Clean, Bright House, A

September 17, 2004

Creating a sense of well-being, a state of concentration here in the present moment, is called creating a home for the mind. It’s a Pali term for it, vihara-dhamma, the quality that you can live in, the quality you can dwell in. And as with any dwelling, you want to create a home for the mind. You want it to be clean, well-lit, well-ventilated. And so a lot of the preliminary work in the meditation is devoted just to that, cleaning out the present moment. We work with the breath, get in touch with the breath energy in the body. There are many levels. There’s the in-and-out breath, and then there’s the sense of energy that flows along the nerves, that flows along the blood vessels, out to every pore of the skin. And there’s a deeper level. It’s just totally still. These levels are all here. It’s just a matter of tuning into them. But to tune into them properly, you have to clean things out first. There tends to be a lot of tension in different parts of the body that comes from thoughts you’ve been holding on to, old emotions you’re holding on to, simply the way you hold the body. It can obstruct the flow of energy here in the present moment, and as a result, it’s not that comfortable staying here. So the first order of business is to find a rhythm of breathing that feels good. Try to do this with a cheerful attitude, because you can’t be tense about finding a comfortable breath. You have to be relaxed about it, but persistent. Keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. Adjusting a little bit here, adjusting a little bit there, seeing what feels good, seeing what doesn’t feel good. And then when you have a good sense of the rhythm of the breathing, then find a comfortable rhythm going here in the present moment. Then you just sweep out the body, just like you’d sweep out the dust in the house, sweep out all the old cobwebs. You can start at any one point in the body and then move through the body systematically. The important thing is that you cover the whole body. Sometimes you’ll notice a sense that you’re here in the head watching the body. Make sure you clean out the head, too. Think of the breath coming in and out the eyes, in and out the ears, flowing in and out whatever patterns of tension there may be in your jaw, around your face, around your eyes, in the back of the neck. Then move on to clean out the rest of the body. Some people find it best not to start with the head. Work up to the head gradually. Other people find it the natural place to start. This is something that’s totally individual. The important thing is that you learn how to sweep the whole body. And as you’re staying here meditating day after day after day, you find that you get particular about how clean you want your house to be here in the present moment. You start digging up old patterns of tension that have been buried for years and years. This is one of the reasons why having time off to do nothing but meditate, or to devote your time primarily to meditation, is an important part of every person’s life. So you really can have a sense of being at home here in the present moment. It’s a comfortable place to stay. Some people can get really fanatic about keeping this place clean. This is a question of balance, because it comes to a point where you remember the whole point of all this is to get the mind to settle down and be still. So how comfortable does it have to be in order to settle down? That’s something you have to work out for yourself. Don’t be so busy cleaning things out that you forget to settle down. Choose any one spot in the body after you’ve been through the body several times. Allow your attention to settle there, and then spread your awareness out to fill the whole body. This is a part of the meditation where you’re making your home well-lit. It’s like having a flashlight going through the dark house. You’ve cleaned up this little spot and that little spot. Now it’s time to settle down and find one spot and put down the flashlight and turn on the light. Illumine the whole house. Be aware of everything from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. Try to maintain a sense of center, at least someplace in the body. Combine that sense of center with the whole-body awareness. This is a skill that takes time to master, but it’s an important one. If you just stay with one spot and lose the whole body, it’s very easy to slip off, especially when the breath gets comfortable. That’s essentially what happens when you fall asleep. You focus on one little spot and it gets more and more comfortable, and then you’re gone. So the sense of whole-body helps to keep you alert and keep you here in the present moment. That one spot or that sense of center gives weight to the meditation. Not in the sense of an oppressive burden, but it gives solidity to the meditation that you wouldn’t have otherwise. At this point, you can allow the breath to find its own rhythm. You interfere with it less and less. You’re just there with the breath. Sometimes it’ll seem to stop and then it’ll start up again. Just note that. When it stops, don’t get concerned. You’re not going to die. You’re not going to asphyxiate. The more still the mind is, the less oxygen the brain is using. The less oxygen used by the brain means the less need to breathe. The oxygen flow at the skin, the oxygen exchange, is enough to keep you going. Then you might find the breath starting up again. Notice that. Don’t try to stop it. Just try to be very still. Have this open sense of awareness with the breath coming in and going out in a way that feels really good. That’s all that’s asked of you. Once you learn to do this, the next step is learning how to maintain it. A lot of people get