

## *Focus on One Thing*

*July 22, 2005*

If you want to see something in detail, to take a careful look, you have to sit very, very still. Otherwise, if you're moving around, and if you see movement in the thing you're watching, you don't know whether the movement lies in the thing or in yourself. The more still you are, the more subtle movements you can see.

This is why a very important part of meditation is to settle in, to be very still. Choose one thing to focus on: the breath. Keep your attention at one spot, and watch the breath as it's coming in, as it's going out.

The one spot can be anywhere: your nose, the throat, the chest, anyplace where you have a sense, a clear sensation that tells you, "Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out." And watch that sensation. Is it comfortable? If it's not comfortable, you can let it change. You can make the breath longer, shorter, deeper or more shallow. There are lots of ways you can play with the breath. And as the breath gets more refined, you can see more. If your mind wanders off, bring it right back. Tell yourself, this is time to stay settled—because it's when you're settled that you can do your real work.

Tonight is the first night of the rains retreat. It's time for monks to settle in for three months. The Buddha designed the life of a monk so that you can have periods of living in a settled way, and periods of wandering around. There are advantages to both. If you spend all your time settled in one place, you get attached to the place. Sometimes you get too comfortable. But if you don't settle down at all, all you see is yourself wandering around, reacting to this place, reacting to that place, and you don't have that much time to really see the mind on its own terms. When the mind is settled in, you can see it clearly.

So for three months out of a year, the monks are supposed to stay settled. As for the remaining nine months, how much they want to wander is up to them.

It may seem strange to be settling in this time of year, when in America everybody else wanders around. They go on vacation, they travel, take a break. Whereas in the tradition of the monks, now is the time to settle in, the time to do real work.

But when you think about it, this is not really a good time for monks to be wandering around in the forest anyway, because all kinds of people are in the forest right now, taking their kids on vacation. The kids, of course, don't want to

go, so they complain and they make trouble. So it's actually a good time for the monks to stay put. And even though we normally think of the summer or the hot weather as a time to rest and relax, the fact that it's hot doesn't really have anything to do with your mind. The mind can create all kinds of trouble for itself in hot weather just as it can in the cold weather. So it's good to be able to sit down and watch it and understand it, while you've got the chance.

This is the time in the year when the monks accelerate their efforts in meditation and study. And it's good for lay people to think about that, too: What in your life still needs improvement? What your life is still lacking, in terms of the precepts, in terms of concentration, in terms of discernment? In other words, what's lacking in the causes for happiness in your life? The causes that you have control over.

So one of the things you can do this evening, in addition to focusing on the breath, is to give some time to thinking about what you want to do over the course of the next three months to improve your practice. Any areas where you're weak, you can focus right on them. As I said, as you're focusing on the practice, you're focusing on the causes for happiness. Where is your happiness still not satisfactory? Where is it still not gratifying? Where could you really use some lasting happiness in your life?

Short-term happiness isn't hard. The problem is, what are the long-term consequences of a short-term happiness? Long-term happiness takes some effort, but it's effort well spent. After all, why do we act anyhow? We want happiness. But if you want your actions to be intelligent, you have to focus on which kind of happiness gives you the results that are worth all the effort that goes into it. Sometimes you could expend a lot of effort and not get much to show for it, and you end up with a lot of pain to show for it instead, a lot of regret.

So reflect on what you can do for the sake of long-term happiness and make a determination this is what you're going to focus on for the next three months. Then, at the end of three months, see what difference you've made. Really settle in on that one topic, focused on that one topic, and you begin to get a sense of the power of your own actions, the power of your intentions and decisions, that what you do really does make a difference, both for your happiness and for the happiness of people around you.