Comfortable Home, A

November, 2002

We’ll be staying here for the next hour, so try to make yourself at home. Here means your body, your breath. And to make them at home, you have to make them comfortable. So when you focus on the breath, figure out a way, test to see what way feels best. You can focus on any part of the body. Where it feels comfortable to stay focused, where there’s a sense of ease in the breathing, and you know clearly, this sensation tells you that the breath is coming in, that sensation tells you the breath is going out. And the sensation feels easy, feels smooth. The longer you stay with it, the more you can smooth out all the bumps and irregularities, which makes it that much easier to stay. For most of us, our bodies are places where we rarely spend much time. We’re like the sort of person who’s always on the move and is content to sleep in any old little hovel someplace because he or she is going to move on the next morning as fast as possible and doesn’t spend any time during the day at all. And for the most part, that’s how we are with our bodies. We very rarely spend time here. We’re all thinking about the past, thinking about the future, worrying about this, worrying about that. And as a result, we don’t take much care of our homes. So when the time does come to settle down here, you’ll find there’s a lot of tension in different parts of the body. And your immediate reaction is to run off someplace else. Well, learn how to sit with it and see what you can do with the breathing to work through it, to let that tension dissolve. You don’t have to hold the body in a way that requires tension. You don’t have to breathe in a way that requires tension, even though most of us do hold our bodies and breathe in those ways, even though there’s nobody forcing us to do it. Still, it’s become second nature. So think outside the box a little bit. We know the air comes in and out the body through the nose, but focus on what it actually feels like to breathe. There’s an energy flow in the body that makes the air come in and go out, and that’s what we’re really focusing on. Where does that energy flow feel constricted? Where does it feel tight? Where do the different parts of the body seem to be working at cross-purposes? Can you allow them to work together? All of this comes under making your home a comfortable place to stay. Once it gets comfortable, then you can rest. It’s like a dog lying down to sleep. The dog lies down, realizes there’s a stone or a root or a thorny branch where he’s laid down, so he gets back up, scratches here, scratches there, turns around several times to check things out, and then lies down again. There’s still something that’s not quite right. He gets up, scratches here, scratches there, and finally gets to the point where everything is comfortable. Then he lies down and goes to sleep. We’re not going to sleep here on the body, but we do want to rest. We want to be able to stay here for longer periods of time. Why? Well, the chant we had just now gives some idea. We’re here to learn about suffering, its cause, its ending, and the path to its ending. That’s a big issue, and it’s something that has to be analyzed right here in the present. So, we settle down so we can look at what’s right here in the present, but we want to settle down first with a sense of comfort so we really can look at suffering, we really can understand suffering. For the most part, we want to push it away. Either that, we push it away, or we try to run away from it. The idea of simply sitting with suffering or pain doesn’t attract us at all. But when the Buddha tells us to try to understand suffering, he doesn’t throw us in with a lion’s jaw right away. He gives us a weapon. He arms us first. He gives us protection. And the protection here is this ability to settle down in the present moment in a place that’s comfortable, a sense of ease, a sense of solidity. When you have that as your basis, then when you look at suffering or pain, you don’t feel so threatened by it. You don’t have the fear that’s going to encompass all of you. It’s there in one part of the body, but you’re in another part of the body. You don’t have to put yourself in the line of fire. You can watch the process, because that’s how we work our way free of suffering. It’s by watching it, learning how to comprehend it. Comprehending means, at the same time, learning how to let go of the cause that turns pain into suffering, that makes, say, physical suffering a burden for the mind, or even mental anguish a burden for the mind. We put ourselves in a position where we can look at things and not feel threatened by them, not feel that they’re being aimed right at us. So there are steps in the practice, and it’s important to realize that before we can deal with the problem of suffering, we’ve got to learn how to get into the present moment in a way that feels solid and secure, so we do feel at home with the breath. Then our home becomes a place where we like to spend more and more time. We begin to see that there’s a lot to learn here in the present moment. One of the problems that meditators complain about is boredom. You watch the breath come in, watch it go out, in, out, in, out. “Is that all there is?” they say. “How am I going to keep my mind with that?” There are lots of different ins and outs to the breath. There are different ways of breathing. You can feel the energy flowing in your body in different ways, and you begin to get a sense after a while of what way of breathing is a good antidote for a particular imbalance in the body and imbalance in the mind. You develop a repertoire. You can think of the breath coming in and out all the pores of the body. Again, “breath” here means the energy flow in the body. You can think of the energy flow going down the spine and out the legs, down the back, down the front of the body. You can think of the energy coming up in the body as you breathe in and going down as you breathe out, or vice versa, going down as you breathe in and up as you breathe out. Once you get in touch with this sense of the energy, you can play with it in all kinds of ways, experiment with it, not only to make yourself more comfortable in the present moment but to learn a little bit about cause and effect, how the way you visualize the breath to yourself actually does have an impact on the physical sensation of the breathing. After all, understanding cause and effect is an important part of gaining insight. Not just seeing that things are inconstant and stressful in oneself, but also realizing that there are causal connections going on. Remember, as the Buddha said, “When understanding suffering, it also means understanding the cause, why they’re suffering.” The causal factors play themselves out right here. So learn to start thinking in terms of cause and effect here in the present moment. What are you doing, and what are the results? Try to be sensitive to both. To be sensitive, we need three qualities. First is mindfulness, which, strictly speaking, means the ability to keep something in mind and to remember. It’s coupled with alertness, the ability to see what’s actually going on. What’s going on with the breath? What’s going on in the mind as you’re trying to keep it with the breath? The third quality is called ardency. In other words, you really stick with the breathing. You really stick with it coming in, you stick with it going out. As soon as you sense the mind slipping off, you bring it right back. You don’t dawdle. And while you’re with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. Until after a while, you feel yourself sitting in the midst of this flow of energy all around you in the body. Not that you’re up in one corner of the body looking at the rest of it, but you’re surrounded by the energy. And it feels good. There’s a sense of fullness. There’s a sense of rapture. This is what enables the mind to settle down. So instead of feeling that you’re trapped inside the body or trapped with the breath for the hour, you actually enjoy being immersed in it. It feels good. Breathing in feels good. Breathing out feels good. This is a good home to stay with. The Pali term is vihara-dhamma. It’s the qualities you develop both in the mind and in the body that you can live with, that you can live in, that you can dwell in. They talk about concentration being a dwelling. The passages in the Canon say, “So-and-so enters and dwells in the first jhana, the second jhana, the third, and the fourth.” In other words, these are places you can move into and stay, set up house, feel at home, rested, refreshed, nourished. Those are the qualities you want. Again, those are the results, the causes of those three qualities we mentioned just now, mindfulness, alertness, ardency. It’s like the work you do. You move into a new house that’s not quite a home yet. You’ve got to work to set it up, make it comfortable, make it a place where you really do feel at home. That’s the work you do. Then the result, of course, is that you can lie down in comfort because you’ve created a place where it’s really nice to stay.

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