

Your World to Practice In

February 25, 2023

We sit here meditating with our eyes closed to get rid of disturbances, to get rid of distractions as much as possible. Focus on the breath. Be fully aware of the breath in the body. When the Buddha classifies the breath, he doesn't classify it as a tactile sensation. In other words, it's not the feeling of the air going over the top of your lip or the tip of the nose. It's one of the elements or properties, *dhātu*, in the body itself. That's something you can feel anywhere in the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out.

In some areas, it'll be more obvious than others. So you start out in one of those areas. Where's the movement that tells you, "Now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out"? Focus your attention there. Notice if it's comfortable. There should be a balance: not too long, not too short. You start with long breathing to wake up the body. And depending on how much oxygen you need, you can stick with long breathing for quite a while if you want. But there comes a point where it gets tiresome, so you let it calm down. Adjust it, fine-tune it so that it feels good—like Goldilocks with the porridge: not too hot, not too cold, just right.

Try to develop a sense of stillness in the body. Don't squeeze the body as you breathe in or as you breathe out. Don't even try to mark a very clear line between when it comes in, when it goes out. Think of the breath breathing the breath. The breath energies are already in the body. As they move, the in-and-out breath moves with them. When you think of the breath in this way, then it's easy to have a sense of fullness, a sense of ease in the breathing.

Years back, I was teaching in Malaysia, and I was told that laypeople shouldn't be doing concentration practice because it's so hard. They should just do mindfulness practice instead. But an important part of the concentration is that it gives your meditation a sense of refreshment, a sense of nourishment. When the Buddha compares the different parts of the path to a fortress at the edge of a frontier, concentration is the food that keeps the soldiers alive, keeps the gatekeeper alive. The soldiers are right effort. The gatekeeper is right mindfulness.

Laypeople's lives are pretty frazzling. They wear you down if you're not careful. So, having some nourishment like this every day should be part of your regimen to refresh the body, refresh the mind, and to get you back in touch with your awareness right here in the present moment.

And to gain some seclusion. That's one of the five factors that the Buddha describes as creating a good environment for your practice: finding some seclusion. If you can't go out and get some physical seclusion, at the very least develop some mental seclusion, where you're far away from thoughts of sensuality, far away from unskillful thoughts. They might be there nibbling at the edge of your awareness, but you don't try to feed on them. Feed on the sense of well-being that comes from the concentration.

Then, around that seclusion, as you go through the rest of the day, you can engage with the other aspects that the Buddha describes as being ideal for creating a good environment: One is keeping the precepts. Another is knowing moderation in conversation. Try to talk about things that are conducive to the practice. The Buddha has a list of topics that are useful for the practice, so that you stay away from talk about wars, alarms, kings—in other words, what most of the news is nowadays. Instead you talk about modesty. You talk about contentment. Listen to people talking about these things. Unentanglement: This is not the sort of conversation you hear very much. So you have to look around for Dhamma talks that address issues like this, to make sure your values are right.

And be very careful about your words. This is part of the precepts already. But there are a lot of things that would be true, that wouldn't break the precepts, but still not be all that beneficial. Think about the Buddha's rules for what he would say: things that were true *and* beneficial *and* right for the time and place. He talked about knowing when to say things that are critical, when to say things that are pleasant. But having a sense of the right time and the right place to say things goes beyond that. That's something you learn with practice.

Another aspect of developing a good environment is to practice restraint of the senses. For a lot of us, when we hear that, we think of putting blinders on, which is not the case. It simply means being very careful about how you look at things, how you use your senses. After all, you're trying to clean out the mind while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, so don't clutter it up when your eyes are open.

And don't develop bad habits. We're trying to get rid of greed, aversion, and delusion as we meditate, so have the same values as you go around outside. When you look at something, when you listen to something, ask yourself: Why am I looking? Why am I listening? Who's looking? Who's listening? Is it greed looking? Is anger listening?

Ajaan Lee and the other forest masters talk a lot about this: the currents that run out of the mind. It's not that greed, aversion, and delusion come flowing into your eyes and ears. They *direct* your eyes and ears, all too often, flowing out as you

look and listen. So you want to take command so that you have wisdom looking, mindfulness looking: qualities of mind you can trust. The Buddha's image for restraint of the senses, as I said, is not putting on blinders. It's putting animals on leashes.

But simply trying to hold some restraint over the senses is really hard unless you have a sense of well-being inside. This is where the meditation connects with daily life. If you learn how to breathe comfortably, with a sense of satisfying breath filling the body while you're sitting here, why leave it when you get up? After all, the breath goes with you. Your awareness goes with you. All the elements that are needed go with you. It's just a matter of priorities.