impatient. They say, “Okay, now that I can do that, what’s the next thing I have to do?” Just do this again and again and again. Get really good at it, as with any skill. It’s in the repetition that you start noticing new things. If you didn’t repeat the skill over and over again, like playing a scale, if you didn’t play the scale again and again and again, there are a lot of subtle things that you would miss. There’s a book on writing which recommends just writing day in, day out, day in, day out, not being too concerned about how clever you are or how well-written the passages are. Just learn how to keep writing, writing, writing. After a while, your skill in developing a voice or recognizing your voice will come simply from the fact that you’re doing this an awful lot. It’s the same with meditation. You learn a lot of things by doing it a lot. In this case, it’s stilling the mind. Again, in different circumstances, not only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed in the sala, but when you’re under the trees, when you’re walking down the road, when you’re working in the garden, when you’re doing whatever work needs to be done, while you’re eating. Try to keep this sense of being centered and at home in the present moment going. As you do this in different circumstances, you’ll see things about the mind that you didn’t see before, the different directions it tends to go when it’s leaving home, when it’s jumping out the windows or it’s sneaking out the doors, or when it trashes the home entirely and you have to come back and start it up again, build the home, clean it out. Eventually, you’ll learn how to stay in the house with the windows wide open. You’ll learn how to air the house out and keep it well lit, because you’re not only aware of what’s going on inside the body, but you can see how it relates to what’s going on outside. You can close the doors when you have to, and you can open them when you have to. It’s your call. But the important thing is that you have this sense of feeling at home. At ease. And once you’re home, you can find things to play with in the house as well. This is why we play not only with the breath, but also with what they call the different elements or different properties in the body. There’s warmth, solidity, the liquid feelings in the body. Once the breath is really still, you begin noticing this aspect of the body. You can play with it in the same way you play with the breath. For example, with the warmth, what they call the fire element or the fire property. Just notice where there is a sense of warmth in the body that’s stronger than other parts of the body. Focus on that and then spread that the same way you’d spread the breath, the comfortable breath. If it starts feeling too hot, then you can focus on the water. If you’re feeling too lightheaded, you can focus on earth. In other words, use these different properties to balance out the sense of the body in the present moment so it feels really just right, perfectly balanced. That way, in your house, if it’s cold outside, you can turn on the heat. If it’s hot outside, you can turn on the air conditioner. If the wind starts blowing and it feels like it’s going to blow your house away, you can weigh it down. In other words, you do what you can to maintain this sense of feeling at home here in the present moment and keep your house livable, a good shelter, a safe one, secure, solid. In doing this, you develop a lot of ingenuity. A lot of people say, “Well, you have to leave concentration, and then you can gain discernment.” A lot of discernment can be gained simply in the process of bringing the mind to the present moment and then keeping it here. It’s not the case that once you defilements see that you’re here in a nice and solid world, they go away and leave you alone. They come back sometimes, it seems, even with more force, because you’re more sensitive to what’s going on. It’s just the whole issue of keeping your house clean. John Foong once made the analogy. Some people feel that when they’re meditating, their defilements get even stronger. They notice their anger more frequently, or their greed, or their fear, or whatever. It’s like going into a house. If the house is already dirty and dusty, a little bit more dirt and dust doesn’t really register. You don’t notice it at all. But if you’ve been keeping the house clean, the slightest little bit of dirt and dust is going to show up. So don’t get discouraged, but also remind yourself that this is an excellent opportunity to watch anger. And when you keep the house clean, then whatever animals come sneaking into the house, you can see their footprints. Whatever dust comes in, you can see their footprints. You notice it. This is why a concentrated mind is absolutely essential for any kind of genuine discernment to arise. Because the discernment comes from your seeing what’s actually going on. And how are you going to see unless things are clean, well-lit in the house? So use the breath to sweep the body. Use your sense of presence. Use your present awareness to fill the body, to give it well-lit. That way you find the house is a very livable house. You don’t feel confined. Even staying in the house, you don’t feel confined because everything is wide open and bright. And when dangers come, you’ve got your protection. So do what you can to make this a livable space. Because, after all, this is where everything is happening in the mind, where everything is happening in your life. It only makes sense that you want to feel at home with what’s happening, so you’re not a stranger to it or an occasional visitor. You want to occupy this space in a way that it’ll feel livable for a long, long time.

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