At Home in the Mind

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There’s a Pali idiom that talks about entering and dwelling in a mind state. We live in our mind states. And it’s important to reflect on what kind of state of mind you’re living in, what kind of home you’re building for yourself, because these states are things that we do build for ourselves. We take raw material from sites, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas from the five aggregates, and we turn them into a place where we live. And even though we may seem to be living in the same world, we’re even right here in the same room. Each of us lives in a different world. Some of the raw materials come from outside, but a lot come from inside. And the skill with which we put them together to furnish our home, to make it livable, really varies from person to person. So it’s important that you ask yourself, “What kind of furnishings are you creating for yourself? What kind of home are you building for yourself?” The places where you tend to stay, the types of thoughts where you tend to stay, those are the dwelling places for your mind. There’s a passage where a young man comes across the Buddha early in the morning in the cold season. The Buddha’s been sleeping outside on a pile of leaves in the forest. The young man asked him, “How did you spend the night?” And the Buddha said, “Very comfortably.” And he said, “Well, how could it have been comfortable? It was cold last night, and you’re just sleeping on the hard ground with nothing but leaves.” And the Buddha said, “In a mind where there’s no greed, anger, and delusion, it’s always comfortable.” Then he asked the young man to think about a house that’s well-furnished, sealed against the cold wind. All kinds of furnishings are there. Every comfort and management is manageable. And he said, “Couldn’t it happen that even a person staying in a nice sheltered place like that could have a mind so feverish with greed, anger, and delusion that they couldn’t sleep?” And the young man had to admit that that was true. So a comfortable dwelling doesn’t necessarily mean physically comfortable. It has more to do with the state of the mind. And it depends on the objects you focus on. It depends on the things you dwell on. If we even have that same idiom in English, “dwelling on something,” it’s more that we actually dwell in them. If your mind is overcome with thoughts of anger, resentment, jealousy, fear, anxiety, that’s your dwelling place. And you have to ask yourself, “Is it a good place to live?” You can change. That’s the whole point of this. You’re not consigned forever to a particular dwelling place. You can make it over. You can rearrange it. Throw out all the uncomfortable furniture and get something more comfortable in its place. This is why they have the different recollections as topics of meditation as a starting point. We like to think that no matter what a mess our mind may be in, all we have to do is focus on the breath and that takes care of everything. And it doesn’t. We first have to straighten out our thinking before we can let go of our thinking. Otherwise, it has a lot of sticky points that are hard to let go. And although it may seem artificial to deliberately think about things to change the habits of the mind, that’s precisely what you’ve got to do. This is what mental training is all about. You’re changing the habits of the mind. It takes willpower. It takes a sense of direction. It’s important. Otherwise, you’re going to be stuck. You’re stuck in some miserable flat, a mental flat, for the rest of your life. No matter how good things may be outside, if certain habits are not changed, it’s always going to be miserable. So first you start off, like we do every evening before the meditation, with thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people around you. Realizing that no matter what kind of people they are, there’s really no reason why you would want to wish ill on them. So you think about that for a while. And the thought itself feels good. They call it a brahma-vihara, which is a dwelling place for a brahma. As it gets more and more unlimited, it’s the kind of place where a brahma could live, the mind state that’s developed. You can reflect on your generosity. You can reflect on your precepts. You can reflect on the qualities that create good people and realize that you’ve got those qualities as well. And if they’re not strong enough yet, you can consciously develop them. This is also a good dwelling place for the mind. It gives you a sense of encouragement, a sense of self-esteem. Those are the kinds of thoughts that open up now. So first you straighten out your thinking, and then you learn how to let the thinking go. It’s a passage where the Buddha talks about this process. He divided his thinking into two types, thinking that was imbued with sensuality, imbued with ill will, imbued with harmfulness. If any of that kind of thought came into his mind, he just let it go. As for thinking that was devoid of those things, he allowed that range to think whatever he wanted to think. But then he noticed that even that kind of thinking would eventually tire the mind. It was from that kind of thinking that he was able to direct the mind into a state of concentration. What the concentration does is it makes your dwelling a lot more solid. Normally most of our