

A Wilderness Mind at Home

October 13, 2006

Seclusion is an important part of the practice. Coming away to a place like this, where you're away from your normal responsibilities, your normal environment, throws the spotlight directly on your mind. And it pulls away a lot of the barriers to the practice, at least the outside barriers. You're left with the inside ones, but they're a lot easier to handle when you don't have the outside barriers getting in your way.

So while you're here, try to stay focused on this quality of seclusion, not only physical seclusion, getting away from other people, but also mental seclusion. You don't have to pal around with your thoughts of past or future. Try to be right here. That's why we focus on the breath. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment. You can't watch any future breaths; you can't watch any past breaths. They're not here. So as long as you're with the sensation of breathing, you know you're in the present moment.

Any thoughts that pull you away from here you know are thoughts you don't want to get involved with. Do your best to let them go. If you find yourself wandering off and chatting up the past or chatting up the future, just drop the conversations and come back here. Remind yourself that the breath is always here, coming in, going out. And the more comfortable you can make it, the easier it'll be to stay. It'll have an appeal. It's not like you're forcing yourself up against a wall. You're actually providing yourself with a nice comfortable place to stay. Try to make a home in the present moment, where you can be by yourself and at your ease.

The problem, though, is that you can't stay here forever. So the trick is to learn how to develop an attitude of a mental seclusion even when you're not physically secluded. This is especially important when you find yourself surrounded by people who don't share your values in the practice. The dominant culture out there places a lot of value on money, material things, power, influence—what Twigg once called “all those horrible things: beauty, power, money.” Those are the dominant values out there. And meditation, you have to remember, is not just a technique. It's a set of values as well. The values hold the technique in place. They go together.

You have to make sure that your values are strong, so that they don't get trampled by the values of other people. This is why you need to create an environment for yourself through your own actions. This is an important

principle in the practice: that your actions really do create your world. We may be sitting here in the same room, but each of us is in a separate world. And you can learn how to take advantage of that fact. When you're with other people, you realize that those other people have their separate worlds and you don't have to buy into their worlds, as long as you make your world strong. And you do that through your actions: what you do, what you say, what you think.

The Buddha lists five things that he recommends as instructions appropriate for new monks, but they also apply to any meditator trying to create an ideal environment at home.

The first is that you stick with the precepts, because the main environment in your life, the main external environment, is shaped by what you do. The environment you create by killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants, is very different from the environment you create by not killing, not stealing, not having any illicit sex, not lying, not taking intoxicants. It's a very different life.

Someone once asked Ajaan Suwat, "What are the most important instructions for meditating out in lay life?" And he said, "The five precepts." It may sound strange to look at the precepts as meditation instructions, but remember that the Pali word for meditation is "to develop." While you're looking after the precepts, you're developing important qualities of mind: you're developing mindfulness by trying to keep the precepts in mind; you're developing alertness by watching over your actions.

You're developing discernment as well, because you find yourself in situations where it seems tempting to lie, or it might even seem to be the compassionate thing to lie to somebody to prevent them from hearing harsh truths. But once you've made the promise to yourself not to lie, you have to find a discerning way not to lie, and yet not to harm anyone.

The Buddha doesn't tell you to tell all, all the time. His basic principle is that some things are true and beneficial, and some things are true but not beneficial. And he said to avoid the things that are true but unbeneficial. Focus on the ones that are beneficial. So that gives you an important principal for filtering your words. Then you notice that even the things that are beneficial are sometimes pleasing to your listeners and sometimes not, in which case you have to figure out what's the right time to say something pleasing, and what's the right time to say something that's not.

So as you look after your speech in this way, it requires that you be very mindful, very alert, and very discerning, very focused on what you're doing: precisely qualities you need as you're doing more formal meditation.

