

A Room of Your Own

November 10, 2005

What you're doing as you're meditating is creating a room of your own here inside the body, here in the present moment, a room where you can keep your own diary and not worry about who reads it—in other words, a place where you can inspect your mind in all honesty and not have to engage in denial or in other forms of covering up things from yourself.

To do that, there has to be a sense of comfort, a sense of ease. That's why we work with the breath, because otherwise coming into the present moment can be threatening and not at all a place you'd like to have as your home.

At the same time, you try to engage in some restraint in terms of what thoughts are going to come in, what things you're going to welcome in from the outside. That's because, in the beginning, this place that you're going to make a room of your own is a bus station. All kinds of people come in, all kinds of people go out, and they do all kinds of things while they're in there. You feel threatened and unsure, so you put up barriers inside. But many times, those barriers are precisely the things that keep your own mind hidden from yourself.

So the first thing you've got to do is close the windows, close the doors, and get everybody out. Any thought that comes into the mind is not going to be entertained. Just try to stay with the breath. Think of the breath as filling the whole body. Whatever parts of the body you find are comfortable, stay with them. See if you can begin to spread that sense of comfort into other parts of the body as well.

If there's pain in your stomach, focus on your back. If there's pain in the back, focus on the stomach. In other words, try to resist the mind's tendency to obsess with the pain, obsess with the discomfort, or to feel that it has to check out every possible threat coming in. Stay with what's comfortable. Learn to see if you can maximize that sense of comfort. Sometimes just leaving it alone allows it to maximize by itself. Other times, you have to work with it a little bit.

Try to get familiar with what works, because there are many energy channels throughout the body. If you've got a sense of comfort in one of the nodes, you can see where the other nodes are and try to connect them. In that way, you can begin to dissolve away some of the uncomfortable spots. Many of the spots stay uncomfortable—tensed up, tightened up—because they're used to being ill-treated. But if you can learn how to be gentle and perceptive with the comfortable spots, then the uncomfortable spots will feel less threatened by your attention and

they can begin to open up. They, too, can be brought into the compass of the sense of ease, feeling at home in the body. Some of your inner barriers begin to break down.

One of the important aspects of having this sense of comfort is that it allows you to be more honest with yourself about unskillful things you're doing, unskillful things you've done. You can look at them with a sense of ease, a sense of confidence, now that you've got a good place to stay. You see that recognizing your unskillful habits doesn't mean that you're a bad person, because you've obviously got evidence here that you've got good things going as well.

That's what's meant by pouring everything into your diary, being confident that nobody else is going to read over your shoulder. In other words, your own tendencies to get very judgmental, very negative, very remorseful or upset: You can keep them at bay. You can be a lot more level-headed with yourself when there's a sense of well-being right here, right now.

This is one of the reasons why concentration can lead to insight. The mind senses more stillness, so it can see ephemeral things more quickly, see subtle things more easily, because its own movement is not disturbing your field of vision. At the same time, the sense of comfort allows you to deal with uncomfortable things and yet not feel a sense of being overwhelmed or threatened by them. If you find that something *is* too much for you to handle, you can just drop it for the time being. There is wisdom in not taking on everything all at once.

Once you start feeling at ease and at home here, you can begin to bring up issues. Where is there still tension? Where is there still stress? Where is there still a sense of being burdened here in the mind? Then you can begin to see what you're doing that's adding to that sense of being stressed or burdened, and you can stop it without any recrimination about what a stupid person you are—or whatever bad habits you tend to attribute to yourself. You can just drop that whole dialogue entirely.

In this way, a lot of your inner barriers to insight start breaking down. Ignorance creates walls in the mind—or ignorance is itself the wall. And it's supported by desire, ill will, all the unskillful habits we have of not wanting to be honest with ourselves about our intentions or not wanting to be honest about the results of our actions.

It's when the mind is still and at ease that it can start becoming more honest. This is why you can pour everything into your diary—be really open with yourself about your feelings, about your thoughts—not just for the sake of self-expression but because you really want to see what's going on and to straighten it out so that you cause less suffering to yourself.

So learn to take advantage of what feels good inside. Learn how to maximize it. As Ajaan Lee once said, if the entire body were uncomfortable or in pain, you couldn't live. You'd have to die. But the fact that there are comfortable places in the body to which you can retreat gives you your starting point. Work on fostering that. Work on nourishing that sense of well-being. Then, when you want to start analyzing your thoughts, understanding your motives, looking at your behavior both in terms of what you do and say outside and also what you're thinking to yourself inside, you can see things more clearly. You can begin to pass judgment on what's skillful and what's not skillful, not in a judgmental way but an intelligent way, a useful way.

“Judgmental” means that you come to quick judgments without really seeing all the evidence. “Using your judgment” means being discriminating and wise in how you evaluate what's going on. And that wisdom allows you to change your habits, drop what's unskillful, nourish what's skillful, and generally engage in right effort. That way, the present moment really does become a room of your own.

In Pali, they call it “*vihara dhamma*,” a home for the mind: a place where, as they keep saying in the suttas, you can enter and remain. In the beginning stages of the meditation, you generally leave it as you leave meditation. But as you get more and more skilled, you realize that you can be here all the time because the present moment is here all the time, the body is here all the time, the breath is here all the time. And you get more and more skillful at staying here even when you're dealing with other people, taking on other activities.

In other words, it's not just the case that wherever you go, there you are. It's that wherever you go, you're at home.