Housebuilding Skills

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When you practice concentration, you’re building a home for the mind. And it is an active process of building. You’re not just sitting here watching whatever comes up, whatever goes away. You’re not settling into some innate state that’s already there. You’re creating a place where the mind can dwell. It’s settling to be fabricated. The word is sankhara. And unfortunately, there are no prefab houses you can get into. But the Buddha gives some plans, and the Ajahns expand on those plans. We need to build this house. It may seem ironic. You may remember that when the Buddha came to awakening, one of the first verses that came to him was that he’d been searching for a house builder through many, many lifetimes. And finally he found the house builder and destroyed the last house. But before you can destroy the last house, you have to build new houses for the mind. Because the mind tends to dwell in some pretty bad ones. We’re constantly creating places for the mind to dwell. The problem is we create them in sensuality, studying your will and thoughts of harmfulness. Houses that come crashing down. And when they come crashing down, they harm not only us, but the people around us. But in the process of learning how to build a good house, you learn what house building is like, what the steps are, and how you can devise and light up the processes so you can understand them. Then you can look at your other bad houses that you’ve been dwelling in and see how you build them. And you’re willing to take them apart because you’ve got better houses to stay in. For example, with sensuality. The Buddha said you can see the drawbacks of sensuality very clearly, but if you don’t have an alternative source of pleasure, a pleasure that is deeper, divorce from sensuality, you’re going to be tempted to go back because the mind needs a sense of pleasure to feed on. Think of the Buddha and his quest for awakening. He’d had that vision of wood lying in water. You can’t use it to set fire to anything. Wood that’s taken out of the water but it’s still wet, you can’t use that either. There’s only wood that was totally dry. That was the kind of wood you could use to start a fire. And he read that as telling himself that he had to deprive himself of all pleasures. And he found out that he was going to die if he did. He tested it for six years. He realized he was going to die and not gain anything worth gaining. Then he found out that the path centered on right concentration was the way to the end of suffering. Right concentration has a sense of pleasure and even rapture that is divorced from sensuality. It’s based on your sense of the body as you feel it from within. As you’re sitting here right now, how do you feel your body? In the West, we have a very poor vocabulary for the sense of sensations in the body as we feel them from inside. Scientists can measure all kinds of things from outside, but how you feel, even your own breath, how you feel the blood going through your veins, how you feel the patterns of tension and relaxation in your muscles, that’s yours. We should be expert in these things, but it’s in an area where we tend to be pretty ignorant because we spend too much time paying attention to things outside. So try to inhabit the body and see what sensations in there are pleasant as you breathe in. What parts of the body feel good when they receive breath energy coming in? Focus on those. They can be anywhere in the body. Then you can talk to yourself about this. That’s called verbal fabrication. The breath is physical fabrication or bodily fabrication. Then there are perceptions and feelings. The perceptions here are the images you hold in mind. These are the things that you bring to your experience to make some sense out of them, to figure out what’s worth looking at and how you should look at it. A lot of the practice is going to be learning how to change your perceptions. In some cases, the perceptions come after you’ve had an experience, but a lot of times they’re there prior to your experience shaping things. So you can tell yourself ahead of time. You can perceive the breath. You can create an image of the breath in your mind that’s different from what it’s been in the past and see how that affects the way you breathe. When you breathe in, think of the whole body breathing in. Every cell in the body is breathing in, breathing out, and they’re all breathing in unison. They’re all in harmony. Hold that perception in mind. Then you’ve got the basic activities that go into building a house—bodily, verbal, mental fabrication. And as you get good practice with these, you find that you can build a good house right here. So take the time. You may find that your first efforts are kind of crude, but as with any skill, it takes time. And using your powers of observation to figure out if things are not comfortable inside, what could you do to make them more comfortable? And allow your imagination some free reign. You can think of the breath energy outside of the body, kind of cocoon of breath energy around you. How can that help create a sense of well-being inside the body? When you’ve learned how to build some good houses like this, then you can look at the houses you build with sensuality, you build with ill-will, and it’s easier to take them apart because you’ve got a good place to stay. If you don’t have this alternative, skillful house, you’re going to keep going back to your old houses. That’s all the shelter you’ve got. But now that you’ve got the comfort of being able to breathe, simply breathe in and out and create a sense of well-being inside. It’s something you can do anywhere. It doesn’t cost anything. You’ve got a house that you can put up at any time, any place. You can carry it around with you. It’s a mobile home. And then when you see that the mind is tempted to build some other houses in its old ways, you can stop the process because you understand it. You don’t understand these forms of fabrication until you learn how to do them well, because you’re going to learn how to let go of all kinds of fabrication eventually. And you’re not going to do it with a sense of disgust or a sense of anger at them. Simply that you explore how far you can take these skills. Then you see they can take you a certain distance, but only so far. When you let go of them, you let go out of a sense of having accomplished something but now moving on to something better. That kind of letting go is how you let go skillfully. So it doesn’t do any good to deny that you’ve been building houses. Some people will say, “Well, there’s nobody there.” That’s how they interpret the teaching on not-self. They make it a no-self teaching. These houses just appear, and then they disappear. So you just develop some equanimity, some patience, and watch them appear and disappear. Figure out that’s all you have to do. That’s not all you have to do, because they keep on coming. And if you deny the role that you’re playing in their building, you’re going to be ignorant. And ignorance does not lead to awakening. It’s by learning how you put these things together that you can go beyond the processes of putting things together. This is how the Buddha learned how to dismantle those last houses. He understood thoroughly how house building takes place in the mind. So build yourself a good house here, based on the breath, based on learning how to talk to yourself in a way that’s really conducive to getting the mind to be satisfied with being with the breathing, taking an interest in the breath, the breath energies in the body, and realizing that as you learn about the breath, you’re learning a lot about the mind. There are some people who say, “Why focus on the breath when the time comes to die? The breath will leave you and you won’t have anything to focus on. You’re just a meditation object that will have abandoned you.” If all we were focusing on was the breath, that would be true. But as you focus on the breath, you’re dealing, as I said, with verbal and mental fabrication as well, and you’re getting to know them really well. And those are the things that are going to lead you to take a new rebirth when you find you can’t stay in this body. And when you know them really well, then you can learn how to get past them, not be confined by them. So as long as you’ve been building houses, build some good houses. It’s in learning the skills that you need to build good houses that you go beyond those skills. You see the limitations and see where you don’t have to do them. That’s an important skill right there.

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