

## *Comfortable as an Outsider*

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We suffer largely because of the way we talk to ourselves. That's what the message of the four noble truths is all about. It's not that we suffer from sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. We suffer because of the commentary we apply to these things. And a lot of meditation is learning to talk to yourself in new ways. In fact, the whole practice is about talking to yourself in new ways, asking new questions—and when you ask new questions, you get new answers. How do you create suffering for yourself? What are the steps? What are the steps in the way away from the suffering? What do you have to relearn? What old habits do you keep? What new habits do you have to develop?

These are questions that are best asked when you're alone, when you're talking to yourself. The problem is that we don't always live alone. We very rarely have time alone now in the modern world. Our space is invaded; our minds are invaded. This has always been the case with every domestic culture where people try to domesticate you so that you live nicely within the culture. Even in societies where they have rites of passage where people go out alone, they have very set ideas of what you're going to find when you go out alone. You're going to be looking for a totem animal or spirit guide. And whatever message you gain, they'll have their ways of incorporating it back into regular society.

One of the things that's radical about the Dhamma is that a large part of it is not domesticated. It's a wilderness Dhamma. The Buddha was able to straddle wilderness and civilization, but it was his time in the wilderness that enabled him to get away from the questions of his civilization and see that they were the wrong questions. The hot topics of the time were: "What are you? Do you have a self? Do you not have a self? Or how about the nature of the world: Is it eternal? Is it not eternal? Who made it? *Did* somebody make it?" That kind of thing.

And one of the things that drove his contemporaries crazy when the Buddha was teaching was that he wouldn't answer these questions. He had another set of questions entirely. It was by holding to that alternative set of questions that he was not sucked back into his society after his awakening.

This is something you'll have to learn how to protect: this ability to be with yourself even when you're with other people.

And part of it's just that: realizing that a lot of people are asking the wrong questions and trying to get *you* involved in the wrong questions. And to the extent that you have to live with other people, work with other people, you do have to

take on some of their questions but you have to take them on with a sense of being disjoined from them. A Dhamma practitioner's always something of an outsider. And learning how to practice both on your own and with other people means learning how to be comfortable with that role. It takes time and it takes determination. Because a lot of us don't like being outsiders. We want to fit in.

I found this during my time in Thailand. We had a lot of work projects around the monastery, and Ajaan Fuang was really good about not forcing me to get involved, but there were times when I had to. This meant we had to work together on a project, talk together about the project, and we could bond around the project. But he was always very careful to make sure that I didn't bond more than that. And of course, the fact that I came from a different culture meant that as I got to know some of the other people in areas outside of the project, whatever the project was—usually construction of some kind—I began to realize these were people I never would have connected with outside of that particular context. I looked at some of their values in their daily life and I told myself, "I'm glad I don't have to get further involved with them."

But in order to maintain that stance as a comfortable outsider, you have to get comfortable inside your skin, comfortable with your practice. Otherwise, you feel that you're the only person making yourself miserable this way, cutting yourself off from others. There's that great passage in the Canon where a monk is meditating off in the forest, and his meditation isn't going well. He hears the villagers off in the distance having a nighttime festival and he's thinking about how miserable he is and how at least they know how to make themselves happy. A deva appears to him and says, "Do you realize how many people envy you right now? All those beings who are going to go to hell, they see you going in the opposite direction." The monk came to his senses and realized that what he was doing was really worthwhile.

Now, we don't have devas coming to talk to us that way, so we have to learn how to talk to ourselves in that way. This is one of the reasons we have Dhamma talks online. And it's a reason why we recommend chanting before you meditate. It helps get you out of the issues of daily life so that when you sit down to practice, you come with a different perspective. We have the chants on the different parts of the body to gain a sense of distance from the concerns of the body, the concerns of consuming; reflections on aging, illness, and death and the fact that our actions are our only possessions; reflections on goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. We develop the right attitudes toward the people around us. In other words, we wish them well. But we realize that, often, wishing people well means we have to go our separate ways.

