

The Best Place to Practice

July 25, 2010

A question that often comes up is, “Where is the best place to practice?” And the best answer is, “Where you are right now.” Because if you put things off to when you can go to Thailand, or when you can go to a monastery, or when you can get *out* of the monastery, you’re avoiding the real issue, which is, “What’s the mind doing right now to create suffering? What can you do to stop it?” Because that tendency to look someplace else, saying, “Well, I can’t really practice right here because of this or that,” or because the people around you are not conducive, the monastery is too disorganized: That’s just the mind pointing away from itself; it’s your defilements pointing over here, over there—anywhere but where the real issue is right now.

They’re like politicians: When politicians are caught doing something bad, they point someplace else: “Well, somebody else is even worse.” And here the mind’s saying things around you are not perfect—which is true; but then, of course, if you got to a perfect place, you’d be so attached to it that you wouldn’t want to leave. And then you’d never really get to test your practice: Can it stand up to difficult situations? As the Buddha said, one of the important things which you want to look for—in yourself, in the people around you who you want to depend on—is: How do they deal with adversity?

Now, it is true you want a place where you’re not compelled to do immoral things—which is why right livelihood is such an important part of the path. If you’re involved in a livelihood that requires that you develop greed, aversion, and delusion in yourself—or that you’re provoking greed, aversion, and delusion in other people—you do your best to get out.

And there *are* those occupations. I saw a cartoon a while back, showing a hobo holding a sign saying, “Will work for food.” And right next to him was a guy dressed up in a very nice suit holding a sign saying, “Will work for jerks.” There are people who are happy to cheat, happy to take advantage of other people. And there’s a lot of that out there in the world. So if you’ve got yourself stuck in a situation like that, you really do want to get out.

But even then, before you can get out of that situation, you do want to work with your mind, to discover the areas where you *can* develop virtue, concentration, and discernment to minimize the harm you’re doing to yourself and to other people.

But otherwise, when you find the mind gazing far off, wanting to go practice over the ocean—and maybe someday it will be good for you to go over the ocean, but in the meantime you're here right here, right now—you've got to practice right here, right now, because that's where the defilements are happening. That's where your greed, aversion, and delusion are stirring up trouble.

And often in really quiet places like this—where we're observing the precepts, where we have certain boundaries on our behavior, where things are really quiet—it seems as if the defilements are roaring in our ears. They seem even worse than they would be if you went back home. But it's simply the case that they're clearer here. It's where they're clear that you can actually deal with them.

If you're out in a situation where you're allowed free rein to do what you like, they go into the background. They're always there, it's just that they don't show themselves quite as clearly. But again, remember what the Buddha said: If someone is well-behaved when there's plenty of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, you don't really know if you can trust that person, because their defilements are being fed.

It's like dogs: You feed them well, and they just lie around and do nothing. They don't bite. But they still have their dog-habits, their dog-attitudes—which, when they're hungry, can get really provoked. It's not as if they become well-behaved citizens and abandon their dog-aversion, their dog-greed, and dog-delusion. It's still there, it's just sleeping. And the Buddha's attitude is that you're not going to let sleeping dogs lie.

If you want to deal with your greed, you have to put yourself in a situation where you're not feeding it. See what happens as it gets dissatisfied—the same with your lust, the same with your aversion; all your unskillful states of mind. Think of that principle that Ajaan Lee said, “When you practice is when you get to know your defilements.” That's what practice is all about. But once you know them, you don't just leave them there. The fact that you can see them means that you can start dealing with them.

So anywhere where you can see your defilements is a good place to practice. In fact it's the *only* place where you can practice. When greed comes up, how are you going to deal with it? When lust comes up, how are you going to deal with it? Anger, fear, jealousy: This is the real meat of the practice. Our tools in getting the mind concentrated are not to make these things just simply go away by making the mind quiet. We make the mind quiet so that we can see these things in action more clearly. And then you want to use that foundation of concentration—or whatever shred of it you may have when the defilements are roaring in your ears—

to give yourself a place to stand, so that you can fend these things off. At the very least, you don't have to give in to them.

And you begin to get to know them. Instead of *identifying* with them, saying, "This is me; this is my attitude," you see that they're simply something there in the mind. And the question isn't, "Is it *your* thought? Is it somebody else's thought?" Although sometimes it's helpful to think, "Where did I get this particular pattern of thinking? Who did I pick that up from? What's the tone of voice? Is that something I want to identify with?" still, the real issue is: What are you going to do with it? Are you going to give in? At the very least, can you watch it? Can you—in the Buddha's terms—*exert a fabrication* against it? In other words, how does your breathing affect it? How does your thinking affect it? What thoughts are you thinking about when this defilement comes up? What perceptions are you holding in mind? Are you looking for more fuel to add to the fire? Are you just complaining about it?

Complaining about it doesn't do anything. Hope lies in trying to figure this thing out. "Where does this come from? Why am I giving in to it? Why am I feeding it? What gratification do I get out of it? What are the drawbacks? Can I watch it come and go? Is it going to take three days to go, or does it come and go, come and go, come and go?"

Now, there are different levels of subtlety in this coming and going. The more you get the mind to quiet down, the more you realize that whatever the disturbance, it's not 24/7. It may *seem* that way, but that's simply because you're connecting the narrative, connecting the dots. But these thoughts actually come in dots, and you don't have to connect them in that way.

So what we're doing as we're getting the mind to settle down and be still, is making *this* the best place to practice: creating a little arena in the mind where you can actually deal with these things, instead of constantly being enslaved to them—these mysterious dark forces in your mind that you don't really notice or don't really understand. You want to shine the light of day on them, and that means you'll really see your defilements a lot more clearly. The defilements you never thought you had, you suddenly notice, "Gosh, these are there in the mind."

It's not that the practice is causing them; it's just bringing them out into the open. So it doesn't mean that being here, or practicing right here, right now, is causing the defilements. Again, it's *allowing* you to see them. And that's important right there, because otherwise you may be vaguely aware of them, but it's like looking at things through glass blocks: You see these vague shapes, but you don't really know them clearly what's on the other side of this wall of glass blocks.

We're trying to create a window into the mind. And so the stillness of the mind both allows us to see these things clearly, and to take a stance. Once we can take a stance, we can actually start dealing with them.

There was that woman who came to see Luang Puu Dune one time, who said she wasn't going to practice meditation in this lifetime; she was making the kind of merit that would guarantee that she would be reborn in the time of the next Buddha. And the tradition is, in *his* time it's *really* going to be easy to practice. But as Luang Puu Dune he told her, if you just dither around right now, you're going to develop the kind of habits where even in the time of the next Buddha you're still going to be dithering around.

In other words, even if your awakening may not come right now, the habits you're developing right now are the habits you're going to take wherever you're going to go. Those other places where it's "easy" to practice: You get there and you find you've still got the same old habits you've been developing right here. But if you really take on the situation, take on your defilements right now, and find that you can practice in places where it's difficult, where things are not perfect, that makes it that much easier when you find a better place—in terms of the people around you, the situation—to be prepared for it. It's not sitting here thinking about it all the time that's going to make that a good place; it's the habits you develop *right now* that allow you to take advantage of that place, wherever it is.

So this is the best place to practice: right where the mind and body are meeting here at the breath. It's simply a matter of taking advantage of what you've got right here, right now. That attitude is what makes all the difference.