

The Context for No Context

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The Buddha once said that if you look back at your life or your many lifetimes, you won't be able to find a point where you could say, before this there was no ignorance and then ignorance began. We're all coming from ignorance, which in technical terms means that we're coming from a position where we don't really see the four noble truths. We don't see our life in terms of the four noble truths. We have our own terms, our own narratives of who we are, our beliefs about the world, all kinds of knowledge and theories that actually get in the way of looking at where there's stress and suffering, what's causing it, and what we can do to put an end to it.

So ignorance is not just a lack of knowing. Sometimes it's composed of different kinds of knowledge, but knowledge that doesn't look at things in terms that will actually put an end to suffering. When you begin to realize that your knowledge isn't working: That's the beginning of true knowledge. As the Buddha once said, if you recognize your own foolishness, that's the beginning of wisdom; to that extent are you wise. Regardless of how much you may know, if you realize that your knowledge is not putting an end to suffering, there must be some better way of looking at things: That's the beginning of wisdom. And you can cut through your ignorance by learning to look at things as they happen simply as events, whether they're things outside of you or things in your own body and mind.

The Buddha says, practice looking at these things simply as things that are separate. You see your body as something separate, your feelings as something separate; your perceptions, your thought constructs. Even your sensory consciousness: You have to see that as something separate—separate both in the sense that these are individual events that arise and pass away, and in the sense that they're separate from your awareness, your sense of you. You want to pare back your sense of you because as long as you claim something to be you or yours, you can't really see it clearly. There's bound to be a liking or disliking, or holding on that prevents you from seeing when something arises, exactly why does it arise? And what effects does it carry in its train?

This is why the beginning of meditation starts with simply looking at the body in and of itself, simply as a body; or feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, mental qualities in and of themselves, simply as events that are happening, something separate from your awareness of them. This allows you to begin seeing how they fit into the causal pattern that either leads to suffering or leads away from suffering. In other words, we take our experience and take it outside of its ordinary context, our narratives about who we are and how we interact with other people, or our views about the world as a whole.

One of the interesting things about the Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths or on dependent co-arising is that they contain long lists of causes and effects, but they're not placed inside a context. "Who is this happening to?" The Buddha says, Don't ask. "Is there nobody there?" Don't ask. "Is there somebody there?" Don't ask. "Do these things exist or not exist?" Don't ask. Just look at

them as events arising and passing away. Which means that we have to learn how to get our minds out of their ordinary context where we have a view of the world, and based on that view of the world we sort everything else out in those terms. The Buddha wants us to erase that context so we can just see things as they arise, as they pass away, and how they influence one another, simply as events that you can watch in the present moment. He even has us view our world views and self-views in terms of their arising and passing away.

So in that sense, while we're meditating, we're trying to get our minds outside of their normal context. But getting the mind outside of that context requires a certain kind of context as well. When the Buddha talks about the ability to put the mind in this position where you're seeing things arising and passing away, it requires a whole series of aids in the practice, many of which are not just meditation techniques. They go back through the way you act in your day-to-day life: what you listen to and give credence to, what you respect, and the people you hang around with. These things help put the mind in the right context where it can then drop the context.

For example the Buddha talks about how it's necessary to have right conduct in body, speech, and mind. This is why we have the precepts, because if you don't hold by the precepts it's hard to be really honest about what your actions are and what their results are. If you've been harmful to other people, you don't like to think about it. And as we all know, what happens then is either that you think about how you've been harmful and you start getting depressed and tied up in remorse; or you start going into denial: You didn't really hurt them, or they don't really matter—that kind of thinking, which makes it difficult for you to see things as they actually arise and pass away.

So the precepts are meant to support meditation practice. And we listen to the Dhamma as a support for our precepts to keep us on the right path. To listen to the Dhamma, we have to associate with what they call admirable friends, people who exemplify the Dhamma in their actions. This is for two reasons. First, it's hard to listen to the Dhamma and believe it if you see that the person teaching the Dhamma isn't abiding by the Dhamma. Second, there's more to the Dhamma than just words. There are habits, attitudes that can't be put into words, but can be sensed. You pick them up just by hanging around a person.

So there's a social context for the Dhamma, a social context for the practice that puts an end to ignorance: a social context for the ability to develop a mind state that goes beyond social context.

This means that as you're practicing there are two things you want to keep in mind. One is your ability to make the mind strong enough to meditate in any context. And two, you make sure that you're creating the right social context both for yourself and for the other people who are here. Ideally we're here to be admirable friends to one another, to be exemplary in our conduct. We don't have to teach one another the Dhamma. In fact it makes life a lot more difficult for me if you're out there teaching one another.

