

Practicing on Your Own

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When you practice here at the monastery, you have the help of a supportive environment. The whole place is designed for people to practice: the values that we live by, the fact that you've got other people here also practicing. It helps provide a protective framework for your practice, a place where the practice can be nurtured and grow.

But when you're practicing alone out on your own, *you* have to provide the framework. In other words, you can't just practice in the context of your life as you normally live it, cramming your meditation time into the cracks and hoping it's going to survive. You have to provide an appropriate context.

There are five teachings that are useful to keep in mind. These are the teachings the Buddha gives to young monks, but they apply equally well to laypeople practicing on their own, because in both cases the situation is the same: The practice is not yet solid and can easily go astray. The five are, one, that you hold by the precepts; two, that you practice restraint of the senses; and three, you keep watch over your conversation. In the Buddha's terms this means make sure that what you say is true and beneficial and timely. You might want to throw in Ajaan Fuang's advice that you ask yourself before you say something, "Is this necessary?" If it's not, don't say it. The fourth principle is that you need to find some time of solitude, and the fifth is that you need to develop right view.

Of these, right view is the most important, because we live in a land of wrong views.

Years back I read a book on cultures that were based either on shame or guilt, depending on how the parents taught the children. For example, Japan was supposed to have a shame culture, in which parents would say to the children, "Don't do that. It embarrasses us in front of the neighbors." America was more of a guilt culture. Parents would say, "Don't do that. It hurts me when you do it." This book was written back in the 40's, but I've noticed now that over time America has changed from having a guilt culture to more of a shame culture. In other words, the attitude became, "If I can get away without anybody seeing this, it's okay." And now we don't even have any shame. The attitude seems to be, "If I can just brazen it out, everything's all right."

This runs totally against what the Buddha was teaching, that our actions really do matter and they really do have consequences. You have to recognize what's

skillful and what's unskillful. And these are not things that change from time to time.

There were two teachings the Buddha gave that he said were categorical, i.e., true across the board, true back in India and true now, and true at any other time and place. One is that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. The second was the teachings on the four noble truths: how suffering is caused and where you look for the cause so that you can put an end to the suffering, and what you do to put an end to the suffering. These principles don't change from time to time. You want to hold to these things, because not only does the culture at large tend to dismiss the whole idea of actions with consequences, but you even go to Buddhist retreat centers, you read Buddhist websites and Buddhist magazines, and everybody says, "Don't be attached to views, don't hold too tightly to your views. Have the view of no view," as if karma would work sometimes and not at other times, like the traffic laws in cities—you don't park on this side of the street on Wednesdays but you *can* park on Thursdays.

That's not the way karma works. Your actions always have consequences. You want to keep that in mind. Now, that's not to be kept in mind in a punitive way. Just remind yourself that this is something really valuable you have: You have the ability to act, you have the ability to choose, and you have the freedom to choose wisely and skillfully. Don't let anybody take that belief in your actions away, because that belief is what'll see you through.

We have that contemplation on aging, illness, death, and separation, all of which sound pretty discouraging, but then the Buddha says we do have our actions as our inheritance—in other words, they carry through.

So give importance to your actions, maintain that attitude, hold onto that. Ajaan Chah has a nice example. You're coming back from a market, holding a banana in your hand, and someone comes up and says, "What are you taking that banana for?" and you say, "I'm going to eat it." He then asks, "Are you going to eat the peel, too? Why are you holding the peel as well?" How are you going to answer?

As Ajaan Chah said, one, you have to answer out of desire—that you really want to come up with a good answer. That's what gives rise to the discernment. And of course the discerning answer is that the time hasn't come to let go of the peel yet. If you took off the peel now, the banana would just be mush in your hands. You hold onto the peel until you don't need it anymore.

And it's the same with right view. You hold on to that, and if people say that you're attached to right view, or you're narrow-minded because you're holding to

a view, remember they're trying to take something valuable away from you. Like the story of all the foxes who'd gotten their tails caught in the trap. They had no hair left on their tails, but there was one fox left who had hair on its tail, so they tried to convince him that foxes with hairy tails didn't look up to date. The latest fashion in foxtails now was hairless tails. So don't be foolish and get your tail caught in the trap. Your belief in your actions is a valuable belief, something you want to hold to.

Similarly with right view about where suffering is caused: There are pains that come from outside, but as the Buddha said, the real suffering in the mind comes from the way you approach things in life, what you bring to the situation. If you bring skill to the situation, then no matter how bad it may be, you don't have to suffer. If you bring a lack of skill, you can suffer from anything.

