

Working at Home

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A traditional Pali term for concentration is *vihara-dhamma*, a home for the mind. It's a place where the mind can stay. But it's also more than that. As with any home, there's more to the home than just the bedroom. And there's more to the home than just living in it.

First you've got to build it. And for many of us, that's the hardest part right there: getting it built. You put up a few posts and they fall down. You put them up again, they fall down again. But you can't let yourself get discouraged, because you need shelter. You need a place to keep your valuables. You need a place to rest. And you need a good sheltered place to work. Otherwise, you work out under the hot sun or the cold of winter.

So you've got to get the shelter built. You put up the posts again. If you stick with it long enough, you can put up at least something that'll stay. Lean a few pieces of plywood against each other, wrap some plastic around them, and you've got at least *some* shelter. Then as you get better and better at building, you can build yourself a better and better house until you've got one that's able to give you shelter from most of the vagaries of the weather. You've got a comfortable place to stay.

But then you've got to maintain it. This is the next difficulty in the practice. For many of us, once we get the mind into concentration, the immediate question is: "What next?" The mind just sits there and doesn't do anything, and we get antsy. Well, at first you've got to learn how to let it sit there and not do anything for long periods of time, not to give in to the antsiness. That requires skill: making sure you don't get bored, making sure you don't lose your focus, noticing when it begins to unravel, when it begins to fray, and learning how not to get complacent about repairing the little frayed ends.

So as soon as the slightest leak develops in the roof, you've got to fix it. Otherwise mold sets in and the whole house begins to rot and fall apart. In other words, there's a skill in maintaining the concentration. You learn a lot about the mind in the course of the maintaining. If you take the meditation into your daily life—in other words, trying to keep centered in your center as you go through your various activities—you begin to see very clearly where your attachments are, where the *asavas* are, the ways your mind flows out to things, barging right through the walls of your concentration.

This means you've got a double duty. One is to try to train the mind not to go barging through the walls; and two, to fix up whichever walls have been knocked down. In this way you're learning both about the mind's defilements and the skills you need to be a good repair person. As you replace the wall, you learn more about walls. You may be able to take what used to be a plywood wall and put up a stone wall in its place.

So the maintaining is an important part of the concentration *and* an important step in developing discernment. But to gain that discernment you can't simply use the meditation as a place to hide out at the beginning or end of the day. You have to carry your concentration with you throughout the day so that you can

use it as a way of gauging the movements of the mind and learning whatever skills you need to rein the mind in when it goes barging out.

So those are two of the steps in having a home. One is learning how to build it, and the second one is learning how to maintain it.

The third step is learning how to put it to use. For this step, it's good to think of the home as having several rooms and not just one. For most of us the concentration is just the bedroom. It's the place you go to rest and that's it. But even there you can learn how to use the concentration for more than just simply resting. As in the story of the princess and the pea: When you lie down on your mattress, are there any peas under the mattress? Can you sense them? In other words, is your bedroom really as comfortable as it could be? You can learn a lot just by investigating the bedroom and finding out where the irritants still are. If there's noise outside, how can you insulate the windows so that the noise doesn't come in? Like those hotels in airports where they've learned how to insulate the windows so you don't even know that the planes are taking off or landing: How can you insulate the mind? Is it better to shut the windows, or to leave them so wide open that the noise goes through and doesn't get lodged anywhere? And what can you do to make the bed more comfortable? There's a lot to be learned right there, for it heightens your sensitivity to even the least little bit of stress that the mind is creating for itself in the very process of staying concentrated.

But there's more to the house than just the bedroom. There's also an exercise room, a kitchen, a woodshop, a scientific laboratory. In other words, it's a working home, a craftsman's home. What this means is that you learn how to use the concentration not just as a place to rest, but also as a place to do your work. To start out, the work can be something very simple. If you've got a big problem in daily life, for instance, a good way of dealing with it is to pose it as a question in your mind before you meditate. Tell yourself: "At the end of the meditation session, I want to think about this issue."

And then put it out of your mind. Don't let your mind go there while you're meditating, while you're trying to get it into concentration. Only at the end of the hour, or however long the session may be, do you bring up the issue again. And now you're looking at it from the point of view of a mind that's strong and well rested, and the issue should be clear—or at least clearer than it was. Just pose the question in your mind and see what comes up. You may find that the new perspective of having the mind still and open makes the solution a lot easier to see.

Many people think that once the mind is in concentration you can't let it rest there; you've got to do vipassana right away. Well, yes, you do need to develop insight, but before you get to the really subtle work of insight, you've got other issues in your life that you have to sort out first. There's a tendency called spiritual bypassing, where people don't want to face the big issues in their lives, so they use the meditation as an escape, an avoidance strategy, claiming that if they can solve the subtle issues of insight, that'll solve their issues when they're off the cushion. But you can't really deal honestly with the subtle issues of inconstancy, stress, and not-self when you haven't sorted through the blatant problems you cause in daily life.