At the same time, you create a world in which it's easier to meditate. You find that people that you attract to yourself by holding to the precepts are very a very different crowd from the ones you attract by breaking the precepts. And you yourself, when you sit down to meditate, are not dogged by thoughts of the wrong you've done to someone else. You don't find yourself tied up in denial or thoughts of regret or remorse.

So that's the first element in creating a good environment: following the precepts.

The second one is restraint of the senses. Notice how you look at things. Are you looking for the purpose of lust? Are you looking for the purpose of not having lust? You can look at the same things with totally different purposes, totally different results. This again emphasizes the role that you shape in creating your own mental world. There are lots of things out there that you can't help but see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. But the way you go out toward them makes all the difference as to the effect they'll have on your behavior. This is why the Buddha didn't teach just breath meditation, he taught contemplation of the body. When there's lust arising, you can look at the parts of the body that really counteract lust. The body isn't 100% lustworthy. There's a lot in there that's pretty disgusting. And if you find yourself in a situation where lust is not going to be very helpful to your life, you focus on the things that will calm it down.

The same with anger. We feel we get a lot done by anger, but actually the anger is not a help. I mean, seeing wrongs that have to be righted, and doing what you can to right them, is one thing. Getting all tied up in anger over them, though, is something else. And it's not a help, because you start miscalculating the effect of your thoughts, words, and deeds, and you end up shooting yourself in the foot. So you have to learn that when someone does something that really needs to be changed, or undone, or stopped, you have to do it with an attitude of goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people harmed by that other person's actions, and also goodwill for the person who's doing the harmful action, realizing that they're harming themselves in the long run. So you want to try to figure out a skillful way to stop the harm without getting tied up in anger.

When the Buddha talks about dealing with hateful people, he gives the image of someone walking through the desert, tired, hot, and thirsty: That's you living in a world of people you dislike. Because if you're surrounded by bad people, and all you can focus on is their bad traits, you start getting thirsty, you're deprived of nourishment. The water here is seeing the good in other people. So you have to look for it even if, as the Buddha said, it's only as much as the water in a cow's footprint. You treasure it because you're hot, tired, and thirsty.

So, again, it's what you're looking for that makes all the difference in what you see, what you listen for makes all the difference in what you hear, and so on down the line. And it can create radically different environments for how you practice.

The third principle is restraint over your mouth. Try to say only the things that are really worth saying: true, useful, and appropriate for the time and place. If that means you end up saying a lot less, well, fine. Because all too often the trouble we get into with our mouths is when we talk with no purpose at all: when we're nervous, when we think we're creating a good impression on other people, or trying to create a good impression, so anything that pops into our head pops right out the mouth without any security gate to check for bombs and explosives.

You find that often times your own words are more destructive than anything else you do, or anything else out there. So always be clear that when you open your mouth to say something, you have a purpose. You want your words to serve that purpose. Once they've served the purpose, then you stop.

Learning how to cut down on your outside chatter helps to really cut down on your inside chatter as well, because you learn to start investigating your own thoughts with those same principles: What's true, what's beneficial? If it's not true, don't think about it. If it's not beneficial, even if it is true, don't think about it. And try to find the right time and the right place to think about things. Learning these habits in your outside behavior helps a lot in learning how to apply them inside.

The fourth principle is, for the monks, trying to find wilderness for seclusion. For laypeople, it translates into trying to find some measure of seclusion, physical seclusion, wherever you can find it. Create a space in your home that's just your spot for meditating, and don't do anything else when you're in that spot. Cut back on the amount of unnecessary information you're taking in from the media so that you're not cluttering up your mind.

And try to develop an attitude of wilderness mind. Remember what it's like to be in the wilderness: You're out, away from your daily responsibilities. It's just you and nature. All the affairs of the world start to seem really small, really petty, and the concerns that loom so big in your life start seeming a lot smaller. You get more in touch with the big issue in life, which is how the mind treats itself.

