Cleaning Up Inside

January, 2003

We’ve got a massive cleanup job outside, but it’s nothing compared to the cleanup job inside the minds. But the same principles hold. Before you clean up, you’ve got to have strength. This is why we start out with concentration practice. It’s an important strength for the mind. You especially come to appreciate it on days like this when you’ve been working hard. The time comes to sit down and you have a chance to really focus on what kind of breathing feels best for the body, feels most energizing for the body. I found that slow, deep breathing is often good for a time like this. You don’t have any other responsibilities right now. Just be with the breathing. Allow your body to breathe and get whatever amount of energy it can from the process of breathing. In other words, we don’t make too many demands on the mind all at once. It’s an important part of this because if you’re to sit down and look at all the problems that need to be cleared up in your mind, as I say, your hands and your feet would just go weak. There’s so much that needs to be done. It’s like the orchard out there. All those trees. It’s going to take a long, long time to clean up the place, get everything back to a semblance of order. But in the meantime, we can live with a fair amount of disorder as long as we have places to walk, places to get back and forth. So you focus first on those, the really immediate, necessary jobs, and then work out from there those. You’ll find that as you approach this step by step by step, it’s not an impossible job. The important thing is not to get impatient and not to let yourself get weighed down by how big the job is, because you never know. Sometimes things that seem enormous, when you begin chipping away at them, sometimes just come shattering down with the slightest tap of the hammer in the right place. So we take this step by step by step. Work on being mindful. Work on developing concentration. As I said last night, start out small. Take what you can manage, and then build on that. In the case of cleaning up, clear out the places that are really necessary for you to live. The mind needs a still place inside where it can gather its strength. It needs a still place where it can retreat when things aren’t going well. And then once it has that still place, then it can build on it, create more room for itself. Work out bit by bit by bit. Then you find ultimately there are huge tracts of very livable space in the mind. So focus on what you can do. Focus on what you can handle. And don’t worry about how big the job is going to be. Even enormous jobs can get done if you work bit by bit by bit. This is what patience is all about. Impatience can spoil the job many times. You get impatient for the results. Things don’t come, and you just give up. And that takes you nowhere. Patience doesn’t mean laziness. It doesn’t mean being lackadaisical in the practice. It means realizing that it’s a large practice, a large job that needs to be done, and so taking joy in each step, taking satisfaction in each step as you work on it, but really devoting yourself to it. Once you’ve got the basic places for the mind to stay, then you can start working on insight practice. It’s actually the same practice that’s taken to another degree of refinement. John Lee has an image. He says, “Concentration practice is like cutting down a forest of trees, chopping them up. Insight practice is like setting fire to the whole forest that you’ve chopped up, that whole pile of wood.” There’s nothing but ashes left. In other words, you take things to a really refined level. But it’s basically the same process of clearing things out. Wherever there’s suffering in the mind that you can notice, you work on analyzing it. You start this way when you’re practicing concentration. Where is the mind disturbed? Where is the mind ill at ease? Find ways of giving it a place where it can be at ease instead. Work through the really blatant problems. Then, when the blatant problems are gone, you can focus on the more refined ones. But it’s the same process, looking at where there’s dis-ease, stress, a sense of the mind’s being burdened. Try to figure out what you’re doing that’s causing that. See if you can negotiate all the voices in your mind without causing that particular type of stress. So you take this process and you just make it more and more refined. How do you know when it’s time to deal with insight? Well, many times it’s not a matter of planning it out. Problems come up, and you’ve got to deal with them as best you can. Sometimes, though, you find that if you tackle a big problem, you’re really not ready for it yet. That’s when it’s important that you have a good, solid place of refuge, seclusion, that you can take the mind back into so that the insight doesn’t take over and take you to places you don’t really want to go yet. The process of analysis doesn’t take you places where you don’t want to go. When I was teaching in Thailand, I had a student who was raring to go on insight practice, and I kept stressing the fact that he needed concentration to be really, really solid. So after a couple of years of concentration practice, he left and went out in the forest. He ran into a monk who was working on insight practice, but whose concentration was pretty weak. It started running away with him, and he didn’t have a good, secure place to come back to. That’s when this particular student began to realize that it wasn’t that he was holding him back. He just wanted to make sure he had a safe place in his mind. So in the process of analysis, taking things apart, analyzing things, you didn’t get carried off into wrong extremes. For example, if the mind isn’t really ready, you start contemplating the foulness of the body, or contemplating impermanence, not-self, and you get the mind really strung out. This is when everything in life seems meaningless at that point. When you see that happening, bring the mind back into concentration. Then when the mind has that sense of well-being that comes from the concentration, when you start analyzing these themes, instead of making you feel strung out, they take a burden off the mind. They remove one more reason for you to get disturbed, to be pulled out of the concentration, pulled out of that peace. That’s what these insights are for. Not to get you strung out, but to make your sense of well-being stronger. Your sense of stillness is even more and more secure. There’s a story in the text about the Buddha teaching the foulness of the body as a theme to some monks. Then he went off into the forest for some inclusion for a couple of months. While he was away, the monks got so off-course in their meditation that some of them committed suicide. Others hired people to kill them. The Buddha came back from his seclusion and said, “Where is everybody? A lot of them have died.” So the ones who were remaining, he got them together and said, “Look, when unskillful states arise in the mind, pull the mind back to the breath, to the breath concentration.” When you do this, it’s like the end of the hot season and the beginning of the rainy season in India. During the hot season, there’s dust everywhere. As soon as the rains come, they wash the dust out of the air. It’s the same with the mind. When you get strung out in your thinking, analyzing this side, analyzing that side, nothing seems to be working. It develops a sense of despair or alienation. Bring the mind back to the breath. Allow the breath to shower the body from the inside and settle all that dust that’s been raised in the mind. When you’re practicing concentration, it’s important that you’re not getting impatient. “When’s the next step going to come? When’s the next step going to come?” This desire to go on to the next step, next step, next step, all the time. It steps all over your concentration because it doesn’t give it a chance to develop the way it should. Even though there’s still a big mess in the mind, it’s like there’s still a big mess out there in the orchard. At least we have places to sit, places to walk, to get from one place that we want to be to another place where we want to be. There may be more work ahead, but at least we’ve got living space, breathing space. Give yourself some breathing space right now. Let the breath bathe the body. As for the work of tomorrow, well, that’s tomorrow’s work, not today’s.

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