

Furnishing Your Home for the Mind

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The Buddha recognizes that there's an element of pain and suffering in being on the path. Some parts of the path are difficult, and when you look down the path and then you look at where you are, it seems like it's a long, long way away to the end.

But he adds that the pain of being on the path is a lot better than the pain of not being on the path. The path may seem long but it's a lot shorter than the alternative, which just wanders around and doesn't really get anywhere. And because it doesn't get anywhere in particular it keeps going round and round and around. It's more like swiggles all over the place—whereas the Buddha's path at least goes someplace, someplace amazingly good.

So to overcome the pain of being on the path, you should learn to look at the good side of being on the path and realize that it's not all painful. It's not a path through a desert that finally, and only at the very end of the path, gets you to an oasis. It's a path through some really nice countryside. In fact, some parts of the countryside are so nice that people tend to stop and spend some time there.

Look at the description of right concentration: pleasure and rapture born of seclusion. Seclusion here partially means physical seclusion when you get away from all the concerns of your daily life, all your responsibilities. That right there gives a sense of relief. But the relief is even greater when you develop what's called mental seclusion. Even though you may have carried a lot of baggage here, you can put it out at the gate. All the voices inside with whom you tend to have conversations, you can let them go for the time being. Give them some freedom, too.

Be right here with the breath. When you focus on the path, remember it's one step at a time. Right now, the next step is the next breath, and then the next breath and then the next breath. If you find yourself wandering away from the breath, drop whatever it is and you'll be right back at the breath. You don't have to pull yourself back. This is the natural place for the mind to be. You drop the other thoughts and here you are with your breathing.

Now, to stay here requires several qualities in the mind. You have to be alert to what's going on. And at the same time you have to have some strategies for making this a nice place to be. You're trying to make this your home.

In fact one of the Pali terms for meditation is *vihara-dhamma*: the place where the mind makes its home. How do you make a home out of the breath? Well, the same way you make a house into a home. You bring in some furniture that you like, you decorate the walls, you paint it the color you like. You put some books on the shelves. In this case, comfortable furniture stands for making the breath really comfortable. When you have trouble staying with the breath, use some other Dhamma themes to keep yourself content. There are what they call

the guardian meditations to help keep the mind in line. These stands for the books on your shelf.

The first is recollection of the Buddha. You think of how amazing he was. Here was, someone with lots of potential for having a position of power, wealth, all the sensual pleasures that a person in a position like that could have. And he realized that it wasn't worth it. As a husband and a father, he wanted something better to give to his wife and his child. So he went off, like men would do in those days, to find his fortune. But in his case, the fortune was not material. It was the deathless. As he said, the pleasure that comes from things that can die and leave you—that's not just things of course; it includes people—leaves you emptyhanded. All the effort that goes into maintaining a relationship, all the effort that goes into maintaining your things, your position, your power, whatever: It all goes. And there's the effort: wasted, gone.

The Buddha wanted something of more lasting value that really repaid the effort put into it.—in other words, something where you put the effort in and then you've got something that doesn't change. And he found it. He came back and he taught it to his family and he taught it to all beings. He was teaching anybody who was capable of being taught. That's pretty amazing.

Think of famous people nowadays: How many people can you think of who would actually leave their fame and fortune and power and whatever and go off into the forest and subject themselves to the kind of torment the Buddha subjected himself to before he really found the path? And then would come back and teach it for free to everybody? That's a pretty amazing individual. That's the person who found the path that we're following.

If thinking of the Buddha seems a bit too far and high up for you, you can think of the Sangha. There are passages in the Canon where the members of the Sangha, monks and nuns, talk about their troubles meditating. They found themselves getting waylaid on the path one way or the other. One nun talks about how she'd become a famous Dhamma teacher and then realized she had nothing inside. She realized how empty it was: all the fame and fortune that came from being a teacher. So she dropped it. Some of the monks and nuns talk about how they were ready to commit suicide. They were so upset about how their path of practice didn't seem to be going anywhere. Fortunately they didn't commit suicide. They stopped themselves in time and ultimately were able to get themselves on the path.

Bringing the reflection to this level makes the path seem a bit more human. But you have to remember that the Buddha was human, too. He showed the possibility of what human beings can do. Most importantly, he found that through our efforts we can find something that's deathless, that doesn't require continued effort to keep it going. And when that's a possibility, it's worth our effort to see if we can do that ourselves.

The second guardian meditation is goodwill: having goodwill for yourself, goodwill for other beings. This doesn't mean you're going to love them, or that you're going to look after them. What it means is that you wish them well, whether they're with you or not with you,

whether you like them or not. And what does it mean to wish them well? You wish that they find true happiness. True happiness has to come from each person's actions. We can't *do* true happiness for each other. We can make things pleasant for one another but the true happiness is something that each person has to find within.

So when you're spreading goodwill to someone, you're wishing that the person would understand the causes for true happiness and act on them until gaining the results. And when you stop to think about that, you realize that it's something you can honestly wish for all beings, even people who are currently very evil. It would mean that they'd have to realize that they've been following the wrong path and would be willing to change their ways.

Now, there are a lot of cases where people are not willing to change their ways, in which case the Buddha teaches equanimity. This is for areas where you can't make a difference. We have to live with the fact that there are limitations on what we can do and on how many people we can actually help—or *when* we can help them—based on our karma, their karma. You have to develop equanimity for the areas you can't change, so that you can focus your efforts on areas where you *can* be of benefit, either for yourself or others. Otherwise, you keep pushing against a brick wall with nothing to show for it except the pattern of the bricks on your hands. So equanimity's what brings wisdom into your goodwill.