So try to develop that attitude as you go through life. Try to maintain periods of physical seclusion, and then try to keep that wilderness mind going wherever you are as you stay with the breath. Because the values of the wilderness mind help to repel a lot of the unhealthy values that come in from society.

The fifth quality that creates your environment is developing right view, which, on the most basic level, means believing in the power of your actions: that

what you do creates your environment more than anything else. Some of the things you experience are the results of past actions, which you can't change, but there's an awful lot that's the result of what you're doing right now. So the more you focus on that, the better the results will be. Don't let yourself get tied up about things coming in from the past that you can't change. Focus instead on what you *can* change right now. That way, you find yourself wasting a lot less energy, and it leads you to focus more and more on your own mind. Because your mind is where your actions come from.

That leads to the second level of right view, which is seeing things in terms of what you're doing that's causing stress and suffering, and what you can do that's going to alleviate stress and suffering. Because that's the big issue in life. Everything we do, we do for the purpose of happiness. And yet so many of our actions bring suffering. This is the big paradox, the big irony in life. Sometimes, the more we struggle for happiness, the more of a mess we create, largely through our ignorance. So you've got to look into what you're doing, and how your actions create stress, and how they can not create stress. And look especially at the actions of the mind. Because you could be sitting here perfectly still, there's nothing oppressing you right now, there's no wind blowing on you, and yet you get blown away by your thoughts. There's nothing weighing down on you, and yet you get weighed down by your mind.

So you've got to look into that. This is why we meditate: to gain a better sense of what the mind is doing, to watch it in action. Look at your thoughts without getting sucked into them. See them simply as events coming and going in the mind, as part of a causal chain. When you think certain ways, what happens as a result? It's not an issue of whether you like or don't like that thinking, just look at what it creates in the mind. If you see that it's wreaking havoc in the mind, you've got to change your thoughts. You've got to change your attitudes.

The Buddha once said that one of the most basic measures of your discernment and wisdom is when you see that something you like to do is causing harm and you're able to talk yourself out of wanting to do it. If there's something you don't like to do that is actually beneficial, you know how to talk yourself into wanting to do it. That's a basic wisdom that underlies all the wisdom teachings, all the way up to the really refined ones like the emptiness leading all the way to release. So try to develop that very pragmatic kind of wisdom.

What this means is that you create an environment where outside influences are pushed out a little bit, kept at bay, so that you can focus on the real issue in life, which is what the mind is doing right now, and how it can learn to do it more skillfully. When you can create this environment through the precepts, through

restraint of the senses, restraint of your mouth, developing a sense of wilderness in your life, and developing right view, you can develop a sense of mental seclusion even when there's not much physical seclusion around you. You develop the values that are an important part of the meditation.

Remember it's not just the technique that's important for the meditation, it's the values that keep it going, that motivate the technique, motivate the practice, that keep you focused on where the really important issues in your life are, right here, right now. Everyone else in the world says the important things in life are things that somebody else is doing some other place. That's the message you've got to resist. The message that tells you that true happiness is impossible so you should focus on the kind of happiness you can buy, teaches you a lot of disrespect for what is the most important issue in life, which is: How can you find true happiness? What, when you do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness? That's another wisdom issue according to the Buddha.

So try to have respect for your desire for true happiness. Have respect for what the mind is doing right now—it's power to change your life. This is what the whole issue of values comes down to: What do you respect? The world out there has a lot of strange ideas of respect. So you've got to watch out for them.

Remember that this is why we bow down to the Buddha, because he gave respect to his desire for true happiness, and then passed the method for finding that happiness on to us. We respect him because he teaches us to respect the most valuable things in our own lives: the power of our actions, the power of our discernment to lead to release. So protect that attitude of respect the same way you'd protect a tiny fire that you're trying to start—as when you set fire to a couple of twigs when there's a wind blowing, and you've got to keep your hands cupped around it until it finally takes. The warmth that comes from the fire, when it really does take, will warm not only you, but also the people around you.