A Place to Stay & Work

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Trying to breathe in a way that feels nourishing for the whole body. And John Foy used to comment how breath is one of the most important foods for the body. The different material foods that we take in provide raw materials, but the way we breathe enables us to digest those things, make use of them. It keeps the body functioning. If there was no breath, you could stuff a lot of food into the body, but it wouldn’t do any good at all. So feed on the breath. And as with any food, try to fix it in a way that it’s going to be good for you and taste good too. One of the reasons why John Lee has you start out with a long breathing is that it puts more oxygen into the body, more breath energy into the body. And if you’ve been feeling depleted, you might want to keep it up for a while, until the long breathing feels laborious. Then you can calm it down, make it more subtle, make it more light, whatever feels good. Because the whole purpose of practicing concentration is to give you a sense of pleasure inside. On the one hand, there’s simply the pleasant sensation of having a breath energy that feels nourishing. There’s also the pleasure of mastering a skill. You’re learning how to focus your attention, how to keep it in one place, then how to expand your awareness. And think of the body being nourished by the breath. Think of all the blood vessels you have in your body. Where are they right now? You’ve probably seen diagrams. The main ones run up the middle of the chest in the front, spread out down the arms, down the legs, down the spine. Think of the breath flowing in those places. Or you can think of your nerves. Again, you’ve probably seen diagrams of where the nerves are located in the body, how they’re connected. So think of them breathing as well. And then ask yourself if it feels good. If it doesn’t feel good, you can try something else. If it takes you the whole hour to find something good, then it’s an hour well spent. If it doesn’t take you all that time, then the next lesson is to learn how, once you’ve established a good feeling in the body and allowed it to spread, how you maintain that balance. Because the skill of spreading your awareness around and the skill of keeping it spread, even though they’re similar or slightly different, the keeping requires less energy. But it requires more vigilance. It’s the vigilance that’s going to turn into discernment, as you watch for thoughts that would come up and pull you away. Try to adjust your radar so that you can detect them when they’re coming, and not suddenly be aware of them when they’ve already kidnapped you and taken you off. It’s like somebody standing on the side of the road who jumps into any bus that comes along, without looking at where the bus is going, who else is in the bus. It’s amazing that we’re still alive. If you lived your life like that, who knows where you’d be now? You want to be more selective about your thoughts. Where are they going to take you? Jon Swann used to talk about the becomings in the mind as the traveling places of the mind. A desire comes up, and you can fabricate a sense of the world around that desire, and then you in that world, trying to get that desire. And these things can take us all over. And so falling into them is something we’re really good at. Learning how to stay outside of them, that’s the skill we have to develop. So the Buddha gives you another becoming, which is the becoming of inhabiting the body. You as a meditator in the body. Try to maintain this becoming. And then the other becoming that comes up, you say, “No thanks. I don’t need to go there. I’m going to learn how to inhabit this.” What usually happens when you move from one to another is that you blank out for a bit, and you find yourself in a different world. And we’re really good at blanking out. The skill you need to develop as a meditator is not blanking out. When you say there’s a temptation to go to another thought world, you say, “No.” And as you’re living your life, from day to day, when you do have to engage in thought worlds, you want to be very conscious of how you enter a thought world and how you leave to go into another one. That’s a skill you want to work on. But the first big skill is to develop a sense of well-being right here. So you really do want to stay, because the mind is a wanderer. The Buddha compared it to a house builder. But it’s more of an RV builder. He puts together an RV and you go driving off. Then it breaks down. Well, you make another one. You drive off of that one. Here you want to build a home. This is an image that’s frequently used in the Canon. They talk of entering and dwelling in concentration. The definition of concentration, Samadhi, is cittas eka katha. Cittasa means “of the mind.” Eka katha. Eka means “one.” Aga means “gathering place.” And the dha there just makes it a noun. Instead of giving the mind one place to gather, one place to get all of its mental faculties to meet. So it’s a home. It’s a dwelling place. Then you want to spread out and inhabit the whole body. That way you stay here more solidly. And as for anybody else who wants to come in, you say, “No thanks. This is my place.” For most of us, our minds are like bus stations. Anybody can come in. Anybody can go out. And who knows what they’re doing. In the different parts of the bus station. John Lee likes to use the image of a home where you have windows and doors that you can open and close. And you can be very selective about what you let in, what you let out. But the important thing is that you keep it clean. You keep it tidy. And you keep it comfortable inside. So you’re not tempted to go running out. You’ve got a good place to stay. It requires that you treat the breath with a light hand. Because of the elements, the breath is the gentlest, the most responsive, simply to the act of a thought. You can think of the breath going someplace, and unless there’s some real blockage, it’ll go. You push the breath through the body. We’re not only pushing the breath, we’re pushing the blood, which is something else. And that can lead to headaches. It can lead to a sense of imbalance. But you think of breath as being able to flow around everything, through everything. Think of all the spaces in your atoms. The breath can flow right through. Think of the whole body being honeycombed. Nothing to prevent the breath from permeating the whole body. So it does become a good place to stay. You want to stay here, one, so that it’s comfortable. It gives the mind a chance to rest. And then two, this is where the work is going to be done. We hear so much about wanting to be in the present moment, how it’s a good thing to be in the present moment, even that it’s the goal. The practice is to just be in the present moment. The Buddha never said that. But he did say you want to get into the present moment because there’s work to be done. And it’s done most easily when you’re working from a sense of well-being. And not only that, as you get more conscious of the different ways in which you put your state of concentration together, you begin to see that it’s fabricated. You have an intention to inhabit the body. You have an intention to play with the breath in certain ways. You talk to yourself in certain ways. You hold different images in mind. These are the things that are going to be the raw material of insight. They’re called sankhanas, fabrications. And the definition of insight is knowing how to look at them, how to regard them in such a way that you let them go. But before you’re going to let them go, learn how to use them. The things we know best are the things we do. So it’s not like you’re sitting here looking at fabrications someplace else. You’re engaged in doing them. Then as you learn to see them on this level, you can see how you put the state of mind together. That enables you to see these things as individual events. I mean, you can see them as events. Then you can stop yourself from creating other become-ings out of them. So the practice of concentration basically covers both tranquility and insight. There’s no place where the Buddha says, “Go do tranquility,” or “Go do insight.” He always says, “Go do jhana,” which is right concentration. And it’s going to require that you develop tranquility and insight, not so much as techniques as qualities in the mind. And as the mind settles down and you get more solidly here, then it enables your tranquility to get more tranquil, your insights become more insightful. It’s a total practice right here. So you don’t have to sit and wait and say, “Well, how much more concentration do I have to do before I do insight?” You’ll be doing the concentration, and insights will come up as you do the concentration. So focus on the doing. And focus on being really sensitive to what you’re doing. And the insights will come.

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