At Home in Undisturbance

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When we meditate, we’re creating a home for the mind, a place where it can stay and feel secure, protected. One of the Pali terms for this is vihara-dhamma. Vihara literally means a dwelling place, but more than just a dwelling place, a place where you feel at home. When the Buddha talked about his meditative preoccupations, the topics he would focus on, there are two that he mentioned. One was the breath, and the other was emptiness. But in each case, he would dwell on these things in a particular way. He said the breath is a peaceful dwelling place for the mind. He compared it to rain at the beginning of the rainy season in India. After months of hot, dusty, dry weather, the first rain would come and it would wash all the dust out of the air. We’re here in the midst of a rainstorm, and the rain may not seem all that refreshing at the moment, but you compare it to what we were experiencing last summer. When it was hot and dry, there’s a lot of refreshment that comes when the air is clear and washed away. So think of the breath as you go through the body, as you’re washing away all the dust inside. As you breathe in, the body is being nourished, the mind is being nourished with a sense of ease and well-being. Try to breathe aware of the whole body. And if you notice any parts of the body that seem to be uncomfortable, as you’re breathing in, as you’re breathing out, allow them to relax. Think of any sense of blockage there may be that’s just dissolving away. Focus on the areas that you can make comfortable. Not everything will respond. But go through the body first and find all the areas that do seem to breathe in easily, breathe out easily. Allow them to be as nourished as possible. And then from there you can spread to other parts of the body that may seem less responsive at first. But as you work at them, they gradually dissolve away, dissolve away, dissolve away. Whatever manifestations the breath feels tiresome or tedious, allow them just to fall away. Stay with whatever ways of breathing feel refreshing. This way you’re creating a home for the mind. It’s like going into an empty house. It’s not going to be home right away. You have to learn how to fix it up, to take advantage of whatever good things it has to offer and compensate for whatever uncomfortable things there may be in the house. After a while, it feels like home. Try to do the same with the breath. Learn how to get comfortable, whether with the breath energy feels in the body right now. Allow it to be at ease, refreshing, nourishing. That other dwelling the Buddha talked about, dwelling in emptiness, had a very specific meaning—dwelling in lack of disturbance. And he gave an example. He said it’s like being in a village and then going into the wilderness. And as you’re in the wilderness, you could spend your time thinking about how many dangers there are, how many inconveniences there are. But instead, you focus on how nice and undisturbed you feel. The issues that you might have around different people? They’re not there. The issues having to worry about your house, your family? They’re not there either. And you appreciate that fact. These disturbances are gone. It’s this lack of disturbance that’s the kind of emptiness the Buddha’s talking about. This is important because when he talks about the sufferings that we experience in life, there are sufferings that result from our own actions. This is one of the big ironies in life. We all want happiness. Everything we do, say, or think is for the sake of happiness. And yet we end up causing ourselves so much suffering. Disturbance is hardly strong enough a word for it sometimes. We create really, really strong suffering. And it’s precisely this that the Buddha’s teaching us how to overcome, how to unlearn those kinds of actions, and replace them with actions that are more conducive to true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t turn around and bite us. And when you think about it, this is what you want in a home. It’s basically a place where you are not disturbed, where you have time to think about what you want to do, to be at peace. So as we’re meditating, if you notice any thoughts that come in and disturb the mind, remind yourself you don’t have to go there. Focus on the things that are not disturbing you. Focus on the things that are comfortable and at ease. That can be your dwelling place. Because outside disturbances are nothing compared to the way the mind can stir itself up, the stories it tells itself, the issues it raises. These are much more disturbing than anything else that comes from outside. So basically we’re learning how not to disturb the mind, how not to inflict the mind with any unnecessary stress or suffering. And it turns out that the unnecessary type is the one that’s most oppressive to the mind, the one that really causes the mind to suffer. So as we’re learning how to undo these habits, we come to see that there’s this potential in the mind for true happiness, happiness that can be our true home. So as you look at the breath, learn how to breathe in ways that are nourishing. Put the body at ease. Nourish it with whatever energy the body needs. And when the body’s been nourished, then things can calm down. Like John Lee’s images of a child who’s been well-fed. It’s been crying because it’s hungry, and now you finally feed it and it calms down. So you need to feed the body with healthy breath energy. And as for the mind, you have to learn how to notice when the mind is thinking in a way that’s actually helpful and when it’s thinking in a way that’s actually causing trouble. And if you see it’s causing trouble, you learn how to let go, hold on to something better in its place. Because the mind does have this tendency to focus on things it doesn’t like, the pains in the body. Disturbing thoughts. These, for some reason, are really riveting. They pull all our attention. And as a result, we tend to neglect the potential for peace, the potential for well-being that’s there in the breath, that’s there in the body, that’s not disturbing itself with unskillful perceptions, unskillful ideas, concepts, thoughts. They get it all stirred up. So remember, your dwelling place is in the area of undisturbance, well-being, peace. That’s where you want to make the home for the mind. And then when the mind has this home, then whatever disturbances there may be outside, they are outside. They’re on the other side of your protection. And they don’t stab into the heart the way they used to. Like that image I mentioned last night, the monk sitting in his hut out in the middle of the forest, and it’s raining, raining, raining. But the hut is well thatched. The walls are shut against the wind. So he has nothing to fear from the rain or the wind. So he says, “If you want to rain, blow, go ahead, rain, blow.” I’m dry inside. In the same way, we need to create this space inside where we really can be at home. Now, the issue may come up, “Is this selfish? You’re letting everybody else suffer while you’re not suffering?” But you have to remember, it’s an issue of skill. We suffer from lack of skill. You can’t go and make other people skillful. The best you can do is, once you’ve developed your own skill, you can, on the basis of that, give advice to others on how they can develop theirs. Then you can set an example. And if you don’t develop your own skill, nobody’s going to be able to develop it for you. So this is something each of us has to do. Because the rain of aging, illness, and death, that’s something you can’t prevent. But there’s no need to let that rain come seeping through our roofs. We can find a part of the mind that really is deathless. It’s a dimension you can touch in the mind. And it’s found by this quest to find what in the mind is really free from disturbance. And as your sensitivity improves, you find more and more subtle levels that you can drop, and your inner home becomes more secure.

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