

Settling In

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Another way of translating the word for concentration—*samadhi*—can also be “settling.” And it’s good to think of this as a process of settling in. All too often we can think of concentration as an activity in which we strive to go higher and higher up the ladder, and sometimes that can create misunderstandings. We try to keep pushing on to what’s next, what’s next, what’s next. Well, what’s next is right here. It’s simply a matter of settling in more and more solidly, more and more securely. You’re not going anywhere else. You’re settling in right here. The progress is just a question of being more and more solid, more and more secure right here.

One way of guaranteeing that is to try to be comfortable. Think of it as settling into a big overstuffed chair. There may be a lump here, a lump there, so you try to smooth it out. You shift around in the chair until you finally get the spot that’s just right. And you do that automatically. You don’t think of it as driving or pushing yourself. It’s simply a matter of being very sensitive to what feels good, what doesn’t feel good, and heading toward what feels best. That helps you to settle in and get more and more centered.

There was a woman one time at a meditation retreat with Ajaan Suwat who complained that her meditation didn’t seem to be going anywhere, and yet she couldn’t turn back. She couldn’t stop doing the meditation but she seemed stuck. Ajaan Suwat’s question in response was, “Where are you going? Where are you trying to go?” It’s simply a question of being more and more here.

So again, it’s not a strange or unexplored place—although *here* often is very much unexplored for us. We settle in only briefly and then jump up and run away. We come back and sit down again and then we jump up and run away. That’s why we don’t get a sense of what’s really going on here. We don’t get a settled perspective on this spot, which is how insight happens.

When people ask you where you are in your meditation, your answer should be, “I’m right here.” That’s all that’s needed. Because what you’re doing is learning more and more what it means to be in a place, to be right here. The mind is constantly creating places. That’s what’s called becoming. Once you have places, then you settle into those places: That’s birth. Often those places are not really here at all. They’re off in some imaginary world. But what we have right here is a type of becoming as well, this state of being in which we’re a human being right now, inhabiting this body, inhabiting this mind.

What you want to do is to be able to get really familiar with it. That's why we have to stay here, because ultimately even the sense of being here and having a place, the Buddha said, is something you've added on to what you're actually experiencing. There's an element, as he said, of passion or desire. It may seem an awfully strong word, but it's there. When we're taking our stance here, we're inhabiting the body. It's ours. If anything happens to this body, it seems to be happening to us. We're really attached. And once you're in a place like this, you're open to all the changes that can happen to this place.

So you want to look into it to see if this is where you really want to be. This is not a question of saying, "I don't like here. I would really like to be over someplace else." It's the whole question of taking a place, of being here, having a here or having a there: That's a function of passion or desire, of clinging. And no matter what you cling to, even if you cling to the idea of "being the knowing," there's still clinging, there's still a sense of a place, and you're still open to the processes of change, whatever kind of change could happen. The only safe strategy is to not identify yourself with a particular place. But that requires a lot of subtle attention to the process of how you identify with a place to begin with, what you do with it, and how you allow your consciousness to land someplace and then proliferate out of that place.

So first you have to cut down on the proliferations. Try to be here as much is possible, with this little elaboration as you can manage. In the beginning, it's going to require a certain amount of elaboration. That's part of the path, as you deal with directed thought and evaluation, getting the breath comfortable, getting the body comfortable, settling in. But then you can let go of that and just *be* with the breath as it is, be with the body as it is. You get more and more used to being here—and what it means to be here as opposed to someplace else. You try to notice the movements of the mind as it settles in and as it leaves and as it comes back, because that's where the process of desire, passion, and clinging will play itself out. That's where you'll see it.

So when the mind leaves, gets distractible, don't get flustered when you realize that it's happened. Just notice: How does it go? How does it come back? You're going to learn some important lessons there. A common image of the mind is that it's like a hermit crab, which doesn't have a shell of its own. It moves into the abandoned shells of other shellfish. Then, when that particular shell gets destroyed, it moves on to another one.

So you're here to watch the mind both as it's settling in and as it's moving. But you can see the movements clearly only when you really are settled. You find that there's a part of the mind that really is here all the time, and then there's another

part that moves. As you get in touch with the part that's here, then you can watch the movements but not move along with them. That's how you gain insight into the processes of the mind. It's happening here all the time.

So if you want to see anything, you have to really firmly established here. Get used to being here. This has to be your home: the place where you settle, the place where you're centered. Then when there's even the slightest movement from that center, you'll know. You'll see when that movement causes stress, when it causes suffering, and you also see how it's not necessary. That's the important part. We live with stress and suffering but something deep down inside tells us that it's necessary: "This is the way things have to be." Well, it's simply the mind's lack of skill. If it were really skillful, it wouldn't be creating any suffering. It doesn't have to. When you can see that, that's how your skill develops. And where are you going to see it? You see it right here.

This is why, when we're meditating, we're not striving to put ourselves out on a limb someplace. We're just settling back, settling back, settling back into right here, so that we really know this spot for what it is.