It's like the man I met from the Yukon. He said if he's out in the forest and he encounters a bear, he's a lot more comfortable if he's the only person there. If there are other people, he finds it harder to read the bear. So you don't have to be teaching the Dhamma to one another, but in your actions you should be examples of the Dhamma to one another. It makes it a lot easier for us to

practice together.

This starts with simple things like showing respect for the place we have here. We're living off of other people's generosity. Always keep that in mind. I've been told over the past week or so that people have been very careless about leaving the lights on. You may have noticed that the generator gets turned on every morning automatically when the batteries go too low. Solar electricity is essentially free, but when we use too much of it, we have to generate electricity, which uses up fuel.

So pay attention to simple things like that. Show respect for the situation around us, for the things that people have provided for us so that we can practice. The practice starts there, and it builds up. When you talk with one another, try to be frugal in your words. Remember that each of us is here to learn how to develop quietude. If your speech is going to disturb someone else's quietude, make sure there's a good reason for it.

Ajaan Fuang always said, before you say anything, if you want your words to help in the practice, ask yourself: Is this really necessary? If it's not, don't say it. As we go through the day, look for the little things you can do to help one another. If you notice some slack anywhere, take up the slack. We're operating on a voluntary system here, what they call an economy of gifts—which means that some things get done, some things don't. If you see that something is not getting done and you're in a position to do it, go ahead and do it. If something's not clean, something's not in order, you're not here serving anybody. We're all here developing good qualities in our minds, and cleaning up a mess is a good way of developing those qualities. In this way our mutual presence becomes admirable friendship, which helps us in the practice.

So you want to help create an ideal environment for the practice, and then use that environment to strengthen the mind so ultimately it doesn't have to depend on a particular environment, a particular context. You can meditate anywhere regardless of the situation. This is a really necessary quality of mind because life is uncertain. You can't always guarantee that this place will continue to be as quiet and as conducive as it is right now. We can't always guarantee that we will stay here. Some of us have to go. Some of us think we're going to stay, but who knows what's going to happen?

This way we're using our context to develop the quality of mind that can drop the context. For example, as you're sitting here right now: As Ajaan Lee used to say, don't think that you're sitting here in a meditation hall. Think that you're sitting way out in the wide open, all alone. There's nobody around for you to worry about. There's simply you and the breath, you and the body. As you focus on the breath and on the body, that sense of "you" sitting there is going to get pared away, too, as you begin to recognize more and more the factors of mind that keep you with the breath, keep you with the body, and the factors of the mind that pull you away. If anything pulls you away, learn how not to identify with it. No matter how intriguing it may seem, no matter how much it may just seem to be your habitual way of thinking, you've got to learn how to drop it, drop it, drop it; step back from it, look at it as something separate, simply as an event that's conditioned by other events and is going to condition other events down the line.

This way you learn how to cut through the ignorance that keeps you suffering.

You begin to see how the different contexts you create around these events place burdens on you, whether they're actively unskillful or just relatively skillful. The fact that you have to create these contexts means that you're constantly keeping them alive, keeping them going. If you don't maintain them, they pass away.

You want to learn how to put the mind in a situation where it's totally free from context, simply looking at events as they arise and pass away. As the Buddha says, ultimately right view gets to the point where you don't see things as existing or not existing. No sense of self gets built up around them. Even the concept of existence or nonexistence doesn't get built up around them. There are just pure events: stress arising, stress passing away. And that's when you learn to see what lies beyond the stress.

In this way, we're trying to create a context here in which the mind can get free of contexts. It may seem strange that we have this double duty, but this is what works. Have a sense of time and place, of when to work on keeping the context here as conducive as possible, and when to drop the context. We all have chores. We all have duties and responsibilities here to some extent. But you have to learn how to wear them lightly. Think about them when things need to be thought about; and otherwise, drop them. Just be with the breath, just you and the breath. Over time there will be less and less you, and even less and less breath.

That's when things get really light, because we see that we don't have to keep maintaining ignorance the way we have been for so long. As Ajaan Suwat once said, ignorance is like darkness. Even though the darkness may have existed for eons, as soon as you light a light, the darkness doesn't have any right to say, "Look, I've been here for a longer time, the light doesn't have any right to drive me away." As soon as knowledge arises, it can cut through the ignorance that's been here for so long. So do what you can to give it the chance to arise, this light of knowledge, both as you sit here with your eyes closed and as you go through the rest of the day.