

Housecleaning

October 17, 2013

The mind's real home is right in the here and now. One of the most natural places for it to settle is right at the breath, because that's where the mind and the body meet. But the mind doesn't spend much time at home. It's usually off travelling around. It'll occasionally come back home, run through for a bit, grab a sandwich, and then head out the other door. As a result, the home is not in good shape.

When the time comes to settle down and try to stay right here, you notice it's like a house that hasn't been looked after for a while. It's just filled with all kinds of junk—things that have come into the house on their own and things that you've brought in from all your travels. You just drop them off here and run off again.

Sometimes it seems very difficult to find the breath in the present moment because there are so many other thoughts and issues cluttering up the mind. And then there's the simple fact that the body often, in the present moment, is not all that comfortable. When you really focus on what it feels like to be here, there's tension here, tightness there, and pain in this and that spot. So you have to think of the meditation, especially when you're just beginning to settle down, as housecleaning.

Your first reaction may be, when you see the mess in the house, to want to run away again. But if you keep on running away, the mess won't go away. And you have to keep coming back, coming back. Especially as you get older and have trouble running off, you find that this place where you have to stay is not in good shape, and yet you find yourself forced here more and more often. So try to develop the attitude you'd have when you realize the house is a mess and you've really got to tackle it. Roll up your sleeves, put a dust mask on your face, and get to work.

The first thing is to realize that whatever thought comes into the mind while you're meditating, you don't have to get involved. A good thing to remind yourself is that, say, you suddenly remember something that somebody said a while back, and all of a sudden you're tied up in why you didn't like what they said or what you should have said in response.

Then there's the pain that comes up along with that: You're actually manufacturing that pain right now. Because where's the contact? The contact of what they actually said, when it made contact at your ears—that's long gone.

What you've got now is the contact at the mind. And you have the choice to continue with that contact or not. So ask yourself, "Why do you want to continue with it?" Try to reflect on the fact that you're the one who's creating the problem right now—and it's totally arbitrary, totally unnecessary. Use that thought to help let go, and then get back to work with the breath.

Keep in mind the fact that the breath is not just there at the nose; it's the energy field in the entire body. And it's one of the few qualities of the body over which you can have some control. You can make some adjustments. It's called the bodily fabrication because it's the process in the body that responds to your intentions, and it has an effect on the rest of the body. You can make use of that fact to get the rest of the body comfortable. Or at least, if you can't make the whole body comfortable, you can give yourself a spot, an area where it really feels good.

You breathe in. Try to breathe down into the chest, down into the area of the heart, and make that refreshed. If there's a lot of tightness in your heart, find some place in your throat, some place in your abdomen, any place. The closer you can get to the center of the body, the core of the body, the more gratifying the breath can be. Or you can think of the breath doing deep, deep, deep into your head. Any part of the body that you've neglected for a long time: Let the breath do its work.

It'll take time. Some patterns of tension have been there for a long time, so it's going to be a long time before you finally learn how to let them go. Ajaan Lee's image is of rubbing your hand across a piece of wood. You pick up a little bit of the dust each time you rub it, and gradually, over time, the wood gets glossy. But it's not going to happen right away. You have to rub it again and again and again. But have faith that this process really will lead to results.

One image the Buddha uses is of having an adze, which is a carpenter's tool with a handle made out of wood. He says that you, the carpenter, know that eventually the handle's going to wear out, but you don't see how much it's worn out in the course of one day. But gradually, over time, you begin to see the place where you grip the adze because your hand leaves a mark there.

So working with the breath may be slow work, but it's good work. And it will have its results. The important thing is that you stick with it. As you breathe in, think of the breath coming in and sweeping through the whole body again and again and again. It strengthens the body—clears up this little pattern of tension, that little pattern of tension—and after a while, you begin to realize that it gets more comfortable being here. It's easier to stay.

