

Building a Home for the Mind

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The texts often talk about concentration as being a home for the mind—*vihāra-dhamma*: the place where the mind can settle in. Before you can settle in, though, you have to build a house. As Ajaan Lee said, the work in building this house is in the directed thought and evaluation. You find a topic that you like to think about, and then you evaluate it here in the present moment.

For example, with the breath: You've got all kinds of breathing that you can focus on, or you can start with the breath energies in the body. Some people find that easier to focus on those energies than on the in-and-out breath to begin with. Just scan through the body. Notice where there's any tension or tightness. Think of it relaxing. Then move on until you've been through the body several times. As you do that, often you'll find that the in-and-out breath has found its own rhythm that's just right for the quality of the body.

The important thing is that you're focused on the sensations in the present moment: That's what you're thinking about and evaluating. It's not as if you're thinking about someplace else or analyzing things in abstract terms. You're asking very practical questions, "How does it feel?" "Is this a place where you can settle in?" "How is the living room?" "How is the dining room? Is it big enough? Or do you feel cramped or tight?"

Okay, you've got to expand the house. Think not only of the body but also of the area immediately around the body. Can you sense that? Is there an energy field there that you can sense? Some people can; some people can't. But if you can, how do you make use of it?

That's a lot of what the evaluation is about. It's like looking at the lumber and the other things you've got for the house to figure out: What can you make with this lumber? You might have had one house in mind, but when you actually get your material you see, "Whoops, this wasn't what I thought I was getting or what I can do anything with it." Well, make the best of what you've got. If in some parts of the body the energy is hard to work with, work around it. If there's a blockage some place, think of the breath as going right through it. If there's a pain in one part of the body and the more you focus on it, the more it seems to get worse, then ask yourself, "What is my perception adding to the pain? Can I think about the pain using other perceptions?"

So the evaluation here evaluates both the breath and the other physical aspects of the body, and it evaluates what the mind is doing, to see what can be changed.

One perception game that I find useful is if you feel that there's a pain in your back, tell yourself, "Suppose that pain is actually a pain in the front of the body, and I'm misperceiving it." Hold that perception in mind—that it's actually in front. Then you find that the energies in the body will move around. Sometimes even your posture will change a bit. You've learned something about the power of perception; you've learned something about how you relate to the body, how your awareness relates to the body. And you begin to realize that there's a lot to explore in the present moment.

Someone asked me the other day what I found interesting in the breath. To begin with, there's so much to explore in the area of how your awareness relates to the fact that you have a physical body here. It's just an awareness, so how can it do something with the body? How can it move the body? Why is it that your perceptions change the way you sense the body? How does this all work? What's going on in the present moment? If you can get interested in that, you've won half the battle right there. Because this house is not just a nice place to rest and then go out and look for entertainment somewhere else; you find that there's a lot of entertainment right here in the house. There's a lot to learn about in the house, because it's not just a house of lumber and shingles; it's a home of your awareness in this body. You've taken up residence in this body. You've been with it for a long time, so what's actually going on here with this relationship? There's plenty to study.

Then there are the different elements or properties: earth, water, wind, fire. Breath, of course, is part of the wind element. On cold days like this, it's good to have something warm inside, so where are the warm parts of the body? Or the parts that are warmer than others? Think about those; evaluate those. See how you can integrate them with the breath.

If this is too much, say, "Well, I just want to rest." You work at building the house, but you can't work 24/7, so you rest in what you've got. Find a little corner where it feels comfortable, and you can gain a sense that you'd like to stay here for a while.

Someone was telling us about a meditation teacher who would get into different levels of concentration but wouldn't stay there very long because they weren't pleasant. That's not right concentration. Right concentration has to be a place where you can settle down and stay for long periods of time with a real sense of pleasure. So you have to check to see if the amount of pressure you're putting on the breath is something you can put up with for long periods of time. Or are you putting on too much? If it's too much, back off a bit and find what's just right that you can stick with for long periods of time. It's not as if you push, push, push

and then break through to something. You stay here and learn how to be balanced right here. The more precise your awareness of what's going on, the more precise your sensitivity to what's going on, then the more solid and balanced the breath becomes, the more solid your concentration becomes. The more solid your concentration, the clearer your awareness of what's going on inside.

