

A Sense of Time & Place

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When you focus on the breath, you're creating a home base for the mind, a home base for your actions. This is the place where you're going to take your stance: being with the breath all the way in and all the way out—being with the direct sensation of how it feels to breathe, and learning to relate to that in a way that feels comfortable, supportive, energizing or relaxing as need may arise. The important thing is to get a sense of familiarity here, that this is where you belong. This is your primary focus in your meditation.

Ajaan Lee says it's like your home base. He calls it *vihāra-dhamma*, your home for the mind. The mind also has its places to go foraging. He calls them *gocara-dhamma*, the different topics you need to bring up, say, when lust arises, anger arises, laziness, discouragement, and it's good to have those tools ready at hand. That's why we have the contemplation of the body for lust, developing the brahmaviharas to guard against anger and ill will, contemplation of death to overcome laziness, and recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to give us encouragement on the path. There's also recollection of our generosity and our virtue to reinforce our sense of self-worth.

These are places for the mind to forage, to go when it needs a particular antidote to a particular problem. But you can't wait until the problem comes up to start practicing these things. You've got to practice them ahead of time. It's like keeping your tools in good shape. When the need arises, you pull out the saw and it's already sharpened. You pull out your knife and it's already sharpened. Whatever the tool, it's ready for use when you need it. This involves two things: one, having these other topics at hand and, two, learning how to read the situation, so that you know what's needed at any particular time.

This relates to seven qualities of the Buddha says characterize a person of integrity. The first two deal with words: having a sense of the Dhamma and having a sense of its meaning. In other words, educating yourself as to what the Buddha actually taught and what it meant in the context of his teachings. Anyone can pick this up by reading or by listening, and by thinking about the matter and then by putting it into practice. It's not just the reading that allows you to know the Dhamma—or the listening or the thinking—but they're a good beginning. You read about mindfulness and then you have to put it into practice to see exactly what mindfulness means and how it functions? You read about right effort and you put that into practice, to see what it means.

This is where the other five qualities for the person of integrity come into play, because some of these different topics of meditation are for particular times. Mindfulness—the ability to keep something in mind—may be useful at all times, but what is it that you're going to keep in mind for this particular problem right now?

What you keep in mind are what you've heard of the Dhamma and what you've heard of its meaning. But you have to keep in mind the necessity to learn how to read yourself, and that develops only with practice. That's why one of the qualities of a person of integrity is getting a sense of yourself. This can apply both inside and outside: looking at the mind, learning how to read the mind. What does it need right now? Which direction is it inclined? Toward greed, or toward anger? Is this energy level too scattered or is it too low? How do you bring it back into balance? That's the internal level.

On the outer level, you look at yourself as you interact with other people. What is your position with regard to them? What are your strengths and weaknesses? How do you learn how to compensate for your weaknesses? How do you learn to use your strengths to extend them to other areas, where you're not quite so strong? This is something you have to learn from experience. You can learn it only by being observant.

The same goes with the other qualities, such as a sense of enough. Again, this applies inside and out. How much practice with the breath is enough? When do you need to develop your powers of goodwill? How much is enough there? How much walking meditation is enough? How much sitting meditation is enough? How much food is enough? How much is too much? How much is too little? Again, this extends inward and outward.

Then there's having a sense of time and place. *Kalaññuta* is the Pali term. When's the right time to apply a particular teaching? Here in the West we tend to have an absolutist attitude: Take one teaching and just run with it, without learning the nuances. The basic principles are all very simple: You want to do what's skillful and want to avoid what's unskillful. In some cases, it's pretty clear across the board, but in other cases it's more subtle. Because there are times when different teachings seem to conflict. On one hand, you want to clearly recognize what's skillful and unskillful. At the same time, you have to learn how to bear goodwill to everybody, regardless of whether they're skillful or not, regardless of whether you like them or not. You have to learn how not to confuse what you like with what's skillful and what you dislike with what's unskillful, within your own behavior and other people's behavior. You have to learn how to tease this out and figure out what's the right time to apply which teaching.

