Housecleaning

October 9, 2017

It was Thoreau who once said that most people live lives of quiet desperation, but nowadays it’s more like people live lives of noisy distraction. Our attention gets pulled out outside all the time. A lot of people can’t live without their screens, their phones, their pads, their computers. It’s always pulling them out, pulling them out. It’s like someone who has a home but doesn’t take care of it. It’s constantly pulled outside with issues outside. So the house itself never gets repaired, never gets cleaned. So when we come here to meditate, people have to settle down with their sense of the body from the inside and their sense of the mind from the inside. We find that’s a lot of junk, leftover, half-finished, undigested, undealt-with issues. It usually comes out in two ways. One is just a lot of stuff welling up in the midst of your meditation. Or it can also be dreams. Some people say that when they come here they have more intense dreams for the first couple days than they’ve had for a long time. That’s because, to change the analogy a little bit, it’s like things have been stuffed into a pot and now finally the lid is off and they can come out. So it’s natural when you get here that you have to do some housecleaning. We don’t like to think of the meditation as work. After all, meditation is a time to rest and put aside our outside responsibilities. But then we find we have inside responsibilities, things we have to take care of, clean out, before we can settle down inside with a real sense of stability and sense of ease. So clean out the body with the breath. To what extent you can clean out the mind with the breath as well. A lot of thinking in the body is in the body. There are little patterns of tension left here and there. They talk about people who have received heart transplants from other people, and they have memories that were not their memories. They have memories of the other person embedded in the heart. So when you start out meditating, John Lee recommends that you have some good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. That’s supposed to compensate for the fact that your breath will be getting calmer as you meditate. So you want to make sure you’ve got a good supply of oxygen. And also that there’s a sense that you’re cleaning things out. Think of the breath coming in from the head. It comes in down to the toes, down to the tips of the fingers. As it goes out, it goes out from all those places as well. Everything gets ventilated, everything gets washed out. You can think of the body as a large sponge. As you breathe in, the breath comes in from all directions, and all the breath channels in the body connect. That’s for things to come up as you get back inside your mind. You find it’s all kinds of stuff. Stuff dealing with stupid things you did. Stuff dealing with hurtful things other people did. This is where you have to have a lot of compassion, a lot of goodwill. For a day and a second time in Thailand, I found myself suddenly alone on a mountaintop with a little bit of human contact every day, but not much. And suddenly I was living with a lot of my past. Some of it had to do with attitudes in the mind that say, “You shouldn’t be meditating, you shouldn’t be doing something else.” So I had to sort through those attitudes and begin to realize that they came from a lot of people in my family, at school. They were ideas I picked up from the media, things I picked up from my time in church. Sorting through that, I began to realize that if I had resentment for the ideas that I’d received from people, that was not the right attitude. I had to realize that people implant ideas in one another’s minds largely out of ignorance. They don’t know any better than this. They think they know what they do know. What they know is something they really know, they think, that they don’t know. I had to realize that I’ve been doing the same sort of thing myself, so I can’t really blame others. So when you find something coming up that gives rise to feelings of anger or resentment or even ill will, you’ve got to realize that we’re all in this world of ignorance together. Just chalk it up to old karma and put it aside. And be patient with the garbage that comes up. After all, when you’re housecleaning, you have to get your hands dirty if you want the house to be clean. This is going to be work sometimes, to sort your way through some ideas. Some ideas you can simply put aside. Others you have to work through. Once you get that idea in, what can you do to pull yourself out of it? It was good to have a Chan Fung around because he had a perspective that I was not familiar with, looking at things in terms of karma and rebirth, which is a very useful perspective for getting some distance from the ideas that you hold on to so tightly. Or your sense of being wronged, something you also hold on to so tightly. Look at it simply as part of this long story of karma that stretches way back, so far back that you can’t find, “Well, who started the problem?” And realize the only proper response is, as the Buddha said, generosity, which includes forgiveness, virtue, you’re not going to harm anybody. And goodwill for everybody, all beings. It kind of clears the decks. This is why we so often have those reflections before we meditate on karma, on rebirth, aging, illness, and death. The chance on goodwill to remind yourself of the attitude you need that’s going to clean out your mind. These are the tools you need to shovel out all the garbage and not just have it come piling back in on you. You really want to get it out. Some of the stuff, all you have to do is just notice that it’s there. It’s like swamp gas escaping. It comes bubbling up and then it goes into the atmosphere and it’s gone. Other things have more tenacity. These are the ones you have to work through. But it’s normal. Just simply learn how to do it well. So things really do get cleaned out. And you find that being inside your mind, being inside your body, is a lot better place than it had been before. And when things get cleared out like this, then you begin to see other levels of activity in the mind. How the mind talks to itself, how the mind sends messages back and forth. The different parts of the mental committee send messages back and forth. Just the basic workings of how things get put together. As you get more and more in touch with that, then you really begin to understand how you can prevent yourself from accumulating more garbage when you have to go back into the world. So you can be like a student in a classroom. I had a friend in Singapore who once said that every day when he got back from work he would sit down and meditate to clean out the garbage. He felt like he was a garbage pail in the course of the day and he had to clean out the garbage. I told him, “Just think of yourself as being like a garbage pail with a cutting out the bottom so that nothing sticks. After all, you are the one who holds onto these things.” So you learn the processes by which the mind holds on and accumulates all this garbage. If you learn how to see through those processes, then nothing will stick at all. So the meditation is not simply a respite from the world, but it becomes a set of skills and tools that you use as you go through the world. And don’t collect garbage. That way, no matter how much garbage there is in the world, nothing sticks inside. And you’re not adding to anybody else’s garbage. That’s when the mind and the body feel clean, clear through.

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