And as for the clutter, take that attitude toward your thoughts that I recommended just now: No matter how real the original issue may have been,

right now it's just in your mind. And so you have the choice of dealing with it now or sometime later. Part of the mind will say that you've got to deal with it now, that it's really important. But you can say, "Well, wait a minute. I've been sitting around all day, and this particular thought hasn't come into my mind. Why is it suddenly important now? I was doing perfectly fine without it." In other words, learn how to argue with the mind's tendency to grab more stuff to clutter itself up.

This way, as you work through the junk in the house here, you find at the very least you've got a corner where you can stay. And over time, that corner gets larger and larger. You begin to reclaim this place as a place where you really do want to stay. But it does take care, and it does take skill. You can't just force yourself here into the present moment and expect the mind to be obedient. If there's no pleasure at all in staying here, it's going to find the fastest way out that it can.

So think of the breath energy sweeping through the body, cleaning things up, and develop the right attitude toward the thoughts that clutter up the mind. Sometimes simply recognizing that this is mental clutter—that's enough for you to drop it. It'll go away, at least for the time being. Other times, you have to actively argue with it. Remind yourself of the drawbacks of a lot of the thinking you get engaged in. When some thoughts are stubborn, you can be stubborn, too. They can be chattering away in one corner, but you've got another corner. You go to your corner. Just stay with the breath. When you don't get engaged in the chatter, it begins to get weaker and weaker. And finally, it just dissipates.

As your awareness of the breath gets more subtle, you can begin to see the thoughts as they begin to gather. It's just a stirring in the energy, and it's right at the border between the mind and the body. Then you have the choice of seeing it as just a bodily stirring or as a mental stirring. It's like when you're working at the computer. You can push a key and get one thing, or you can push Control and then the key, and get something else entirely.

So try to keep the stirring on the physical level. As soon as you see any perceptions coming up saying that this is a thought about that, this is a thought about this, breathe right through them. Breathe through whatever stirring there is right there, and you can nip the thought in the bud.

This way, as you clean things out, you find that this house here in the present moment really becomes a home, a real home where you can stay. You can rest when you need to rest. If you have work you need to do, you can do it right here—because your work is to figure out how the mind causes itself unnecessary stress and suffering, and that work is best done right here. When you're rested, you can do this work. When the work gets tiring, you can just go back and rest again. This home we have right here has many rooms, and the shelter it provides can give you

shelter for all your skillful activities. You begin to realize that this is a really good place to stay. Even as the body gets sick, you can make the present moment a good place to stay.

Use the work to clean things out as much as you can, and then work on your attitude, reminding yourself that this is just a temporary home. You'll have to leave it someday. It's not who you really are. It's something you use while you can, and then you have to put it aside, which may seem threatening because then the question is, where do you go next? Well, you don't have to worry about that right now. As long as you've been doing good things in your life, you go to a good place. Where do the good things come from? They come from a mind that's well rested, a mind that has a good sense of well-being here in the present moment. So when you're working on the present here, you're helping to get the future covered as well.

So survey the house here. Some days it may need nothing more than just a little dusting. On other days, you have to pull things out. There are rats' nests and who knows what else in here sometimes. So you pull everything out and clean things out. It can be a major housekeeping project. But either way, it's good work. If you don't do the work here, where else are you going to live during this lifetime? This is your home base. You're here in the present moment much more often than you're in your physical home because this is where you are, wherever you go. The problem is that the mind doesn't fully stay here. It's off wandering around someplace else and not looking after the home it has to keep coming back to.

Take some time. Realize that it's going to be work, but it's not work all the time; it's work simply as you're cleaning things up. In the same way, when you have to do a major housecleaning, it's not that you constantly have to do a major housecleaning every day. It's every now and then, especially as you're moving back in. Once you're settled in, then the jobs get lighter and lighter. Then the opportunity for rest and the opportunity for doing the kind of work you really want to do—which is to understand the mind—grows more and more.