An Environment for Practice

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There's a discourse where the Buddha talks about five qualities that a new monk should develop or should pay special attention to. The five are useful not only for new monks, but also for old monks and for lay people, because they're about creating the environment for your meditation practice. All too often, especially in lay life, we think that we can simply stick the meditation into our lives as they already are, and somehow the influence of the meditation will seep out and spread into the rest of our lives automatically. But it doesn't work that way.

Meditation requires an environment where we make special space for it. And you have to look at your life to see which parts of your life really are not helping your meditation at all, and be willing to make changes, be willing to make sacrifices.

So it's good to think about these five qualities and how they apply to your life. The list is pretty short. One is being very strict in your precepts. The second is showing restraint over the senses. The third is trying to speak as little as possible. The fourth is finding wilderness or secluded place to stay. And the fifth is having right view. So let's reflect on them one by one.

Being strict in your precepts: For the monks, this means the 227 precepts plus all the other extra ones in the Khandhakas. And, as is explained in the Vinaya, the precepts for monks serve several purposes, internal and external. Some of them are there for training the mind; others are there for creating calm, peace, and harmony in the community; still others are there so that the community inspires respect. If monks are squabbling or competing with one another to get fancy things, it doesn't inspire any support for the community. And not only does the individual monk who's breaking the precepts suffer, the other monks suffer as well.

But the really important precepts are the ones that train the mind and foster harmony within the community. A peaceful community, where people are getting along, is the ideal place to meditate. If there are squabbles, if there are rivalries, it creates a bad atmosphere. A lot of time is spent on maneuvering, strategizing, trying to get people on your side whenever there's a conflict. That's wasted energy.

So you want to live in a way that promotes harmony, that promotes a sense that we're in this together. Theravada is often accused of being too individualistic, where you're looking out for your own skin and not caring about other people.

But you look at the way the Vinaya sets out the life of a meditator, and you can see that that's really an unfair accusation. You want harmony. You want to work together because if you're in a community of people who are serious about their practice, that helps *your* practice, gives you an extra little oomph. When you see other people being meticulous, it inspires you to be meticulous as well. If you see other people trying their best not to continue a particular squabble or inflate it, you start thinking about your behavior.

As for the rules that deal specifically with training your own mind, one of the best ways of seeing your defilements is to put obstacles in their way. As I've said before, you don't know the strength of a river until you try to build a dam across it. The hidden currents that lie under what seemed to be a still surface suddenly reveal themselves for how strong they are.

So look at each of the rules as an opportunity to learn about the strength of your defilements. The rules, particularly the ones that you rebel against, force you to focus in on exactly why you want to rebel. What's the problem? Which part of your mind feels constrained by the rule? None of the rules get in the way of nibbana, but a lot them get in the way of your particular defilements. This is one of the best ways to see them.

This applies not only for the monks' rules, but also for the five precepts. They're not general principles that you apply when you want to and forget about when you don't. You make them a promise to yourself. These are the principles by which you're going to adhere, no matter what. You're not going to let your behavior overstep those rules. Then, when you find yourself wanting to overstep them, you can look into the issue. Where does this wanting come from?

When you see it, you've caught a defilement. It's like catching a fish. When you catch it, you can examine it. Otherwise, as you wade through the water, it just brushes up against your leg underwater, and you have a vague idea that there may be some greed, anger, and delusion in there, but you don't see the actual instance of how it arises, how strong it can get, and the ways it can argue its case that in the past you've so often fallen for.

Well, here's your chance not to fall for them. You've got a rule on your side. You say, "No, I'm not going to kill. I'm not going to steal. No illicit sex. No lying —not even the least little bit of lying." You're going to lie even as a joke, which is what most of America humor is. "No intoxicants, period." When you run up against something solid like that, you get a chance to see the defilement in action as it bangs his head against the rule and says, "This is not the right time for that rule. This is a silly rule. It's an ancient rule," whatever. Just hold on to your promise to yourself, and that way, you get to see the mind.

That right there creates a very important context for the practice. Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was teaching a retreat at IMS, one of the last question they had on the last night was, "How do we carry the practice into daily life?" Ajaan Suwat mentioned the five precepts, and a lot of people were offended. "He's giving us Sunday school rules," one of them said. But the precepts are not Sunday school rules. They're an important part of meditation. They help you catch your defilements, so that you can see them clearly for what they are.

The same with the principle of restraint over the senses: The Buddha here is not saying, "Don't look, don't listen." He's saying, "Be careful about *why* you're looking, *why* you're listening. What motivates you to look at something? What motivates you to listen to something?"

This contemplation serves two purposes. One, you find that the more you look at things that are unhealthy for the mind, the more deeply ingrained they become. But more importantly, you get to see your intentions in action. As the Buddha said, if you see any unskillful mental qualities being developed by your looking or your listening, you can tell yourself, "Don't look there. Don't listen there." Or: "Change the way you look. Change the way you listen." If you're looking for something that's going to incite lust, look for its ugly side. If you're listening to what other people saying to get involved in some sort of conflict, try to listen in a way that you can end the conflict. Find common ground.

Anytime that you catch yourself looking or listening or smelling or tasting or touching things or thinking about things with a motivation or intention that's not quite honest, turn it around. This serves two purposes. One, you really get to see your intentions in action. Two, you learn how to resist bad habits and create good new habits in the mind. How many times have you looked at a beautiful body and just kept looking for the things that make your lust even grow stronger? It's an old habit, and we have lots of defense mechanisms around it. But now make a new habit. Look for the ugly side. Look for the unappealing side. Just keep at this again and again and again. Make it a new habit. You find that you create a better environment for your practice of concentration, a better environment for the development of insight.

