A Building & Cleaning Crew Inside

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When you first settle down with the breath, you’ve got to direct your thoughts there, and you’ve got to evaluate things. You evaluate the breath, you evaluate how the mind is getting along with the breath, what needs to be adjusted, what’s perfectly fine as it is. Those two qualities, direct thought and evaluation, are directly related to how you talk to yourself in your mind. As the Buddha said, these are verbal fabrications because you direct your thoughts and you evaluate things before you speak. You speak to yourself in the mind. Who’s speaking and who’s listening? There are lots of voices and there are lots of listeners, and you have to train both so that you’re speaking in ways that are useful to others. You’re actually getting the mind to settle down. And when you listen, you listen to the right voices. It’s so easy to listen to the wrong voices, especially if you’ve got a lot of unhelpful voices in the mind. So part of the training is teaching you what to talk to yourself about as you settle down. If you have very negative voices in the mind, a lot of this has to do with making them more positive, or at least replacing them with more positive voices. Think about Ajahn Mun teaching his students in the Northeast. That’s the poorest part of Thailand. If you were born in the Northeast, you didn’t have much hope for getting anywhere in society. You didn’t have much of an education. All the message is coming out from Bangkok, whereas Bangkok knew a lot better about how you should live than you did. And so a lot of Ajahn Mun’s talks were devoted to reminding his students that, yes, they had the capability. They had the capacity to meditate, to get someplace in the practice, to actually attain the noble attainments. So a large part of his talks were composed of pep talks. You’re a human being. This is all it really takes. You’re a human being, you have a human body, and you’ve got the human mind. That right there is something amazing, something you can really use for the purposes of true happiness. And this is why we have the chants translated into English. So you have these thoughts floating around, “May all beings be happy. I’m the owner of my actions.” The world is swept away. You can’t depend on the world for your happiness. You’ve got to look inside. And you do have your actions. So these are some of the thoughts, some of the phrases and sentences that are good to keep repeating over and over again so they become part of your conversation inside. Then specifically with the breath, you’ll notice that your thoughts and your evaluations have to deal with perceptions. You have to have certain labels, you have to have certain images, basic concepts. And so we provide those as well—ways of thinking about the breath, thinking about the breath as the energy that flows through the body and opening the mind to the possibility that it can flow everywhere. And it can be harmonious throughout the body. It can be healing. That gives you a lot to work with right there. Dharma instructions are all about helping you with your verbal fabrication and your mental fabrication of the perceptions. So you give rise to good feelings that also have a fabricating effect on the mind. Of course, as we’re focused on the breath, that completes the set bodily fabrication as well. It’s just learning how to put these things together. In the beginning, it’s like herding cats. Or as they say in Thailand, it’s like catching crabs and putting them in a basket. You’ve caught a couple crabs, and as you’re trying to get the next crab, the crabs already in the basket are ready to crawl out. So you’ve got to be aware all around. But it’s not always that way. As you get more and more skillful at getting together with the breath, evaluating the breath, thinking about the breath, making adjustments, talking to yourself in ways that are encouraging, and listening to the encouraging voices, the burdens get lighter. You find that you have to do less and less talking to yourself, or at least the talking gets less variegated. It becomes more, “Just stay here. Stay here. Just stay right here. Stay balanced right here. Don’t worry about whether the breath is going to come in or go out.” Sometimes it gets very, very still. And just out of habitual training, you keep trying to pump it in and pump it out, even though the body doesn’t need it anymore. Things can just get very, very still. So keep that perception in mind as well, when the energy is all open and connected in the body. There’s no need to pump things in and pump things out. There’s no need to do a lot of catching of the crabs coming out of the basket. You can make a comparison with the difference between building a house and just keeping the house clean. Building a house takes lots of work. You need hammers and saws. It’s a lot of labor, very intensive. There’s work in keeping it clean, but it’s a very different sort. You’re using different tools, more refined ones. You use brooms and mops, wiping cloths. So when you’re first settling down, it’s like building a house. And it can be very wearisome. But after a while, once the house is done, then it’s just a matter of keeping it clean. You still have to be alert. You still have to be quick to catch any little things that are going to disturb the mind or disturb your stillness. And for people who live in places that don’t like building, but don’t like keeping the places clean, and there are people like that, you begin to wonder, “Well, what’s next? What can I do next? How can I…” You think about using your building skills to improve things, but this is not the point. We’re not using building skills anymore. We’re using cleaning skills. So realize there are places where the heavy work gets put aside and it’s just a matter of being alert. It’s very light work. It’s continual work. You have to keep watch over this. You can’t just zone out or wallow in the pleasure of the concentration or just trust that it’ll do its thing on its own. You’ve got to look after it. But looking after it as it gets more refined, as it gets more solid, is a lot easier than hauling ladders around and having to build things again. Of course, if it falls, then you’ve got to go back and build yourself another little concentration house. But at least you’ve had practice. And it gets more and more efficient if you keep at it. Now, if you forget about it for a while and get lazy, then you’ve got to start all over again. You’ve got to lay foundations, and you’ve probably lost some of your sense of how to handle a hammer, handle a saw, and it gets very frustrating. But it can be learned again. Just remember, there are various stages in this practice. They all require mindfulness. They all require alertness. But in terms of the work of ardency or the work of the direct thought and evaluation, it varies depending on where you are and how well you’ve built your house and how well you’ve maintained it. Of course, in doing this, you begin to see how the mind builds other houses for itself, too. This is where you can use the skills of concentration to gain some insight into your defilements—where your greed is taking you, where your anger is taking you. It’s the same factors of fabrication. You ask yourself, “What are the basic underlying images that you’re talking to yourself about?” That perception of the mind is a committee. Who’s talking and who’s listening? The person who’s talking, is this someone worth listening to? And when you choose to listen to one voice or another, what are your reasons? Then you can start listening to exactly what are those voices saying. As for the side that’s listening, how does it interpret those voices? Are these people you really want to listen to? Are these attitudes that you really want to adopt in listening? That’s a good place to start taking things apart. What would be a more useful way of looking at things? This is where it’s good to associate with people who are skilled in taking apart their own anger, or taking apart their own lust, or their own greed, because they have ways of thinking that you can pick up just by listening. And values you can pick up by hanging around. That way you can build better houses for yourself—houses that are not based on greed, aversion, and delusion, or that don’t aggravate greed, aversion, and delusion. Because you’ve had hands-on experience with changing the committee of your mind. So it’s a meditator’s committee. It’s a meditator’s building council. It’s a meditator’s construction crew. It’s a meditator’s cleaning crew. And they’re good not only for the meditation, but for lots of other things as well. Because the skill of getting the mind to settle down, that is the skill of skills. And the lessons you learn here can be used to take a skillful attitude towards everything else you do, whether it’s a manual skill or a social skill. Try to see how you’re breathing around the issue. Try to see what underlying images you’re holding in mind about who you are and how you relate to the issue, or how you relate to the task at hand. And how you talk to yourself about these things. Can you change the conversation and change the concepts? Give yourself a new vocabulary. Carry the home of the breath into your other activities as well. This way, the skill of the meditation spreads out and becomes a skill of life.

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