And then on the external level, what's the right time to talk? What's the right time to remain silent? When is it appropriate to say certain things, when is it not? You can

learn this only by trial and error and by being very observant—both of your own behavior and of the behavior of others.

Then on to the more exclusively social skills: One is a sense of the society you're in—in other words, the group of people you're staying with. What kind of speech is appropriate in a particular group of people, based on their class, their background, the circumstances you find yourself in? In what groups of people is it best to remain silent in and in what groups of people is it best to speak? And what kind of speech do you use? What do you say? This is an important part of the practice. You can't just go and say, "Well, I'm the kind of person who says x all the time." You can't be that person and a sensitive Dhamma practitioner at the same time. You have to develop a range of skills and a range of ways that you can use your speech.

Finally, there's a sense of judging people, not in terms of their ultimate worth, but looking at the people around you and seeing who's a good example for what kind of behavior. If there's a bad example for a certain kind of behavior, you turn around and look at your own behavior. Do you behave in that way? What can you learn from these people?

It's interesting: There's a lot of talk on how we should not be judgmental of other people or pass judgment on others. But those are two different things. Being judgmental means looking at somebody and immediately forming an opinion. But the Buddha has a lot to say on how to pass judgment on other people skillfully, primarily as examples for your own behavior. Who's a good example? Who's a bad example? And what are good standards for judging? You don't judge people by their status, even though you have to be sensitive to their status when you're talking to them. You don't judge them in terms of their value, their worth. It has more to do with the skillfulness of their intentions. How do you read that? You find that over time you can begin to read people. In fact, the better you get at knowing your own mind, the better you get at knowing other people. As you see the different workings in your mind, you realize that this goes on with other people as well. This is an important principle in the practice: learning how to generalize in this way. It helps to develop a sense of samvega about the world.

Sometimes we think, "I'd like to have that social position and I'd like to have this security and I'd like to have things this way." But then you look at people who have things that way, and you have to remember they have the same types of suffering that you do. You begin to wonder: Is it really worth having that particular kind of ambition?

Another time when it's useful to recollect in this way is when you're sitting down to meditate, things are not going well, and you're tempted just to give up and say, "Well I must not have it in me to meditate." But everybody faces difficulties. It's good to

reflect on that, good to remind yourself of that, so that you don't get discouraged. The proper question is, "I'm having this problem, other people had this problem before and they solved it. How did they solve it? It must be solvable. Otherwise we wouldn't have enlightened people." And when you have that confidence that these problems can be solved, that's important step in the direction of solving them.

So learning how to use your powers of judgment wisely, skillfully, is an important part of the practice. And it comes with experience. It comes through trial and error and being alert to the fact that you've got to be sensitive to these dimensions of the practice. That's important to keep in mind, because otherwise we come in with our preconceived notions, whether they're educated or not.

They say up in the wilderness of Alaska that the people who tend to do most poorly when they move into the wilderness are the ones who come with a lot of preconceived notions. They've read up all the books on surviving in the wilderness and they've come up with particular ideas, which may or may not work. But if they just hold to those ideas without testing them, without being willing to grow and develop, and see how far some ideas hold and where they no longer hold: If they don't have that ability to see the nuances and the subtleties, they're not going to survive.

And it's the same with the practice. You may know the Dhamma and you may have understood its meaning. You may have read all the books on the topic, listened to all the great Dhamma talks. But it's in the practice that you learn the subtleties, the ins and the outs, so that your knowledge is not just two of these qualities. You want to have knowledge in all seven. You know the Dhamma and its meaning, you have a sense of yourself, and a sense of enough, and a sense of the time and place, and a sense of the people you're with, and a sense of how to judge people wisely.

So realize that the Dhamma is not just a matter of getting a few instructions and then following them to the letter. You also have to learn how to read yourself, read the situation around you—and realize that you've got a lot of different tools to draw on. You've got to keep your tools sharp and have a clear sense of which tool is right for which situation. It's only then that your practice becomes all-around.