Constructing a Home for the Mind

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The chant just now was on the factors of the path. One of the really important factors is right effort. An important part of right effort is desire. You may have noticed that there you generate desire too. You abandon unskillful qualities that have already arisen to try to make sure they don’t arise again. You develop skillful qualities. And once the skillful qualities are there, you’ve got to learn how to maintain them, look after them so that they grow. So there’s the desire and there’s the work. Many of us come to meditation hoping to rest. But as we’ve said many times, the Buddha compares a concentrated state of mind to a home for the mind. And as with any home, you have to work at it. If you just lie down out under the open sky, it’s not going to be much of a home. If you try to throw something together really quickly, it’ll last for a couple days, but you won’t get the comfort that you really want. So you have to be willing to work. Protection work takes time, takes energy. But when you do a good job, then the results are worth it. You’ve got a protection against the elements. You’ve got a warm place when it’s cold, a cool place when it’s hot, a place where you can find seclusion. This is what we’re working on as we meditate. So it takes a certain amount of work to get everything right. You start with the right object. The breath is a good one because it’s always there. Wherever you go, you’ve got your breath. But the work here is learning how to relate to the breath. You may want to relax and have a nice, cool, soothing breath, something very subtle. But sometimes the body needs more than just subtle breathing. It needs heavier breathing. I told you today about the student, my teacher, who I’ve been tracking him down for three years. I finally found him at the monastery there in Riong. The very first night we were sitting as a group, he mentioned to her, “Hey, you’ve been focusing on the cool breath for three years now. It’s not good for you. It’s not enough energy for your body.” You’ve got to learn to see what you need, and you have to provide it. You can’t just hope to coast along with what seems easy. There’s some work that needs to go into this. Of course, as with any work, you have to learn how to do it skillfully. If you just barge in, if it’s nothing but desire and effort, you can create a real mess for yourself. So you have to learn how to be observant. What works? What doesn’t work? How do you relate to the breath? How do you relate to spreading the breath energy through the body? How do you do that? Do you force it? If you force it, you’re going to get headaches. Things will get out of balance. How do you let it simply radiate out when you find that there’s tension in some parts of the body when you open it up? How do you keep it open without, again, forcing things too much? That requires that you watch and observe, experiment and observe again, experiment again and observe again. Learn from trial and error. What way of relating to the breath works? If you use a lot of pressure, you’re going to have problems. If you learn how to use the power of thought, which is simply holding in mind the possibility that this can happen, that the breath can go through areas where it seems to be blocked, or can find ways around them. Remember, the breath energy is already there. You’re not pushing energy into just a solid wall. You want the energy to diffuse into the energy that’s there, and to give it energy when it needs to be energized, and relax it when it needs to be relaxed. In other words, be observant. This element of discernment. It’s an important part of right effort. It has to build on right view and right resolve. You want to understand where you’re causing unnecessary stress and suffering and what you can do to put an end to it. So there’s work to be done. You want to build a good house, one that’s got a good, solid foundation. So that may mean, especially in the beginning, you do a little bit more work than you might have anticipated. And you’ve got to deal with desire. It’s an important part of the meditation, but you have to be skillful about it. The desire should be the desire to learn. And if something isn’t going to work, you want to know that it’s there. If it’s not going to work, unskillful desire is when you want whatever you do to work, and then you get upset when it doesn’t. The more skillful approach is to say, “Well, this is a learning experience. I try this and then we’ll see what happens. And if it doesn’t work, I want to know.” And in the process of learning how to read what doesn’t work, you might gain some ideas of other things that might work. So you try those. Try those. Keep at this. And things will work at some point. The second thing to keep in mind as you work with desire is to remember that you’re aiming at something. Then you want to be upfront about the fact that, yes, you really do want the mind to settle down. You want everything to be really, really nice. You want to gain the insights that are going to lead to freedom. There is a point to sitting here. There is a point to concentration. But if you focus all your attention on the end result, you’re going to miss what’s actually happening right here. You’re going to go off the road. It’s like driving to a mountain on the horizon. If you spend all your time looking at the mountain, you’re going to run into somebody. Or run off the road. As long as you know that the road you’re on leads to the mountain, you can just follow it. Focus on the road. And the road right here is your breath. Right now. Right now. Right now. And the way your mind is relating to it. Being mindful, i.e., keeping the breath in mind. And being alert to notice what’s actually happening with the breath, what’s actually happening with the mind. And then being ardent in doing this skillfully. In other words, you give it your full attention and you try to do it well. You’ve got to be on top of the mind each time it’s about to slip off. Learn how to recognize the signals that it’s sending. It’s getting ready to move. It’s a little bit bored. Sometimes a little thought will just flash into the mind for a second. You say, “How about going there?” And then it pretends like it didn’t say it. And you’re still with the breath and it seems to be okay. And then there’s another little flash. And bit by bit, the different members of the committee are getting converted. It’s kind of a divide and conquer. And then before you know it, everybody’s gone running off to where that little thought was. So you have to be extra careful. Be on top of the little thought. Little things. Because they make a huge difference. It may seem strange. We’re looking for a deathless property, or a deathless element, or a deathless dimension to the mind. What are we focusing on? Your breath. Your thoughts. All these little things. Just in the same way that we’re focusing on our actions. And our words. It may seem like such little things, but it’s in the little things that you see how the mind moves. You see how it lies to itself and you see how it creates all kinds of problems. And in understanding the little things, you begin to understand the larger patterns. And so as you keep an eye out for little things that are going to pull you away from the path, you end up learning an awful lot about the mind. So try to keep your desire focused on doing this well. And as for how long it’s going to take for the mind to settle down, just put that question aside. Some people find that it’s quick and easy other people find that it takes time and a lot of groundwork has to be done. You’re trying to create a foundation for your house and sometimes you dig down and you find that there’s nothing but mud. You have to dig way, way down until you hit the bedrock. So you have the choice. Are you just going to build your house on the mud and hope that nothing happens, that there’s no earthquake? Or are you going to build it on the bedrock and be willing to put in the effort? The path is something that’s fabricated, as the Buddha said. It is the foremost fabrication of the mind, the best thing you can do with your intentions and your desire, because it will lead to a point where the mind goes beyond its intentions and reaches a state in which there is no need for desire at all. But to get to that point, you have to put things together. It doesn’t just happen on its own. So engage in concentration work. In the beginning it requires that you put in some effort, but you’ll find as you start doing it well that the effort gets more than repaid. You put in a little bit of energy, you get a lot of energy in return. That’s when it gets really good. But if you find that you’re putting in a lot of energy right now and the energy return is small, it can mean one of two things. Either you’re not doing it right or you’re doing it right but there’s a lot of work to be done. So try to keep your motivation up. Remind yourself of why you’re here, why it’s good to be here. If you’re not working on this, the mind will probably be working on something else, creating a lot of trouble for itself and for other people. At the very least, here you’re working on something that’s going to be good for everybody. It’s your gift to yourself and your gift to others that you learn how to train the mind. So this is the best thing you can be doing with your time. So give it your full attention. Whether it takes a lot of work or just a little work, it doesn’t matter. The work is in learning to be observant. However much work that takes, it’s all well repaid. Jon Fung’s two most common instructions for meditation were 1) be observant and 2) use your ingenuity. We’ve got the basic technique. It’s simply a matter of learning what you have to do in order to make the technique work for your mind. And although the general principles are the same for everybody, there are going to be a lot of little details that are different for each of us. And as you exercise your powers of observation and your ingenuity, you’re exercising your discernment. And that’s the quality that’s going to set you free.

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