This is one of the reasons why traditionally they didn't have such things as meditation retreats. You went to monasteries. And in monasteries, there was time to meditate, but there were also other duties in the course of the day. There

was work to be done. You had to interact with the other people in the monastery to at least some extent. And in the course of that work and those interactions, you learned a lot about the Dhamma: the Dhamma of generosity, the Dhamma of virtue, the Dhamma of patience, equanimity, goodwill—all these other virtues that are an essential part of training the mind.

The idea of creating meditation retreats came basically in the late 19th or early 20th century, the same time when the assembly line was invented, breaking jobs down into little tiny parts that you do repetitively. This approach to physical work was efficient and effective, so it became the model for a lot of meditation retreats and for the methods taught on those retreats. You take one method and you just apply it again and again and again. But a lot gets left out in that approach. It's like exercising only one muscle in your body, so that the muscle gets strengthened all out of proportion to the rest of your body. And that can't be healthy.

It's better to think of meditation as a training for the whole mind, as exercise for the whole mind. You have to train the whole mind in all the virtues of maturity and heedfulness. In other words, you need to develop the ability to anticipate dangers, particularly dangers in your own behavior, and to figure out what you can do to prevent them.

You also need to master skillful suppression, the ability to say No to a state of mind that you know is going to lead you down the wrong path. Traditionally this virtue is associated with the attitudes of shame and compunction. In other words, you realize that unskillful behavior is really beneath you. "Shame" here doesn't mean low self-esteem; it actually means very high self-esteem, realizing that your worth as a person shouldn't be squandered on shoddy behavior. Compunction is realizing that if you follow a certain action, the results are going to be bad, and so you want to avoid that kind of behavior.

You also want to develop what psychologists call sublimation, the ability to counteract the desire for an unskillful pleasure by finding a more skillful pleasure to take its place. This is one of the reasons why we have the practice of concentration. The mind wants pleasure, so you give it a pleasure that's harmless, blameless, that it can tap into whenever it wants, so that the impulse to go after less skillful pleasure won't be so strong.

Then there's altruism or compassion. You have to learn compassion for the people around you, compassion for yourself. And you need a good sense of humor. I don't know the Pali term for a sense of humor, but you see it throughout the texts, especially in the Vinaya: the ability to laugh at the foibles of human nature that led monks and nuns to do unskillful things. Many of the origin stories for the rules really are humorous. They teach you to laugh at that kind of behavior, but it's a good-natured laugh. It's not nasty or mean. It's the recognition that we all have had those impulses, and we can see the foolishness in giving in to them. The virtue of humor is that it allows you to step back and separate yourself from what you're laughing at. As the Greeks used to say, the gods laugh. In other words, the gods are up there on Mount Olympus looking down on human beings below, and because they have that sense of distance, they can laugh at human behavior. So when you can laugh at yourself, you're putting yourself in a godlike position, a small-g god, separate from your foibles and above them.

These are some of the virtues developed as you learn how to live wisely with other meditators, live wisely in a group. Psychologists call these virtues healthy ego-functioning, and even though the Buddha never talked in terms of ego-functioning, he definitely did teach these virtues as part of the path.

So you try to use your concentration as a tool in developing these virtues in the course of the day. Take some quiet time and then look at your behavior. This is like having a bedroom with a workshop right next to it. You get rested and then you can go to work. And even though you may not be directly applying the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the five clinging-aggregates, you're learning to take a problem-solving approach to issues in your life, which is precisely the Buddha's approach. The four noble truths are a problem-solving approach, focused on the problem of stress and suffering as a whole, and offering a solution to the problem. As you first start applying this approach to the obvious issues in your life, you learn to develop maturity around the application of this teaching. The work then gets more and more subtle, to the point where your workshop turns into a scientific laboratory and you're discovering new things about quarks and muons. You can take your precise scientific equipment and learn more and more precise things about what's going on in the mind, working from the large issues or the blatant issues to the more subtle ones.

This is how skill gets developed. You can even extend the image of the house to the point where you start studying the house itself. Take your microscope to look at the beams and the carpet, to analyze the molecules in the air. There's lots of stuff in the house to study. And it's all right here.

So if you get the mind still and find yourself wondering what to do next, the first answer is that you've got to take care of the stillness. Remember: It's a house. It's not a movie show. You're not looking for entertainment. The house doesn't have to be entertaining. The prime requisite for a house is that it's restful, that it offers good shelter. But then the Buddha saw that you can do more with a house than just find shelter and rest. You can make it a working home.

In other words, you learn not only how to build and maintain your home, but also how to use it as your workshop. You not only develop and maintain concentration, but you also put it to use. This was the big difference between the Buddha's approach to concentration and that of his two teachers. His two teachers saw concentration simply as a place to rest, and that was it, whereas the Buddha said, No, you can actually work in here as well. There's more to be done than just resting. You work and analyze, you discover new things about the mind. And if you're still looking for entertainment, that's the best kind of entertainment there is: the joy of developing a skill, the joy of discovery.

So it's good to have a large sense of what this image of *vihara-dhamma* or home for the mind means. You learn how to build it, you learn how to maintain it, and then you use it as your workshop, working from crude problems up to the more subtle ones. So whatever stage you're in—the building stage, the maintaining stage, or the working stage—remember to keep this image in mind so that you get the most use out of the home.