

A Home & a Mobile Home

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One of the standard terms for concentration is *vihara-dhamma*, which can be translated as “a home for the mind.” As you focus on the breath, you want to get the mind so that it feels at home here, in a home that’s solidly built and a good place to stay. Otherwise, the mind goes roaming out looking for scraps outside to give it a little bit of pleasure. But as you go roaming around, of course, you’re not protected. There’s no roof over your head, no floor under your feet. You’re exposed to all the weather. So come back inside.

Part of having a house, of course, is that it has to have a good foundation. In this case, we’re trying to stay with the breath consistently as our foundation, regardless of whatever comes up. Some things that come up are obvious distractions and other things are not quite so obvious.

We were talking today about a sense of mental well-being that can come as you stay with the breath. But it comes and goes for a while. And there’s the temptation to try to stick with that and make it last, but if it doesn’t have a good foundation, it won’t stay. That kind of pleasure, even though you can make it last for a little while as you focus on it, eventually is going to come tumbling down because you’ve left your foundation, which is the breath. So you get back to the breath.

It’s like building a house. Sometimes you can build a house on a weak foundation and it’ll stay for a while, but it’s not going to last very long. You need a solid foundation. The problem is that a solid foundation takes time and sometimes it can be discouraging. When we started the monastery, for years people were giving donations and it all had to go in the ground. We had to improve the road not only in the monastery but also leading in to the monastery. We had to spend a lot of money on water pipes. And after everything was agreed on, the county suddenly decided that maybe someday someone’s going to build a house up there in the mountains so we want to make sure the water pipe here is big enough, and that added lots to the cost of the pipe. People would come out and say, “What’s happened to all the money we’ve donated?” We’d say, “It’s in the ground.” There wasn’t much to show. But now that all the foundation is in place, we can build. And the buildings will last longer because of the work we put into the ground.

So it’s the same with the meditation. It takes time to get this foundation going, but it’s well worth the effort. It may not show its results right away, but if you have this foundation well set, then when the time comes to build on it, what you build is going to be solid. It’s not going to collapse.

An important part of this foundation is learning how to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of pleasure. All too often we hear that meditation is just about watching pleasure come and go, watching pain come and go, watching things and getting out of the way to let these things happen on their own. But, as the Buddha said, that’s not the role of

mindfulness. The role of mindfulness is that if you see something is skillful, you remember to give rise to it. You don't just let it come and go. And if it seems like it's going to go, you remember to do what you can to prevent it from going. If it's not arising, you remember to do what you can to make it arise. That's when he says mindfulness becomes a governing principle in the practice.

So in this case, in order to keep the mind from running out after pleasures outside, you have to give it a strong sense of pleasure within. At the same time, as you have that sense of pleasure within, you find it becomes a good foundation for more skillful actions. If you have sense of irritation inside, it's very easy to speak and do things through that irritation, and all too often those are things that you later regret. So you owe it to yourself and to other people to learn how to give rise to this inner sense of pleasure and how to maintain it.

What's special about this house is that we also learn how to pick it up and move it around with us. We make it a mobile home. In other words, this is a skill you want to develop not only while you're sitting here but also as you go into life. This may be what the Buddha meant when he would use a phrase with regard to meditation: that you give it a grounding, or literally, give it a building site, and you also you give it a means of transport: Literally, you give it a vehicle.

The ground is when you're sitting here well-established, solid here in the present moment, without any other things to distract you. Little noises outside maybe, but the outside distractions are minimal. You're dealing totally with inside distractions and you want to learn how to fend them off so that they don't take over the mind.

One important skill is learning how not to go chasing them around. In other words, just as you don't go chasing after feelings of pleasure, you don't go chasing after your distractions. You stay here with the breath. The distractions will come and go. You have to learn that you can be aware of the breath in the midst of the distractions. After all, the distractions don't destroy the breath. All you have to do is emphasize that part of your awareness, the breath part. Other thoughts, even though they may be there in the mind, don't have to take over. And as you don't pay attention to them, they lack their food. Because this is what feeds them: when you pay attention. So even if you just pay attention to them enough to chase them away, they've got you.

It's worth noting that that sutta where the Buddha talks about the various techniques of dealing with distractions is named after this particular technique: relaxing around the distraction. In other words, you sit here breathing. You stay with the breath, have a sense of ease with the breath, and then as other distractions come in, you begin to realize that they're connected to a sense of disturbance in the breath. So you smooth that disturbance out. Breathe right through it. And the distraction goes away. It doesn't have any place to take a stance. In other words, you don't let it have a building site, you don't let it have a grounding. You give your awareness, your ardency, your alertness, your mindfulness a grounding in here instead.

As in Ajaan Chah's image of being in a house with only one chair: If you let anybody else take over the chair, they're suddenly in charge of the house. So you have to sit in the

chair and you have to stay there. Anything else that comes in the house has to stand. That way you're in a more comfortable position. You're in command. You can order them around.

So first we give the mind a grounding as we sit here. Then we give it a vehicle. In other words, we learn how to carry it with us out into our daily lives. This doesn't happen automatically. You have to consciously take the perception of breath or of space in and around you—that this is *your* space, and the space is filled with good breath energy—and learn how to carry that with you.

It's like walking and chewing gum at the same time. There are some people who find that hard. But most of us have learned a long time ago that there are different things that you can do at the same time, and this is one thing you want to do: being able to walk around and carry this perception of breath or the perception of your space inside. This is your safe territory. And you want to have a sense of well-being in here, because that enables you to bring well-being into all your interactions with other people. That's your strength. And the ease of the breath is the nourishment for the well-being of your mind. Otherwise, the mind gets hungry and then it turns into something else.

So do what you can to maintain this perception of breath energy. One way of using this perception is that, instead of thinking about the world surrounding you, think of your awareness of the breath surrounding your awareness of the world. You can turn tables on it. The world is moving through. It's like your awareness is a theater and the world is the show on stage. The theater encompasses the stage. So there's breath all around your awareness of what other people are doing, what other people are saying. The breath as larger.

You can use those images the Buddha gives of the entire earth or the entirety of space—or of the River Ganges, which is broad and large. He uses those images to describe the quality of immeasurable goodwill, but you can use them to envision your awareness of the breath as well. It's solid. It's deep. It encompasses everything you see and sense. So instead of taking the little bit of breath in your body out into the world, you basically allow the world into this larger arena of your breath.

Again you're in charge. That doesn't mean you can order people around, but you're in charge of what you let come into your mind.

Another useful perception is of a force-field around you. The breath is flowing well: It's like electricity flowing well in a generator, creating a magnetic force-field as it spins around. You can have a similar protective shield of breath energy around you, so that other people's energies don't penetrate yours. And you see them clearly. The force-field doesn't block your vision. You see what they need. And you're in a better position to provide it, because you're not feeling threatened by their energies.

If someone comes with negative energy, it just goes right past. You don't have to suck it in. All too often, when we want to sympathize with somebody else, we subconsciously suck in their energy. We think that that's being open to them, but it's not helping them at all. And it's certainly not helping us. Because then it weakens us.

So you want to maintain your strong energy inside, a healthy energy, an energy of well-

being. You've learned how to create this sense of well-being through the breath energy. Now learn how to maintain it as you're sitting here and as you carry it into the world. Give it a grounding, give it its vehicle, give it its means of transport, so that wherever you go, you're at home. You've got a solidly based home while you're sitting here and a good mobile home to take you around. This way you're at home wherever you go.