A Well-thatched Roof

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There’s a passage in the Canon where a monk says, “My hut is well-thatched. The roof doesn’t leak. So rain, God, go ahead and rain.” Of course, the hut here stands for his mind, and a well-thatched mind is one that protects itself. You can make a comparison. A mind in meditation is like a home. You’ve got a good roof, you’ve got windows and doors that you can open and close. The untrained mind is like a bus station. Anybody can come in, anybody can go out, and who knows what’s happening in the dark corners? You’ve got windows that open and close. This is what makes it into a home. You can basically say “no” to some people coming in and “yes” to others. To change the image a little bit, like the fortress, mindfulness is the gatekeeper. Certain thoughts are worth coming in, certain thoughts you shouldn’t let in, because they’re enemies for the mind. Greed, aversion, and delusion. Then come in and recap it. Mindfulness, they don’t come from outside, they come from within. And they go out and they look for things to feed on outside. So this is where you have to exercise some control. Where are you going to focus? As the Buddha said, the things you think about are the way your mind gets bent. Sometimes we think to ourselves, “Well, if I just allow myself to follow this particular bout of anger or this particular bout of lust, I can just get it out of my system.” But what you actually do is you imprint it even more in your system. Whatever you think about a lot, whatever you obsess over, the Buddha says is the way your mind is bent. It’s like creating a rut in the mind, so it’s easier and easier to go in that direction. And it feels more and more natural. So many times the thoughts we have, the emotions we have, we think, “Well, this is just the way I feel, this is the way I think, this is the way I really think, this is the way I really feel.” Actually, it’s just the way you habitually think, habitually feel. You want a part of the mind that can step back from that. That’s why the Buddha gave that recommendation. You learn how to sort your thoughts out between the ones that you can follow and the ones you can’t. The ones you can trust and the ones you can’t. The ones you cannot trust are the ones that are imbued either with sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness. The ones you can trust are the ones that have renunciation as their theme. In other words, not denying yourself pleasure or happiness, but looking for pleasure or happiness in the right place. Good will, or as the texts say, non-ill will, but it basically means good will, when appropriate, equanimity when appropriate. And harmlessness, basically having compassion, seeing there are people who are weak right now, who are suffering right now. And instead of taking advantage of that fact, you’re trying to protect them and do what you can to help them where appropriate. Those are the kinds of thoughts you can trust, particularly the one of renunciation. You’re not renouncing unskillful relationships or controlling minds and habits. Years back when I was doing a survey of modern Buddhist books in America, you look in the index, and if they mentioned renunciation at all, there were those two issues, controlling mind states and bad relationships. Well, you don’t need the Buddha to tell you to renounce those things. A therapist can tell you to renounce your controlling mind states, and your parents can tell you to watch out for bad relationships. The Buddha is talking about renouncing sensuality. It doesn’t mean renouncing pleasure. It means renouncing your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, the mind’s habit of feeding on fantasies. You’ve got to learn how to say no. How do you say no? You provide the mind with an alternative pleasure. You think about the drawbacks of sensuality, but you’ve got to have this alternative pleasure as well, the pleasure of getting the mind in concentration. The Buddha does have you deny yourself some pleasures, but he gives you something to feed on in the meantime. Because, as he found, if you try to starve yourself of all pleasure, you end up on the verge of death. So the path does have pleasure, as we chatted just now. There’s a purpose for this pleasure. It helps the mind to settle down, and it’s not so hungry for things outside. This is one of the reasons why we leave the windows and doors open. We do it all the time. We hope something will come in to distract us, something will come in to entertain us, because we feel impoverished inside. There was an experiment I read about recently where they got people to sit in a room for fifteen minutes with nothing on the walls, just them sitting in a chair. They were told simply, “Just sit and think for fifteen minutes, and then rate how you felt afterwards.” More than half said it was a miserable experience. Then some were offered the opportunity to have an electric shock, a painful electric shock. That’s part of the experiment, and a lot of people chose it. They’d rather have an electric shock, they’d rather have that pain, than the pain of sitting with their own thoughts. They would offer people money and say, “If you want the electric shock, you’re going to have to pay for it.” People would pay for their electric shock rather than sit there and just think. That’s what the untrained mind is like. It feels impoverished inside. So we’re giving it something good to hold onto inside, the pleasure that can come when the mind finally settles down. This is what I was saying earlier today. If you want to just learn how to be okay with your thoughts, as long as you’re neurotic, that’s something you have to do. If you want to learn how to be okay with the fact that you have some negative thoughts, but there comes a point where you have to say, “Okay, enough. I’m going to get the mind to settle down, be with something really good, and say no to the wandering mind, and say yes to the mind that’s willing to settle down, willing to close the windows and doors, make sure the roof is well thatched, because there’s so much well-being that comes.” That’s when you master the skill. So it’s worth the effort that goes into it. And if it seems selfish, remind yourself that other people benefit from this. The fact that you’re not letting your greed, aversion, and delusion prowl around the neighborhood means that the neighbors are not being harassed. And you provide a good example. There’s so much careless speech and action going on in the world right now. And a lot of people say, “Well, everybody does that, and so they’re going to do it too.” But if you can provide an example and say, “No, there’s happiness that can be found by training the mind.” That at least makes people think there’s an alternative. Years back, when I first went to Thailand, there was a monk. I arrived late at night and woke up the next morning. I looked out my hotel window, and there on the street below was a scene that I’d seen in documentaries before, but here I was seeing it in real life. There was a monk coming down the street, stopping in front of a store. The woman in front of the store dropped her work, went inside, came out, put a little something in his bowl, and then he went off. It was almost surreptitious. And it really struck me what he stood for. It was the fact that there’s an alternative way of living, an alternative way of finding happiness. So even if you’re not a monk, the fact that you’re training your mind and you can show some restraint in your words and deeds, some care in the way you speak to other people, coming out of a trained mind, that offers a good example for the world. And it’s how we repay our debt of gratitude to all those who’ve been practicing the past. To all those who’ve passed this skill on to us. So you build your house, but you’re not the only person who benefits from the fact that you’ve got a good house. Whatever animals you have inside of the house, you make sure they don’t go prowling out so the neighborhood can be at peace and you’ve got them confined so they don’t cause a lot of trouble to you either. The concentration on its own can’t get rid of them, but it’s a good beginning. So learn how to protect this mind, the mind that’s still. While you’re sitting here, it’s a lot easier than protecting it outside, but at least it gives you some practice in doing this, in learning the skill. You can then try to start taking the skill outside as well. But again, show some restraint in what you allow in. With the internet now, we’ve got the whole world right in our hands. So be very careful about which parts of the world you allow in. Be very careful when you go surfing around. Make sure you don’t land on a rocky beach that destroys your surfboard. Everywhere, as you go through the world, remember you’ve got to show some restraint, just as you’re showing restraint right now. And there’s a lot of happiness that can come from that. We tend to think of restraint as being confining. But think of it as a protection. And all the valuable things you have are right in here. It’s not like you’re being deprived of anything. But learn how to build right in here so that it really is comfortable. Make this house into a home. Get familiar with the breath. Get familiar with the various ways the mind needs to be cajoled, threatened, whatever it needs in order to get us settled down. But remember, there’s a reward. And the reward doesn’t come only at the end of the path. There’s the reward of well-being that comes when you can be with the breath and be able to sit just with your thoughts, and very few thoughts, and find that you can really be happy here in this protected space inside.

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