A Home to Take Home

November 9, 2013

Janasavadi used to call this a quiet corner, a place where you can get away from the world, the world of your responsibilities, the world of all your relations, and take some time to sort out your mind in what’s called physical seclusion. Even though we have a fair number of people here, the basic bottom line is very different from the bottom line outside. We’re all here to train the mind in whichever way the mind needs to be trained, because it’s a training with many aspects. It deals with your dealings with other people and your dealings with your own mind, what’s important in your life. It’s what you need to let go of, what you need to develop. There’s time and there’s space here to work on those things. The question is, when you leave this quiet corner, what do you take with you? For some people, simply the fact that they’ve had a chance to rest gives them some refreshment, gives them some energy. There’s really more you can take. You can actually take a quiet corner inside. It’s called mental seclusion. And this is a quality you can develop anywhere. It’s easiest to develop in physical seclusion. In fact, when you come to a quiet place like this, you begin to realize exactly how much conversation is going on in your mind. You can sit out under the trees and there’s nobody else around, and yet there are debates and conversations and all kinds of things going on in your own head, which is why we have this skill of staying with the breath. It gives you an alternative. So you’re with the body in itself, right here, right now. You’re not thinking about the body in the world or your identity in the world. It’s just having a physical presence right here. And being with that physical presence gives you an anchor. When you hang on to that, then you can look at all the conversations in the mind and realize you don’t have to get involved. Because a lot of those companions in your mind are different forms of craving. And you begin to see that they just go on and on and on, creating a lot of stress. They’re not really amounting to much. They can lead you into all kinds of directions, but in and of themselves there’s really not that much there, not much of substance. It’s one of the purposes of coming out here is to get some perspective on all those conversations going on in your mind, and to be able to pull out of them. It gives you the skill to pull out. That’s the take-home when you leave. It’s the skill. You can’t take the air, you can’t take the trees, you may take a few persimmons. What’s really of value when you take back is the skill you take, knowing that you can hang on to the breath, when you need to, when all the conversations in the mind are getting pretty loud. And that’s just the conversations in your own mind. There are conversations outside that you’re going to be entangled with as well. But you don’t have to get entangled. You begin to realize that there are hooks there, but you don’t have to get snagged by the hooks. You can stay with the breath because the breath goes with you wherever you go. And one of the purposes of having this skill of staying with the breath is to make it a place where you feel at home. So no matter where you go, you are at home. There’s that principle that wherever you do good becomes your home. You do good with other people by being generous and by being virtuous, which means you can feel at home wherever you go. But even more important, you want to be able to feel at home inside your own mind. Because so much of our activity is trying to get away from ourselves. We don’t like what we see in the mind, and so we run away from it. But we have to keep circling back, circling back. So as long as you’ve got to keep coming back, get to know this spot and recognize that there may be some unskillful things going on in the mind, but there are also some skillful things. This is an important element in the Buddha’s teaching here. The skill here is looking at what’s going on in the mind, not so much in terms of what you like and don’t like, but where do these thoughts lead? Where do these feelings lead? Which ones are worth encouraging? Which ones are not? And again, it’s good to have the breath to be able to step back and breathe through a lot of the tension that can build up around the more unskillful members of the conversation. And it puts you in a better place to look at them. You don’t feel like you have to get sucked into their stories or sucked into their agendas. So try to make yourself at home with the breath so you can be at home with the mind. No matter where you go, there is a sense of being a little bit separate. You can still make a quiet corner for yourself, even in the midst of large cities. If you go through the airport tomorrow, wherever you go, you can have this quiet corner inside, and you can look at the world as a big play. These places are the backdrops on a stage, and all the world is full of people playing their parts. And you can watch them. You don’t have to get involved. Maintain that quiet center. That place of feeling at home with the breath, feeling at home with your own mind, realizing that you do have skillful qualities in mind. And they’re your real friends. Those are the ones you want to have conversations with. As for the unskillful members, just let them go. If you give them reality, they’ll hang around for a long time. It’s like paying attention to them is like feeding stray dogs. If you don’t want the stray dogs around, you don’t feed them. At first, when they’re not being fed, they’ll get obstreperous and they’ll get difficult. But if you’re patient, you find that after all, they lose their strength. You don’t have to get involved. Just this ability to step back from your thoughts and see them as a process coming from causes and leading to results, that’s what really keeps you on the path. As the Buddha said, he got on the right path when he was realizing that he could divide his thinking into two kinds–thinking that was skillful and thinking that was unskillful. Which meant that he would step back from his thoughts and ask, “Where do these thoughts go? Do they lead to oppression of the mind? Do they lead to causing trouble for yourself, causing trouble for other people? If so, let them go.” No matter how much you may like them, they’re thoughts that you really have to dissociate yourself from. As for the thoughts that are skillful, go ahead and think them as much as you want. But even then, he said, you can think about something for twenty-four hours and it may be okay. It may not cause any harm, but it tires you out. This is when he turned his mind toward concentration as a place to rest and gain energy and to gain strength. So use this center you have here as a place where you can step back and look at your thoughts. Where do they come from? Do they come from a trustworthy place? If not, don’t get involved. Where do they lead? If they lead you to someplace that doesn’t look good, don’t get involved. And you have the freedom of choice. The Buddha really protected that principle very much, the fact that we can choose. He wasn’t the sort of person who’d go out and argue with people all over the place, but there were some people who’d actually seek out, and those were the ones who taught that you have no choice, that whatever happens is just going to happen, so you just learn how to accept it and that way you find peace. The Buddha would actually seek those people out and argue with them, pointing out that it was pointless to have a path of practice if you had no choice. People would either do it or not. It had nothing to do with their choices. Then why bother teaching? Why claim that you had a path of practice? But you do have these choices, and the whole point of the practice we’re doing right now is to maximize your ability to make skillful choices, to give you the support you need, to give you a base on which you can look at things and step back and get out of the conversations, get out of all the turmoil. Because you look at the world, and every day there’s conflict someplace, killing someplace, stealing. That’s the nature of the world. But you don’t have to bring that world inside. You can create your own space, your own world inside, a place where the mind is at home that can step away from the rest of the world. You have this quiet corner inside. That’s the skill you take home, so that you have a home wherever you go. You have a sense of peace, even in the midst of whatever turmoil the world has. As the Buddha said, in a world of people who live in conflict, we don’t get involved in conflict. We live at peace inside. We have our own nourishment inside. We have our own home inside. And this is not a selfish thing. It’s not like you’re just looking after yourself and letting the rest of the world go their way. The fact that you know how to look after your own pains, you know how to look after your own suffering, that takes a huge burden off of other people. If you can’t handle your own pains, then you go thrashing around. And in the course of thrashing around, you can’t help but hit other people. So when you look after your own suffering, your own inner well-being, it’s a gift to yourself and a gift to others. The practice as a gift. That’s an important principle. As the Ajahns always say, when you get to the end of the practice, you realize that it’s all one thing, clear through from the very beginning to the very end. The practice as a gift. You start with learning how to be generous, and you realize that observing the precepts is also a gift, making your mind still. Gaining discernment. Learning how to let go of all your unskillful qualities and find this source of true happiness inside that doesn’t need to lean on anybody else. It’s all a process of giving. And as with all giving, you get so much more in return.

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