

Clearing Your Space

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There's a modern retelling of the King Arthur legend called *The Once and Future King*. In it, Arthur, when he's a young boy—he's called Wart—is being trained by Merlin the magician. Part of the training is that he gets turned into different kinds of animals, to see the world from their perspective, to learn what wisdom the animals may have.

One time he's turned into a wild goose flying across the North Sea. He finds himself in formation with other geese. He gets in a conversation with a goose next to him, and they talk about where they're going. The goose next to him, a female, says, "One of the problems of this island where we're going is that other flocks of geese come and chase us away from our feeding grounds. They make life difficult. We have to keep fighting them off." So the young Wart says, "Why don't you just kill them?" She looks at him with horror and moves away from him, "How can you think of killing your own kind?" That's the lesson.

This is what human beings do: They kill their own kind. Other animals don't. Other animals, their wisdom is that you have to live in a world where there are going to be those of your own kind who make life difficult, but you have to put up with the difficulties. You don't go around killing them. That means you have to carve out your own space, push the difficulties aside, and take your little space as enough.

This is what we do as we practice. If we had to straighten out the world before we could sit down and practice, not only would it be an impossible project, but also a lot of evil would get done, as there are a lot of people who would not fit in with our ideas of what we want. If we started killing them off, we'd get further and further away from the Dhamma. We have to put up with the fact that this is an imperfect world. We're developing our perfections, but the world around us will always be imperfect.

We have to look after our own space. This principle applies to the practice in general. As the Buddha said, we're living in a world where other people are breaking the precepts, but we don't break the precepts. Other people are in conflict, but we don't get into conflict.

We can't expect the world to be perfect. If you're looking for perfection, you have to look inside. And even inside, there are certain things you have to put up with. Sometimes you sit down to meditate and there are pains. Sometimes the

pains go away when you get up from the meditation, while others are more persistent.

So what do you do? You read the instructions in the Canon where they say that through concentration you develop a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of rapture, and then you let it work through the body, saturate the body so that there's no part of the body that's not saturated with rapture and pleasure. You read that and you ask yourself, "How do I do that? The pain is there; it's not going to go away." The answer is: You work around it.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a house where some of the floorboards are rotten. If you were to lie down on the rotten spots, you'd fall through. So you lie down on the good spots.

I had a student one time who had bought a house. It was in a lovely spot, but it had been abandoned for about ten or twenty years, and a lot of druggies had moved in, in waves, come and gone, come and gone. The house was a total wreck, but the basic foundation was good, the basic structure of the house was good. It was just that the inside walls and the finishing were pretty much destroyed. So he got the house at a cheap price. He was a handyman, so bit, by bit, by bit, he fixed up the house. The first thing he did was to work on the room where he would live. Just that one little spot: He made that livable, and then from there learned how to make the whole rest of the house livable.

This is what we do as we meditate: You find one spot in the body that you *can* make livable through the way you focus on it, through the way you breathe, the way you conceive the breath going in and out of that spot. You protect that spot. As for the other parts of the body that you can't make nice, that you can't saturate with rapture, can't saturate with pleasure because there's pain: Just let them go for the time being. Work on shoring up your position of strength, the position that allows you to stay here in the present moment with at least some measure of well-being.

And the same with the mind: Sometimes really persistent thoughts keep coming back again and again and again. You try to think about the drawbacks of those kinds of thoughts, and they still come back again.

This is where you have to think about the committee of the mind: There will be some members who just keep talking, and they're not going to stop, but the reason why they don't stop is because you're paying attention to them. So, let them chatter, let them speak as much as they want. You just don't focus there. You focus on some other part in the mind. Your attention to these thoughts is what feeds them—the fact that you find them interesting.

This is our problem: We start thinking, and all of our thoughts become interesting. You have to realize that some of your thoughts are not all that interesting after all, especially the obsessive ones that keep going over the same things again and again and again. They have their hooks, so you have to learn how to shave off the hooks.

The first thing to do is just let them chatter away, but you're going to be someplace else, here in the present moment, realizing that your awareness is larger than the thoughts. It may seem smaller because you get *into* the thoughts, and they surround you. But you've got to realize there is a space in your awareness that is outside of them, from which you can see them simply as processes and say, "They're thinking, they're saying this." Not, "*I'm* thinking, *I'm* saying this." "*They* are thinking, *they* are saying this." That gives you some distance.

Like that image in the Canon where the Buddha describes a man sitting watching a man lying down, or a man standing watching a man sitting: You're able to pull out a little bit. It's that ability to pull out that saves you. You have that choice.

If the thoughts are insistent and stubborn, well, you can be insistent and stubborn, too. You're just not going to go following them. Let them chatter away.

Think of them as people in a corner of a room: You're in a large room, they're off in the corner some place—and you don't have to get involved in their conversation. Look out for any tendency in the mind to want to see, "What are they saying about me? How am I involved in this?" Just remember that their karma is their karma, and what they say about you doesn't have to touch you.

Even if they say your name, remember, your name is something that was given to you by somebody else. It's not really you. It's not really yours. Think in that way. In other words, disentangle yourself from any interest in the thoughts, any connection to those thoughts.

Think instead about the breath. How's the breath going? Give yourself something else to get interested in. The thoughts will continue running on automatic pilot for a while. They've got their own momentum, especially the really obsessive thoughts. But you just have to say, "No, I'm not going to go there. I'm going to focus on something else." Think about the breath. If the breath seems to be too subtle, you can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha—any of the recollections that you find inspiring.

So, even though you can't stake a claim right now for all of your awareness of the body, all your awareness of the mind, at least you can find your own space—you clear your own space so that you have a place of comfort.

Like the man in the house: Even though some of the walls had been torn off in other parts of the house, he didn't have to think about that while he stayed in his little corner. He made the corner comfortable enough so that he could get rest, and then when he was rested, he could get back to work fixing the house.

So, allow your mind a place to rest, because this is going to be a pattern throughout. Even as things get more settled down inside the mind, and you start actively engaging in discernment work, figuring things out, there will come times when the problems you're trying to work out have not been solved, but you have to put them down because you simply need to rest. If you can't rest, you'll wear out very quickly. So, clear your space. Clear your space in the body. Clear your space in the mind. Clear your little space here in the world.

Things outside may not be going the way that you want them to, and you can be pretty sure that they won't go the way you want them to. There'll be parts of your own body that won't go the way you want them to, parts of the mind that won't go the way you want them to, but don't make that an excuse for saying, "I can't settle down."

You *can* clear your space and you can protect it. It'll provide you with a place where you can rest. When the mind is rested, then whatever duties it has, whatever challenges confront it, you're in a better position to take them on.