We tend to stash away our meditation, fold it up like we fold up the blanket we're sitting on, and then leave it. But that gives you a bad balance sheet in the course of the day. If you sit and meditate X number of hours and then just leave the body, leave the breath the rest of the day, you don't get much of a chance to really enjoy the breath, develop a sense of feeling at home here, feeling that this is your default mode.

When you have this sense of well-being, it allows you to step back from your greed, step back from your anger, and not let them take over your senses. Then it's a lot easier to assert control over them. As I said, the Buddha's image is of the animals on the leash. You've got a monkey, a dog, a crocodile or alligator, a bird, a snake, a jackal. You tie leashes to them and then you tie all the leashes together. If you don't have a good post to tie the leashes to, then they'll pull and push and pull and push, and whoever's strongest among them will drag the others with it. Among those, the alligator is the strongest, so it'll probably drag all the animals—snakes and birds and monkeys—down to the river, where they'll drown.

But if you have a post—and this stands for mindfulness of the body—you tie the leashes to that post. Then they can pull and pull and pull as they like, but they're not going to go anywhere very far. That's why you're able to keep your senses on a short leash, keep your defilements on a short leash, so when the time comes to sit down and meditate, you close your eyes, and the mind is not that far away. Your awareness is not that far away. Your thoughts haven't wandered that far away.

Things incline more and more inside, which is where they belong—because after all, where's the problem of suffering? It's inside. Where's the cause of suffering? It's inside. The solution is also inside. So you want to stay close to inside, right here.

This connects with the final element of creating a good environment: having right view, remembering that what you do is a lot more important than what

happens to you. What you do is more important than what the world is doing. Regardless of what the world is doing, you want to make sure that you look after your actions, that you're clear, mindful, and alert.

You see, as you get more and more sensitive to your actions and your intentions, that the Buddha's right: If you want to look for the cause of suffering, it's not going to be out there. There are horrible things happening out there—that's for sure. There are people who are all too happy to start wars, blow up things. They could blow up *you*. They probably wouldn't think twice.

But you can't let that dissuade you from doing what's right, because when you leave this life, what are you going to take with you? Not what other people did to you. If you do take that with you—in other words, thinking thoughts of revenge—that's going to pull you down. Instead, you take your actions with you, so make sure your actions are good. Take your wisdom with you. That means you've got look inside. Make sure you don't carry a lot of craving and clinging with you.

The image the Buddha gives is someone who's being swept downstream in a river. There are grasses growing on the bank of the river, and the person getting swept down tries to hold on to the grasses to keep from getting swept away. But the grasses get pulled out, and some of them have sharp edges, and they tear at your hands, cut your hands. So the only safe course of action is that you've got to learn how to get out of that river. That's what we meditate for.

So what you're doing is creating an environment that revolves around the meditation. Instead of bringing meditation into daily life, you're bringing your daily life into the meditation. This becomes the point where you focus most of your energy: trying to understand where you're clinging, where you're craving, how you can learn to stop. That's going to be delicate work, which is why the meditation is necessary, why seclusion is necessary: so that you can see your own mind, know your own mind, in action.

As you get to know your own mind like this, it's a lot easier to continue with all the practices that create the right environment. It's a lot easier to exercise restraint over the senses, a lot easier to stick with the precepts, to value seclusion, to be careful, very careful, in your speech, in your conversations. All these elements help one another.

This is how you create your environment as a meditator. We talk about going out into the world. Well, each person has his or her own world, created by his or her own actions. So when you take these standards as a guide, this is how you create a world that's really good for the practice. Wherever you are—in the monastery, out of the monastery, at home, wherever—it becomes a world devoted to the practice, because after all, the world outside doesn't have much of a

direction. As the Buddha saw on the night of his awakening, it just goes around and around and around. It never arrives anywhere.

So when the world doesn't have a real purpose, you can give your own purpose to your life. Create a world around you that has a purpose. The purpose is freedom. Restraint of the senses, restraint through the precepts, restraining your conversation may seem confining, but remember what's really valuable about freedom. Freedom is the ability to find true happiness, to choose to find true happiness, to choose to do what's skillful. And the ultimate freedom, of course, is the ultimate happiness, free from suffering. But that ability to choose is what takes you there.

So despite the emphasis on restraint, the ultimate message is freedom. As the Buddha said, just as the ocean has the taste of salt wherever you go in the ocean, all the Dhamma has the taste of release. You can take that everywhere with you as well.