If you find that you're having trouble staying with the breath, you can use goodwill as a way of reminding yourself that this is why you're here: for your true happiness. It's because you really do wish yourself well. This means that the meditation is not a burden that's being placed on you. There are difficulties in the practice but you're following this practice because you wish yourself well. You're not trying to punish yourself. That attitude of goodwill is another guardian meditation. Again it's like the books you keep in your house to make the house a home.

The third book on the shelf is contemplation of the foulness of the body. Now that may not sound like a book you'd like to have on your shelf, but it's very useful when you realize how many of our concerns in life center around on body. We can do an awful lot of unskillful things in our concern for maintaining the body, giving ourselves physical pleasure, or just assuaging our physical hunger. We can do a lot of foolish things under the power of lust for other people's bodies. So it's good to have this as an antidote.

Some people complain that this contemplation gives you a negative body image, but it's a *healthy* negative body image. An unhealthy one would be if you think of your body is ugly and everybody else's is beautiful. A healthy negative body image is that we're all in the same boat. You take the skin off of everyone and you wouldn't be able to look at anybody. If you put your livers out here on the floor, we wouldn't be able to say who had the most beautiful liver. Then think about all the issues in life that revolve around bodies that contain livers and whatnot. It's enough to give you a sense of dismay.

At the same time, the Buddha has us develop healthy positive body image. In other words, the body is very useful. Without it, we wouldn't be able to meditate, we wouldn't be able to

practice generosity. So he's not down on the body. When we're meditating here, we're trying to fill our awareness with good breath energy throughout the body. So it's not that the body is a bad thing. It's just that you have to learn how to have the right attitude toward it.

So we want a healthy positive body image. An unhealthy positive body image would be one where "My body is more beautiful than other people, I'm better than other people, and I can get away with more, because I'm more beautiful." That kind of attitude is setting you up for a fall, because beauty doesn't last. You see all the things people do to keep scrambling after it, realizing they're losing the youth that they used to have.

So again, this contemplation of the foulness of the body is good for counteracting an unhealthy negative and unhealthy positive image, and replacing it with a healthy negative image and a healthy positive image. This, too, is a good book to have on your shelf in the house—your home of concentration.

The final one is recollection of death. Death is going to come to all of us. As the Buddha said, the purpose of this reflection is to help motivate us to find the deathless. It's not here just to get us depressed. Most people don't like to think about death because they figure, "Well, what can I do? I'm just going to die." They don't think about preparing for it aside from maybe putting aside some money for their medical bills, making a directive for whether they want to be resuscitated or not.

But that's not really preparing for it, because when we die, things don't stop. Consciousness does not have to depend on the body. Consciousness can go simply on craving and find itself in a new body. So what kinds of cravings are you associating with here? This is another reason why it's good to have some seclusion, because our main companions as we go through life are our cravings. When we can't stay with the body anymore, we'll latch on to one of them, or a whole parcel of them. They're like eels. They can go slipping off every which way. So what are the eels that you've got inside yourself right now?

The Buddha has you reflect on death every day. Every morning when the sun rises, remind yourself, "This could be my last day. Am I ready to go? Is there anything in the mind that would make it really difficult for me to go right now?" Well, you probably could think of quite a few things. Those are things you can work on today. Every evening when the sun sets, remind yourself, "I could go tonight. Is there any unfinished business either inside or out that's really important?"

This helps us make the most of our time—because time gets eaten away, eaten away, and it can't be brought back. We can remember it, try to call it back in our memories, but those memories just slip away as well. When the Buddha has us focus on the present moment it's because, as he says, "Death is imminent." We're not here because it's a nice place to be or a wonderful moment or whatever. We're here because there's work to be done, and this is the place to do it: in your mind right now.

So this recollection is good for days when you're feeling kind of lazy or you find yourself

slipping in to unskillful habits, either in your meditation or when you're dealing with other people. It's to remind you there's important work to be done and you don't know how much time you have to do it, so the best time to do it is *now*.

So these are some of the books in your library in your concentration home. In other words, when your breath starts getting boring or you're tired of being with the breath, you can take one of these books off the bookshelf. You could leaf through the recollection of the Buddha, goodwill, contemplation of the body, or contemplation of death. Of course, the purpose of this reading is to make you realize when you're ready to put the book down and get back to the breath. The breath is your anchor in the present moment, so that you can see events in the mind as they come up without getting pulled off into the little worlds that they create for you: worlds of the past, worlds of the future, worlds of someplace else. The breath is your world right here.

So you want to have a sense of being rooted here. Ajaan Fuang used to say, "When you're sitting here meditating, think of roots growing out of the base of your spine going down into the ground." You're solidly here, you're here with the breath. And you find that when you learn how to stay here, this is really a position of strength. When you develop this skill, you can take this strength back with you.

It's useful to have a quiet set of surroundings to work on it, but as you get more used to it you find this really is where you feel at home. And there's no need to leave it. You can be with the breath and still be aware of the world outside, aware of what you have to think about, but you've always got this place to come back to. And because you've learned how to furnish it well, you're familiar with the breath energies in the different parts of the body and the different things they can do: the times when it's good to have a feeling that the breath energies are moving up through the body as you breathe in, the times when it's good to have a feeling that it's going down through the body as you breathe in. Or breathing in and out from every pore so you breathe in into a line that goes down the center of the body and you breathe out from that line. There are lots of ways of exploring the breath energy in the body. And you begin to realize there's a whole repertoire of skills that can be associated with the breath.

So make this place your home. Because it *should* be your home. This is your area of awareness that nobody else can share: what you feel from within, how you feel the body from within, how you feel your mind from within. So fill this space with good energy, because this can be the foundation for all the other good things you do in life.