from your thought processes is a huge skill right there.

But then, what about the content of your insights? Ajaan Fuang often warned against trying to memorize your insights. He said that if it's genuine, it'll do its work right then and there. But if you try to stash it away and apply it to other things, it may not be quite the right insight you need for those other things.

It's like having a hen that lays eggs. It lays a really nice egg. But then you try to keep the egg. What happens, of course, is that it goes rotten after a while. And then you start doubting the original egg. Well, originally it was a good egg. It's just that you tried to hang onto it. So what you have to learn how to do is see if you can use the insights, and then let them go. Take the egg, eat it, and keep taking good care of the hen so that it will lay more eggs.

In other words, try to maintain this sense of still, broad centered awareness as much as you can and bring it into different situations—along with the skill that comes along with this: the ability to see a thought that would pull you away from the breath, but you don't go away from the breath. You just watch the thought go and it stops. You can step out of it. That frees you of a lot of suffering right there.

Of course, sometimes there are issues in life where you'd like to have a specific answer to a specific question. There's no real guarantee that the concentration will give you the correct

answer, but the concentrated mind will put you in a much better position to come to an answer.

One rule of thumb is if you have a big question on which you're trying to make a decision, pose the question before you go into concentration. And then drop it. Do your regular concentration. Try to get the mind as still and as settled as possible, and be really strict with yourself: You won't let yourself think at all about the issue during the meditation. Then, when you come out, there are two things you can do. One, see if some answer has already popped up in the mind. If it hasn't, think about the issue for a bit and see how it looks as you're coming out of a concentrated state. What answer seems most reliable, most sensible? Do that three times; three different days, if you can, and see if the same answer seems sensible after each session. There's no guarantee that it's right, but at least you've put the mind in a much better position than normal to come up with an answer and then to evaluate it.

But for the most part, the kind of insights we're trying to develop are actually skills, because the skills will then produce insights as they're needed for a particular problems as they arise. And you can tell through your concentration that you're in a better position to evaluate: Did that insight really do a good job of letting go of the suffering, letting go of the stress you're causing yourself?

So there's no absolute guarantee, but you've got a range of skills that put you in a much better position to judge what's skillful and what's not.

After all, even the Buddha, on the night of his awakening, didn't come to the conclusion that his first two insights were absolutely true until he had achieved the third insight, in which he actually saw suffering dropping away from the mind and no suffering coming to take its place. He realized he'd reached something that, in his words, could not be provoked—in other words, a release that wasn't going to turn into something else. That's when he really knew that he had something valuable.

So you need to have a certain amount of trust in the concentration, but at the same time, the realization that you still have to put things to the test. Sometimes the answers that come up may not be 100% sure. So you test them. But try to put the mind in a position where at least it gets better attempts at answers. And when you come to an answer, at least you're coming from a mind that is still and clear and alert. That really improves the possibility that the answer is going to be correct, because when the mind is quiet and still like this, it's as if it opens up the doors inside so that an answer that might not have occurred to you otherwise does have the chance to come out. At the same time, when the mind is quiet and still like this and has a sense of well-being, you can be better at evaluating the answer as well. You're more sensitive to how that particular answer has an impact on the mind.

The important thing is you learn how to maintain these skills and bring them into all sorts of situations so that you're not left with just trying to memorize an insight that worked last week and try to keep forcing it to work in different situations. Sometimes insights will work

and sometimes they won't. It's much better if you can get the mind in a state of stillness where it's more likely to come up with good answers that are appropriate for the situation and you can evaluate them immediately.

So try to work on those skills and you'll be in a better position to gain the insights you want: fresh insights every day. It's like having fresh eggs every day; fresh bread every day. You don't want the stale bread from yesterday or the rotten eggs from last week. You want the ability to serve up something fresh whenever you need it. And that's what the concentration can do.