The third principle, speaking little, keeping your conversation to a minimum: When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, that was one of the principle he set out. He told me, "Before you say anything, ask yourself: Is this necessary? And if it's not, don't say it, period. Because in meditation, we're trying to control the mind. And if you can't control your mouth, there's no way you are going to control your mind."

So even when things that are true, you have to really be careful about how much to say. Try keep your words to a minimum. Speak what achieves your purpose and stop right there. A lot of disturbance, both for yourself and the people around you in a community, comes from just running off at the mouth, saying things because they're amusing or whatever.

This doesn't mean you have to be grim and serious. There is a time and there is a place for humor. But don't overdo it. Get a sense of how much is enough and then stop right there. You'll be amazed at the effect on your meditation.

It also gives you insight into how you create your environment, because so much of our environment is verbal. It's not just the physical things we have around us, but it's also the words that are in the air. If you keep churning out worthless words, people will stop listening to your words. When they don't listen to your words, you create trouble for yourself. You create trouble for them. So try to have each word you speak serve a purpose. And then leave it at that.

The rules for politeness in a meditation community are very different from those in lay society. When two people sit alone in a room and don't say anything, it's not because they're angry at each other. In this environment, it's because they're focusing on their minds. It's understood that that's okay. Not only okay, but actually desirable. Back when I was living in Thailand, most of the time I was the only Westerner. Toward the end of Ajaan Fuang's life, we had a French monk come and stay with us for three months. One morning, he and I came back from our separate alms rounds and set out the food for the meal. Neither of us had anything to say. So we just did everything we had to do, had our meal, finished it. And it turned out there was a Thai person watching us. He came up afterwards and said, "This is really amazing. Westerners can do this. They can be quiet. They know how to respect each other's space. They know how to respect each other's concentration." He had imagined it wouldn't be possible.

So that's the third principle for creating a good environment.

The fourth is finding a wilderness place, a secluded place to stay and meditate. Going into wilderness really does something to the mind. It helps cut you off from all the assumptions and values you happen to pick up from the people around you, the people you choose to be with, the people you happen to come into contact with throughout the day—all their ideas of what's important, all your ideas of what's important about you. When you go out into the wilderness, the values are different. You really have to be careful. You have to be very heedful because the support network out there isn't the same. The way of living intelligently among people is one thing; living intelligently in the wilderness is something else. It really fosters heedfulness, which means thinking carefully about what you're doing, and

the consequences of what you're doing. And also taking good long look at what's really important in your life.

You're going to meet up with difficulties. Things in the wilderness aren't as convenient as they are when you're living with a lot of people. It's great training in endurance, resilience, finding out what your strengths are, finding out where your weaknesses are, and what you can do to counteract those weaknesses. You really get to see yourself. Sometimes what you find out about yourself is encouraging, sometimes it's discouraging, but don't let yourself get discouraged. We've got the training.

That's the fifth quality, which is having right view. This is one of the reasons we don't send monks out right to the wilderness right away. You have to hang around people who have been practicing to get a correct sense of what's important about your mind. When things come up in the practice, what are the things to focus on, what are the things not to focus on, what are the real important issues in life?

The Buddha once made the point that a large part of wisdom lies in knowing which questions to answer straight out, which questions need to be reformulated, which ones have to be dropped, which questions require counter-questioning. This principle applies not only when you're talking to other people, but also when questions come up in your mind. What's really important in your life? The Buddha says the whole issue of the unnecessary suffering you're creating for yourself: That it's important. Yet we have all sorts of other agendas, all sorts of other issues that we carry around with us. It takes quite a while to learn how to drop those issues and to focus on how you're creating suffering for yourself, as opposed to what you thought was important. You really need some major shift in where you stand, how you look at things.

Right view is defined in terms of four noble truths. It's basically framed by the question: What are you doing that's causing unnecessary suffering? These are the things you can do to stop. That's it. Those are the truths that are really important. Other truths about all the other things in the world that you can think about, study about, read about, are distractions. They pull you away from the real issue. And it's easy when you're off alone in the wilderness to get involved in your distractions. So a good grounding in right view is necessary.

You have to keep coming back to what the Buddha said was the focus of his teachings: suffering and the end of suffering. And where is it happening? Right here, right now, in the movements of your mind, in the processes in the mind. So you have to learn to look at what you're thinking about, not in terms of the

content, but *how* you're doing the thinking: "What are the motivations? What are the qualities that create suffering in that way of thinking?"

That requires a radical reorientation of how you look at things, and the angle from which you look at things. Bit by bit by bit, as you keep reminding yourself of this point, the mind really does begin to change its frames of reference, changes its perspective on things. Issues that used to be really important to you begin to fade into the background. Things you never noticed before suddenly come into the foreground.

So these are the five qualities that create an ideal environment for your meditation. Notice that only one of them has to do with the actual physical environment. The other four are things you *do*. After all, what you're doing creates your environment. It's as if you're creating a magnetic field around yourself. It attracts things that are useful, and repels things that are harmful.

So pay special attention to this mental environment, the verbal environment, the intention environment, the environment you create with your thoughts, your words, and your deeds, so that you realize that the meditation is not simply a matter of sitting with your eyes closed or walking back and forth on a meditation path. It's a matter of developing good qualities of mind all the time, so that your interaction with other people is not a distraction from the meditation or an obstacle to meditation. It becomes part of the meditation, part of your quest to put an end to suffering.