dwellings live in an earthquake zone. The slightest little bit of tremor can knock us over. A little bit of pain, a little bit of discouragement, a little bit of anxiety, and we’re out. The whole thing gets tipped over. But as you get into states of concentration, you’re less susceptible to the earthquakes. You’ve got a more solid foundation. So even when things do rumble around, your home isn’t destroyed. So you can create a good place for the mind to stay, simply through directing your thought, say, to the breath, and then evaluating the breath, making it more and more comfortable. Then allowing that comfortable sensation of breathing to spread throughout the whole body. This is what makes it more solid and lasting. It gives you the kind of foundation that doesn’t get knocked over easily. Then as you get more and more skilled with this, you discover you can have this home wherever you go, no matter what things are outside. Home here means anything outside of the mind. It includes the body. So that even when you’re tired, even when there’s pain, you can still get the mind into this state because you realize it doesn’t have to depend on perfect conditions. In the beginning, you have to be careful about where you meditate, the kind of situation, the kind of locale, the environment, because the mind is so easily disturbed. But as you get better and better at focusing it and having a sense of where the kind of concentration is in your mental universe, you can go right there. And you find that in whatever the situation. And if you find you still have trouble getting there, just remind yourself, “What would life be like without a good state of concentration, a good home like this?” Well, you’d be living out on the streets, subject to everything that comes your way. And when really bad things happen, bad storms come, what are you going to do? You’ve got to have a home. You’ve got to have shelter. And so the state of concentration provides that shelter. It’s even better when you can use the concentration as a basis for contemplating your attachments. Your attachments to certain sights, certain sounds, certain smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and realizing how easily they set you up. Things you like to listen to, things you like to look at. Many times those are the things that are worse for you. So you’ve got to learn how to take them apart and realize there’s nothing but that, just sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. And yet we create all kinds of reality around them. It’s like going past an outdoor movie theater at night when the movie is playing. If you don’t sit there and watch it for a long period of time, it’s just flashes of light against the screen. That’s all it is. You can’t imagine why anybody would want to pay money to look at that. But if you look at it and you start creating a narrative around it, then you get pulled in, too. And so we’ve got to pull ourselves out and get back to the stage of flashes of light, flashes of sound, seeing that it’s nothing but that. Nothing that you would want to really get involved with. Nothing of any real substance. When you start taking things apart in this way, you find that you take apart not only your outside attachments, but ultimately you can take apart your attachment and concentration. But don’t be in too great a hurry to do that. Attachment and concentration is bad only when you start using it as a place to run away from reality and go into denial. But otherwise, it’s a good skill to have, especially when your other attachments are still strong. Still tenacious. You take apart your attachment and concentration only when the outside attachments are all taken care of. And with that, you find that the mind opens up to another dimension entirely. It’s called the dwelling place of the noble ones. It’s a different kind of dwelling entirely. With full awakening, the Buddha says that there is no more house builder. It’s all been taken apart. Because at that point, you’re in a place that doesn’t need shelter. But as long as you’re living in the world here, you need shelter, which is what you create in terms of the mind state. So make sure that it really is shelter, that the roof doesn’t have any leaks, that the windows don’t let the wind in, and that the house itself is a comfortable place to stay, a good place to stay. There are so many things out there in the world that you could bring into your house, but many times it’s like bringing in a pet ball constrictor. Someday the ball constrictor may decide to constrict you. So you have to be careful what you bring into your inner dwelling. This doesn’t mean going into denial or escaping reality. It’s just that there are certain things out in reality which accomplish nothing at all when they’re brought into the house. We seem to be so avid to bring them in. So be careful about what you bring in. This is what Restraint of the Senses is about. Try to make a good dwelling place inside for yourself to stay. Look after it well, because this is the world you live in, when you realize your responsibility for it and the opportunities that those responsibilities provide for you to make changes, to redecorate, to throw the old dwelling out if it really is irreparable, and build something better in its place. That’s what the meditation is all about.

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