All these reflections are there so you can create a mental space for your meditation, convinced of its importance—and being okay with the fact that it's somewhat cut off. Because when you look at the craziness of the world, you realize you really do want to be insulated from it. Some people will say you're running away, but that's the whole point. Samsara tries to suck you in, and all too often we're willing to be sucked in, to play along. And then our lives get frittered away by things that are totally irrelevant.

So we have to take charge. This is one of the reasons why it's so good that the meditation method we have here is proactive. It reminds you that you do have a large role in shaping your environment. And you want to take advantage of the fact that you have that power, to at least some extent, to shape things. There are so many meditation methods that tell you, "Don't do anything, just accept things as they are".

Last night I was reading a little piece on the attitudes that you should bring to mindfulness practice and one of them, according to the author, is that nothing needs to be changed, nothing needs to be fixed. You have to be convinced that you're beautiful as you are. That's what the author said. But after meditating that way for a long time you'll begin to feel helpless: that you shouldn't be trying to fix anything, that you shouldn't be trying to help anything. It's like those dogs in the learned helplessness experiment. First they were placed in a room where, no matter where they lay down on the floor, they were getting electric shocks. And after being that way for a while, they were moved into another room where half the floor would still give them electric shocks and half the floor would not. The researchers would drag the dogs from one half to the other so that they could see the difference, but by that point the dogs had given up. They were convinced there was nothing they could do to avoid the shocks, so they just lay wherever they happened to be.

And there are a lot of meditation methods like that, convincing you that there's nothing you can do so you might as well accept that fact. But that wasn't the Buddha's approach. Look at his meditation instructions for breath meditation: They're all about intentionally breathing in certain ways to induce certain mental states and certain physical states. You can be aware of the whole body with a sense of well-being throughout the whole body, calming the effect of the breath on the mind, calming your perceptions. These are things you can do.

So when you find yourself getting discouraged or getting pulled into the questions of the world, remind yourself: What are the questions the Buddha would have you ask? Where is your suffering right now? What can you do to change what you're doing to create that suffering? Because it *is* something you're

doing. The cause is something you're doing; the suffering itself is something you do. Why keep on doing it? It's not necessary. So find ways to remind yourself of the importance of this question and how you don't want your time frittered away.

And as for the sense of feeling a little bit estranged, remind yourself that it's good to get away from crazy society. Every domestic society is crazy in its own way. You're doing something that the noble ones would approve of. So keep them in mind. It's not that you're totally alone. There are other good people who are following this path.

Back in the days of the Roman Empire, the Stoics had what they call the cosmopolis. *Polis* meant city; *cosmo*, of course, meant cosmic: the cosmic city. The idea was that this particular city was not determined by *where* you were, it was determined by what you respected. And if you respected reason, you were a member of the Stoic cosmopolis wherever you were.

In the same way, when you respect the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, when you respect your ability to find true happiness, that makes you part of the cosmopolis of the Buddha's *parisa*, the following of the Buddha: those who are asking the questions the Buddha asked, looking for the answers inside themselves.

So as you repeat the chants at night, remember that people all around the world are repeating them. And there are some people actually practicing in line with the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, taking refuge not only in the external Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha but also in the Triple Gem on the inner level: the qualities of the practice, developing right mindfulness, taking refuge in things that are unchanging, things that are free from conditions. This means that you want to learn how not to let yourself be overwhelmed by the conditions of having people around you, and how to keep your internal conversation somewhat separate from the conversations outside. This means that when you're working together, you talk about things that are necessary to talk about. But watch out for conversations that stray away from things that are of genuine worth. You may become a person of few words, but what's wrong with that? As long as your few words are good words, they're a contribution to others.

And part of your own training in gaining some control over your mind is to ask the question: "Where does the suffering come from?" Well, it's coming from within. "What can I do to put an end to it?" Well, you're learning the skills. That's what matters. There's something undomesticated about those questions and those answers. And if they set you apart, they set you apart in a good way.