So again, this is pointing to the importance of how you train yourself. And if nobody else sees that it's important, at least you know that it's important for you. You want to hold on to that.

All the other aspects of creating a good environment for your meditation derive from this. On the one hand, when the Buddha says to seek solitude, try to find some time by yourself, this means solitude not only physically but also in terms of getting the mind secluded from unskillful states, the things we tend to pick up in the course of the day as we see this and listen to that. We need time to clean those things out. And it's always good to have some time by yourself to remind yourself that you don't need to get carried away with the views of the society around you.

This is one of the reasons why we go out in the wilderness. You sit on the rim of the Grand Canyon and your values are going to be very different from what they are when you're sitting on the side of the street or sitting in an office working with other people. When you get out in the wilderness, the affairs of daily life seem more and more minor, less and less important. They don't have to weigh down so much on the mind. Even if they are important issues, in terms of your family and your work, you want to have some time when you can put them down.

You also need some time to question the values of society at large: the things that come in through the Internet, through TV, whatever. You want to be able to ask yourself directly, "Do I really believe in these things? Are these things really good to believe? Can I be independent of them?"

The other three teachings are about how you carry through with right view and the perspective that comes from solitude. You realize that your actions are important, so that's why you hold to the precepts—because you want to act in a way that's not harmful. You don't want to kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, or take any

intoxicants under any circumstances. This is going to require ingenuity on your part. For example, with the precept against lying, sometimes you have some information that someone else wants, and they might do harmful things with that information. How do you keep that information from them without misrepresenting the truth? This is going to vary from situation to situation, so following the precepts is not just blindly following rules. You've got a principle that you know you should hold to, and it requires ingenuity in holding to it skillfully.

Restraint of the senses comes down to the fact that the things you look at are going to have an impact on the mind, and the way you look at them is going to have an even bigger impact. You could look at a picture, and greed could go out or anger could go out to feed on it. The picture itself may be relatively neutral, but if your greed goes out after the picture or your anger goes out after the picture, it's going to leave a big imprint on the mind. So when you're looking at something, ask yourself, "Who's doing the looking here?" Is it you or is it your greed or your anger or your delusion? What's the purpose in the looking? What are you looking for? Are you looking for trouble?

If you see the mind is giving free rein to its unskillful attitudes, learn how to look at things in just the opposite way. If you see something that's really beautiful and excites lust or greed, can you look at it in another way? Can you focus on its unattractive side? If something gives rise to anger, can you look at it in another way that doesn't give rise to anger?

Try to see your looking and listening, whatever, as part of a process. They come from the mind in the way you look at things, and also they're going to come back and have an impact on the mind. So it's not just innocent things passing by your eyes or ears. There's a causal process going on that comes out of the mind and then comes back into the mind, and then through your actions goes out into the world.

As for your speech, try to be very clear about why you're speaking. One of the hardest types of wrong speech to avoid is idle chatter—speaking about things without having any really clear intention in mind, just to fill up social space or to provide some social grease. If you realize that your workplace does need a little bit of greasing up for the things to flow smoothly, put a little grease on it, but make sure it's not too much. Otherwise, when you start opening your mouth without any thought about why you're opening it, then other things come out besides just friendly chatter. And again, this stuff comes back at you. In the meantime, the fact that you've been thinking about these things and sending your mind all over the place just to talk means that the mind is going to have trouble settling down when the time comes to sit and close your eyes to meditate.

So right view lies at the basis of all of this, and you want to be able to protect your right view and act on it. That's what provides the context for your practice as you go in the world. This is how you stay rooted in the Dhamma.

Years back, when we were first setting up the monastery here, people would come and say, "This tradition you've got here is not going to fit in America unless you change it like this, or change it like that, or change it the way basically I want it," they would say. We resisted that, and the reason I gave is that we're far away from the ajaans here. Back when I was in Thailand, being around the ajaans, you felt close to them and there was a sense of security that came from being with good people, wise people, people with reliable values. Here we're far away from them. If we cut ourselves off from the things they taught us, it's like cutting ourselves off at the root. We'd just be drifting around. And it's the same with right view. As you take right view into the world, that keeps you rooted in the practice, rooted in the values of the Dhamma, and it's only under conditions like that that your practice, like a plant well nurtured and strongly rooted, can thrive.