At Home in Jhana

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As the Buddha once said, there is no happiness other than peace. Here he’s talking peace of mind. We might think that there are forms of happiness you get from very aroused states of mind, very active and running around states of mind. But that’s not really happiness. The mind’s true happiness is when it’s at peace. It’s so rarely at peace. It’s traveling around all the time, jumping from one thought to the next. If you ever took a magic marker and tried to trace where your thoughts went in the course of the day, you’d have them all over the world. Sometimes outside of the world. It’d be a huge tangled mess. That’s our normal day-to-day way of living with the mind, traveling from here, traveling from there. The process is called samsara. We usually think of samsara as going from one lifetime to the next, but it also includes the mind’s wandering from one thought to the next, one thought world to another world. And it moves on, moves on, moves on. Because the mind can’t stay in any of these worlds. It’s like going into a house that’s ready to fall apart. You’ve got to leave that house and go into the next one. That one’s ready to fall apart, so you have to leave that and go into the next one. The mind gets worn out at loose ends. It’s what you’re feeling. You’ve got to build it a house where it can stay. Ultimately, of course, you know that statement of the Buddha, “He sees the house builder and he will not build a house again.” That’s awakening. But before you get to that point, you’ve got to learn how to build good houses. That’s why we practice concentration, to give the mind a place where it can stay and gather its energy, gather its strength. And know at least some peace of mind along the path. We just chanted the different factors of the path. The first one the Buddha himself discovered was right concentration. You probably know the story. He was practicing austerities for six years. He finally reached the point where he realized that no one had ever practiced austerities greater than his, and yet it hadn’t gone anywhere. He was trying to force himself not to breathe, going on extremely small quantities of food. Yet it still hadn’t brought him the peace of mind, the awakening he’d sought. The fact that he was able to stop and take stock of this is one of the really amazing points in the story of his life. You can imagine what kept him going all those six years, if not a sense of pride. Then he finally came to the point where he was willing to give up his pride. He admitted that this path that he had followed was not working. So the question arose, “Okay, what other possibilities were there?” He thought of the time when he was a child. He happened to be sitting under the tree while his father was plowing. In his mind, he just naturally entered the first jhana. He was directing his thoughts to the breath, evaluating the breath until it gave rise to a sense of rapture and pleasure, a sense of fullness and ease that came from his mind not being involved in any kind of unskillful thoughts at all. He asked himself, “Could this be the way?” And the response arose in the mind, “Yes.” So he followed that way. Then, as he discovered, there were other factors in the path as well. The right concentration was the central one. There are different levels of jhana. These are home for the mind. You can settle down with a breath and a sense of ease and well-being. As you stay with this longer and longer, you begin to realize that you’ve got it all right here. Everything you need for peace of mind, a sense of well-being and ease, the satisfaction that comes with a sense of physical and mental fullness or rapture, you can find it all at the breath. It’s simply a matter of sticking with it and getting a sensitivity to what kind of breathing really does feel good right now. In other words, you’ve got all the raw materials for happiness right here. You don’t have to go traveling around anywhere else. Just pay attention to what you’ve got. The mind has a habit of fabricating things, so have it fabricate the right concentration. You’ve got the breath, which is physical fabrication. You’ve got direct thought and evaluation, which are verbal fabrication. And then you’ve got feelings and labels or perceptions. Those are mental fabrications. So instead of fabricating worlds outside, thought worlds that can go who knows where, you fix up what you’ve got here. It’s like you have a little shack that you haven’t been paying attention to. But you can fix it up. You can turn it into a home. Add a few additions. You can add the second jhana, the third jhana, the fourth jhana. So it becomes a spacious home, especially when you take the equanimity of the fourth jhana and you apply it to the dimension of infinite space or infinite consciousness. It’s an enormous home. But everything you need is right here. It’s simply a matter of taking the time. Develop this sensitivity so you can stop your wandering around and develop what’s called a viharadhamma, a home for the mind. When your home is comfortable enough, you can light it, you can decorate it in all kinds of ways. In other words, you can take this house of the present moment and turn it into a real home. And you find, ultimately, that it’s not just a resting place. All the things you need to know for awakening are right here as well. After all, these states of right concentration are made up of form, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness. These are all the raw materials you need to understand to see where your attachments are. The Buddha said, “Knowledge that puts an end to what they call mental fermentation, or mental effluents, the things that darken the mind, that trouble the mind, the knowledge that puts an end to these things, comes from being in one of these states of jhana or any of the formless attainments that are built on jhana.” As you turn around, you look at the state of concentration you’ve got. After having constructed it, you deconstruct it. Look at the raw materials you’ve got. You see that no matter how wonderful a house you’ve built, it’s still subject to decay. It can fall apart. It depends on the effort of fabrication to maintain it. And when you see that, you’re getting disenchanted with it, then you can let that go as well. Instead of suddenly finding yourself back out on the street without any shelter, you’re actually in a place where you don’t need shelter anymore. You’ve gone even beyond the need for a home. But in the meantime, get good at building this house, keeping it in good shape. Learn how to be a good repairman. Because without this home for the mind, you’re just wandering around out in the streets. With it, you’ve got shelter. You’ve got a place where you can fix food for the mind. It’s a place to rest, a place to sit and examine yourself to gain knowledge. This is one of the amazing things about the Buddhist teachings. Everything you need to know for true happiness is right here. It’s just that you haven’t sensitized yourself to it enough. You haven’t understood properly how you take the raw materials you have here and end up creating suffering out of them. And you haven’t realized that you don’t need to create suffering. You can create a sense of ease and well-being. You can take these raw materials that you’ve been carrying around as loads and you place them down on the ground and they turn into a path that can take you to true happiness. So allow the mind to settle down. When it wants to wander off, keep reminding it, “Where are you going? What are you looking for? Are you looking for trouble?” Everything you need is right here. It’s just a matter of learning to look carefully enough, consistently enough, steadily enough, so you begin to see the subtleties of the potentials you’ve got here. So this house of the present moment does become a home. And you can stop all your random wandering and allow the mind to find a peace that really is a true happiness. It’s so true that ultimately when you find the highest level of happiness, it’s a happiness that doesn’t have to depend on anything at all. In the meantime, the happiness of Jhana depends on being mindful, being alert, being persistent in your effort to be as skillful as possible in maintaining this state. But ultimately, as you get really good at maintaining this state, you get to the point where you understand it thoroughly, so thoroughly that you can go beyond it. And that’s the true peace, the true happiness that the Buddha was talking about. It’s simply up to you to decide if you want to find it within yourself or if you’re just going to leave it as words that the Buddha said. Everything he said was for the sake of us to put it into practice. He never philosophizes simply for the sake of philosophizing. All of his teachings were meant to be used as tools, ways of thinking, ways of looking, that have certain results. It’s all aimed at putting an end to suffering and bringing about true happiness. So make sure that the tools that the Buddha left for us get put to good use. If you use them for the purpose for which he intended them, you’re going to benefit. It’s all up to you.

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