To Live with Yourself

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In Jhansa, what would often begin as meditation instructions is saying to remind yourself that what you’re doing here is excellent work, working on your own mind. And it’s not selfish. It’s looking after yourself in an intelligent way that actually has lots of benefits that go outside, too. It’s a way of being responsible. In the beginning, it looks irresponsible. You’re going into yourself dealing with an area that nobody else can see, nobody else can feel, the body as you experience it from within, your awareness as you experience it from within. And you’re learning how to live with yourself inside here. It may seem like a small thing, but if you can’t live with yourself, the bad effects are going to start spilling out. It’s like someone who can’t live at home goes running around and becomes a delinquent outside. You want to learn how to settle in and be on good terms with your body, be on good terms with your mind right now. That doesn’t mean just going along with whatever comes up in the mind. But it does mean learning to be sensitive to what’s there and to admit what’s there. Take stock of what you’ve got and then see the best thing you can do with it. You take your stance with a breath and find some spot in the body where it’s easy to focus on the sensation of the breathing. And protect that spot. Think of it as being like a fire that you’re trying to start. You’ve got the kindling, you’ve got the fuel. You’ve got the wind. So you have to protect the fire as you start it. It’s going to be a little tiny flame for a while. It’s not going to seem like much. And you read about spreading rapture and pleasure through the body until it’s totally saturated with rapture and pleasure, with no part of the body not touched by rapture and pleasure, and you wonder when you’re going to get there. And for the time being you have to remind yourself that you do want to be with the breath because you want to gain some concentration. But for the time being, forget about the concentration. You don’t take concentration as your object. You don’t take jhana as your object. You take the breath as your object. Try to gain an interest in the breath for its own sake. Remind yourself that when the breath energy flows well in the body, it’s going to be good for your health. It’s going to be good for the mind. So pay full attention to what you’ve got right here. Be very intent on your spot. And whether it grows to be a big spot in the course of the meditation, that doesn’t matter. Just protect what you’ve got. And it may not seem like much in the present moment, but it’s there. And if you’re too tired to do a lot of directed thought and evaluation, just do the directed thought there with that spot. Try to keep it comfortable. And then remind yourself that this is something good. Because once you’ve got a good, firm place to stand, then you can see things a lot more clearly. Otherwise you’re like being in a train station. You’re in a train, and all of a sudden you don’t know for sure if your train is moving or the other train is moving. You see one of them has to be moving, but you’re not sure which. It’s only when you see a post go by that you know, “Okay, your train is moving.” Otherwise, you need something that’s really fixed so you can know what the movements of the mind are going to be. So if the fixed point is just that, a point, at least you’ve got a point. If you want to have a little fun, have two points. I know an elderly woman who used to get into concentration really quickly. She’d have one point in the middle of her head, and the other point down at the base of the spine, and then think of a line connecting the two. And just taking care of those two points kept her mind busy enough so that she didn’t have anything else to think about. And she’d get into concentration really quickly. If those two points are too far apart for you, try the middle of the head and the middle of the chest. But protect what you’ve got. It’s part of right effort. Getting something good started and then protecting it. Even though it may not seem like much, there may not seem much rapture or pleasure. The rapture seems very far away sometimes. But at least the spot you’ve chosen is not painful. It’s pleasant enough. And you think of all the blood flowing around in there smoothly and easily and filling all the blood vessels. You can get a sense of fullness. Protect that. And if, as you’re protecting, it begins to grow, let it grow. But don’t lose sight of what you’ve got. Because it’s going to help you live with yourself inside, to have a good place like this. One of the terms for concentration is viharadhamma, which means a home. So you’ve got to put a roof over this, put walls around it, make sure it has a good solid floor, and then just stay here. Don’t think about too much beyond just staying here. It may seem like a little thing, but big things come from little things, especially if little things aren’t solid. So make sure that this is solid. If you find that when you do settle down, it begins to get blurry, that’s when you start moving your attention around, trying to expand the range of your awareness. Because otherwise the breath will get more and more refined, and the spot where you’re focused on gets smaller and smaller and then just disappears. And you fall into an air pocket, or everything just blurs out. So when the comfort does come, allow it to spread. Allow your awareness to spread, too. It may not be up to doing the whole body, but do at least something larger than just a small spot. Because when the mind is a small spot, then it can go in any direction very quickly at any time. But if it’s larger, if it inhabits the body more fully, it’s hard to pull everything into that small spot that can then move. So it makes it easier to stay here once you’ve got a larger frame of reference. But again, if you find that having that larger frame makes you lose your focus, go back to the focus. Learn to get a sense of what’s working for you. The instructions are here in a kind of a general way to give you an idea of what your options are. But it’s up to you to choose what’s working based on your powers of observation as to what’s working. That way you become friends with the breath, friends with the body. You can live in here. And when you’re at peace in here and you can live with yourself inside, then you find it’s going to be a lot easier to live with other people. And they’re going to find it’s a lot easier to live with you. So the effects do spread around if you take care of the area in here. And it looks like you’re being irresponsible, closing your eyes, not engaging with the world. But there are some skills that we need to practice inside. Nobody taught us these skills in school, so we’ve got to learn them now. Because it’s when you can live with yourself. That the bad effects of not living with yourself don’t spread around. And that’s a gift to the world right there.

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