So you're evaluating the breath, evaluating the way the mind relates to the breath; and when there's a sense of pleasure that does come, you evaluate what to do with that. How do you spread it without ruining it? If you push on it to spread it around, it's not going to be pleasant any more. Pleasure has to radiate, has to glow, or sometimes it'll flow. But you can't push it. All you can do is open up the different channels of energy and see what happens.

It's in this way that you develop a place where you can settle in and stay. When the work is done—the directed thought and evaluation work—then you can rest in deeper levels of concentration because the whole body has been worked through, cleaned out. It's as if with directed thought and evaluation you're sweeping through the body—getting rid of all the cobwebs; getting rid of all the dust. When they're gone, you can settle in, become one with the breath: unification of awareness, as the Buddha calls it. There's a sense of flow and no sense that the flow is going to stop. It just flows and you're right there.

The Buddha's image is of a lake fed by a spring. One of the Thai ajaans called it still flowing water—the mind is still but there's a sense of flow in the body. And you allow that to mature. You settle in.

A lot of the work of the concentration as you're going to go from one level to the next is just a matter of *really* settling in. If you find someplace where you haven't settled properly, dig away at that like a dog that's found a root or a stone getting in the way of the place it wants to lie down. It gets up, scratches it away, and then lies down, and there's an even greater sense of ease.

At this point, you don't have to count the levels of concentration you go through, just start asking yourself these questions. This is what the work is all about. Settling in and then noticing, "Okay, it's not quite right." Back up a little bit, check things out, evaluate again, and when you can sense what's wrong, okay, fix that, and then settle in again. If you don't see anything wrong, just stay right there. Let the mind gain a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. As the Buddha said, you want to indulge in this sense of well-being, because it's nourishing for the mind. Ajaan Fuang called it the lubricant of our practice, to keep things flowing smoothly, not running dry or creating a lot of friction. You get a greater and greater sense that you really belong here, that this is a good place to be. You don't feel any great need to move.

Some people are afraid that when they get into concentration, they'll get stuck there and won't be able to get out. You can get out easily; in fact, concentration is one of the easiest things in the world to leave. The stuckness they're afraid of is the fear—and it's a legitimate fear—that they'll crave this so much that they'll get upset about anything that disturbs it, and they'll always keep wanting to run away to their concentration, and not deal with the issues of the world or their own other inner issues.

Okay, that can be a problem. But first develop the concentration, because those problems can be solved. The problem that can't be solved is if you're afraid to do the concentration and don't do it, if you're afraid to settle in, afraid to stay. Actually, as you're practicing, you're looking for a place to stay for long periods of time, because there are lots of issues in the mind that you won't be able to understand unless you watch them for long periods of time from a very steady point of view.

As you deal with the troublemakers in the mind—the defilements and other unskillful qualities—you have to realize that they have all kinds of tricks. And only a very steady gaze can see through some of those tricks.

So this is what you need. Find an object that you can stay with, and if it's not quite right, you evaluate it and adjust it so that it's something you can stay with for long periods of time, without a lot of in-and-out, in-and-out. It's like riding in a car: If the driver's foot isn't steady—it goes up and down, up and down—it's not a pleasant ride. You want to be able to settle in so that you can stay steadily here.

As for whatever level of jhana it might be, you can put those questions aside. Right concentration is not focused on jhana; it's focused on an object like the breath. The quality of jhana itself comes from being really settled and doing your proper concentration work, so that you can settle in even more. Because you want this quality of awareness that allows you to be steady and to watch other things that are very subtle. This connection may take a while to understand, to watch and to see. So try to get a state that can stay steadily here, so that you can do the work you need to do that goes further than concentration and leads you to something that's even more solid and even greater refuge than your little home of concentration.

Think of concentration as a little shack that you build as part of the path. Build it well because you're going to be on the path for a while. And learn the lessons that come with staying steadily here with one object. Your sensitivities will become improved. Your standard as to what counts as pleasure will get heightened. It's the steadiness that makes all the difference in the mind.