Cleaning House

March, 2003

Meditation is housecleaning. You want to create a space here in the present moment where you really can feel at home. And yet when you try to settle down, you find there are all kinds of other things going on, the pains and aches in the body, distracting thoughts that point out in other directions. And you realize that one of the reasons your home is so dirty is that you’ve been leaving the doors and the windows wide open. Not only do you go in and out all the time, but other things come in and out all the time, and there’s no control over who gets to come in, who gets to go out, which is why this home we have here in the present moment is very little like a home. It’s more like a bus station. Anybody can come in and out of a bus station. And you find all sorts of strange people in the corners. So one of the first orders of business is to get some more control over the windows and doors, in addition to expelling the people who are harmful and dangerous from this space. You also want to make sure you’re not letting them in. This is why restraint of the senses is such an important part of the practice. You’re not consciously letting anything in that’s going to destroy your concentration, anything in that’s going to destroy the strength of your mind. This doesn’t mean you go through life blind or deaf or dumb. Simply that you’re wise and selective on the things that you focus on. When you go through a crowd of people, what are you looking for? Are you looking for the attractive women? Or you could change your mind and say, “Well, let’s look for the old people. See how many old people there are in this crowd.” As you focus instead on that, you begin to notice how much aging there is. The people you were not interested in before suddenly stand out. That’s because you learn to ask yourself a different question, give yourself a different focus. That’s what restraint of the senses means. You learn how to adjust your focus. So you’re focusing on the things that are actually helpful to the meditation. In this way, the fact that you have eyes and ears and a nose and a tongue and a body and a mind, instead of being a problem, actually come to help the meditation. This is why we have the chant on the thirty-two parts of the body, changing our focus on the body. It’s why we have the chant on metta, changing the focus of the mind, which tends to get worked up about other people’s misbehavior, or the realization that deep down inside everybody wants happiness. It’s just that some people are very deluded. They don’t know what will take them there. At the same time, there’s no reason for us to wish ill on anybody else, no matter how bad their behavior. That just turns us into one of them. So thoughts of metta shift your focus. This helps overcome also some of the intoxications we have in the mind. The Buddha identified three. There’s intoxication with youth, intoxication with health, and intoxication with life, which is why he has us contemplate aging, illness, and death so much, to realize that they’re always lying in wait, if they haven’t hit us hard already while they’re about to. It could happen at any time. The purpose of the meditation is to help shift your focus so that you’re not wasting your time focusing on things that are not going to be helpful at all and actually are harmful to the mind. This helps you go through the day in your dealings with other people, finding things to focus on that help protect the mind’s center, help protect the mind’s sense of equilibrium and balance inside. Those are things that would normally stir you up and make you lose that equilibrium. Don’t have such an easy time of getting into the mind. It’s bad enough that we let thieves into our house. Sometimes we go out and we invite them in, whether they wanted to come in originally or not. So this is the habit that we’ve got to learn how to overcome, the habit we’ve got to learn how to change. Otherwise, what little practice you get in the course of your daily meditation just gets washed away like a sandcastle at the edge of the sea. You spend all this time building a nice sandcastle, but it’s right there in the high tide line. As soon as the high tide comes in, there it goes. It’s gone. If you’re going to build a castle, try to build it above the high tide line or find some way of withstanding the ocean. That way, the progress that’s made today as you build your castle doesn’t get washed away. You come back and there may be a little wear and tear, but it still hasn’t been totally washed away. So you can fix it up, expand it, work on it some more. Now we find there’s less of a sense of futility in the practice. You actually can make step-by-step-by-step progress. Once you’ve got the doors and the windows under control, then you can turn around and start cleaning out the house. This is what we’re doing as we meditate with the breath. You clean out a lot of the pains by adjusting the way you breathe. As that gets more and more comfortable, you find that you also get rid of a lot of the distracting thoughts. As mindfulness fills the body, there’s less of an opening for those thoughts to come in. As other thoughts come welling up from inside, you just let them go, let them go, let them go. You don’t have to get involved. Many times we make the mistake of trying to chase them down and straighten them out before we let them go. There’s an interest in those thoughts. “Exactly where is this thought going to go? Let me follow it for a little bit before I let it go.” Well, it’s got you. As soon as something stirs in the mind, you say, “I don’t need that. I don’t need that right now.” That has to be your constant theme. Now is the time to be with the breath. As this internal space gets less and less cluttered, you begin to see important things in the mind. As I said this morning, the most important thing you start finding is your intentions. They become clearer and clearer. When the mind is making a choice to do this or say that or think this or focus here or look at that, you see the intention in action. You realize that you don’t have to identify with it. If you’re riding in the intention, just like riding along the wave, you become part of it and you don’t realize how big the wave is or where it’s going to go. But when you have the breath as your foundation, you have a place where you can step back a little bit and see these intentions as they move. You realize you’ve got the choice. Do you want to go along with that intention? You begin to see exactly where it’s going to go because you’ve stepped out of it. In cleaning out the house, it’s not simply a matter of making a comfortable place to stay, although that’s an important part of the practice. You’re also uncovering a lot of interesting beings in this house that you didn’t expect. A lot of interesting animals that have taken up residence in your basement. You bring them out of the basement and you get to see exactly what they are, which ones are useful, which ones are not. You train the ones that can be trained and you let the other ones out of the house. It’s about the fact that you’ve got this activity going on in the house, even when you’re trying to keep it quiet. It becomes a help instead of a hindrance. So all these activities go together, knowing when to open and when to close your doors, how to get a lot of the trash out of the house, and learning to see what interesting animals you have in the house. There may be some trainable dogs that you have in there, or a horse, or who knows what kind of animals there are. But they’re all hidden by all the garbage. So that’s a cleaning out process. We stick with it. We don’t get sidetracked by those texts that say, “Well, there really is no mirror there to wash the dust off of.” As long as there’s a mirror, you clean the dust off, because you want to see clearly. As long as there’s garbage in your mind, you clean the garbage out. As for the task of deconstructing the house when you no longer need it, that’s something you save for later. You can’t do the deconstructing until you’ve done the cleaning. It just doesn’t work. If you were to deconstruct the house now, there’d be no control whatsoever. You wouldn’t even have any windows and doors to open or close. Everything would be wide open. And not wide open in the sense of free, but wide open in the sense of being subject to everything that comes past. So at this stage in the practice, you work on building it, keeping the house in good order, keeping it clean. And that takes you awfully far in the practice right there.

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