

Meticulousness

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There are a lot of traditional stories that associate cleanliness with wisdom: the attitude that likes to keep things neat, looks for the little details, is responsible, careful, shows itself outside in being clean, in looking after the place. It shows itself inside, of course, in developing insight. There's a real connection. These weren't stories that were just made up to get people to be clean. They pointed out a real connection: The attitude you take toward your surroundings is indicative of your attitude toward what's going on in the mind.

Ajaan Lee tells the story of Ven. Sariputta putting on his robe, noticing that there were some leaves on the ground where they shouldn't be. So, even while he was putting on his robe, he used his foot to move the leaves into a little pile where they belonged. In other words, his feet were free, so he put them to use.

There's another story in the commentary about Sariputta. The tradition was in those days that when monks went out for alms, the ones who went out earliest would set up the dining hall. The ones who came back latest and finished their meals latest were responsible for cleaning up afterwards. Regardless of whether Sariputta went early or came late, he would always hang around, just to make sure that everything was kept clean and orderly. Then he'd go back to his dwelling. Not only was he personally clean, he also wanted to make sure that everybody else was keeping things in good order.

There's the story they tell about a novice who was told by his teacher to sweep up the monastery. The novice didn't feel like doing it, but he went ahead and did it anyhow. And he made a vow. He said, "With the wisdom that comes from this act of merit, I want to be able, in a future lifetime, to ask questions that nobody else can answer." Well, the teacher happened to overhear him make the vow. And the teacher said to himself, "Well, because I told him to clean up, I should have a share in the merit of the cleaning up. So I want to be the person who can answer the questions that he asks." The tradition tells us that the novice eventually became King Milinda, a Greek king who ruled in the area of northwest India after Alexander had invaded. The novice's teacher was reborn as Nagasena, the monk who was able to answer Milinda's questions.

So as I said, there's a strong connection between cleanliness and wisdom, being responsible and being wise, because it shows that you're meticulous. It starts with simple things, like the lights. In those days, of course, they didn't have electric lights, but we have electric lights—so think about when they should be kept on,

when they shouldn't be left on. When you leave a room and nobody else is coming in—you turn off the light. When the doors should be open—like down in the kitchen: Make sure the outside doors are closed to keep the mice and the rats out. The door to the pantry should be left open so that it doesn't heat up and the refrigerators don't have to overwork—simple things like this. Look for areas where people tend to overlook when they're sweeping up and make a little extra effort. Sweep those areas up as well.

I was rewarded one time for this. I was visiting a monastery, and the other monks said, "Come down at 4:00 p.m., and we'll have a work period where everybody sweeps up. Then we'll have some cocoa and coffee, and everybody can go back to continue meditating." Well, I missed the time. My watch wasn't working that day, and the sun wasn't out. It was totally overcast. When I got down, it turned out that it was well past the time. Everybody had had their coffee and cocoa. All the usual places had been swept up. But I noticed there were some places that hadn't been swept up. So I went ahead and swept those, had my coffee and cocoa, put everything away, went back up to my hut. Next morning, the woman in the kitchen came as I was about to leave and said, "I saw you sweeping up in areas where nobody's swept up before. I'd like to make a donation."

So at the very least, when you keep the place clean, it's inspiring.

And what's the wisdom of keeping the place clean? You keep it new without having to build it anew every day. It's your way of showing respect for other people's generosity, showing some gratitude for the fact that people have built this place. Everything we have here—you look all around you—it's all a gift: the building we're sitting in, the land we're sitting on. All these things are gifts. So you should have some respect for them. And as you show respect for the gifts, not only do people appreciate it, but it also shows a good attitude on your own part: that you value the qualities that are good in human beings.

Even though you may not be able to give the gift of building a place like this, you can give the gift of keeping it in good order. You can give the gift of minimizing our use of resources. Even though we make our own electricity here, it can run out sometimes. Then we have to turn on the generator, and it uses gas. So try to use as little electricity as possible. Use as little water as possible. Be frugal in your use of resources. And be clean, because as I said, that attitude of being meticulous outside translates into being meticulous inside. If you want to clean your mind of its defilements, you can get good practice by keeping the monastery clean.

We like to talk about the levels of concentration and which levels you can base your insight on, but it all comes down to how meticulous you are. Just because

you've attained a certain level of concentration doesn't mean you're necessarily going to see anything unless you have this habit of being meticulous, of noticing things that other people don't notice, trying to clean up areas where you haven't been told to clean up. You'll be surprised how often then things that you've been taking for granted, the background noise in the mind, are precisely the areas where you should start investigating. And nobody else can tell you that.

Ajaan Fuang—who was able to read people's minds, I was convinced—commented one time that it's not the case that when you know how to read people's minds, you know what to say to them. When you're looking at someone's mind from the outside, you don't see what it looks like from the inside. So you're the one who has to look at your own mind, and look at the dirty corners in your mind, the mental tiles that have gotten some mold. Tell yourself, "Hmm, maybe I shouldn't overlook these things. Maybe I should clean them up."

In other words, there's a lot of chatter going on in the mind. If you just take it for granted that it's going to have to be there, you're never going to see anything. It's the ability to look into the different levels of inner conversation and peel them away, peel them away, peel them away, to see what's left on the really basic levels—that's when you're going to gain some important insights. The teacher can tell you, "Look here. Look there." But it may be that you have a particular blind spot that no one else can see, and of course, you're not looking there.

So look around. Ajaan Lee has that comment: "When you live in a monastery, make your eyes as big as the monastery." When you develop that habit of having this all-around eye, which is one of the epithets of the Buddha, then you can start applying it inside, so that you're looking not only at the areas in the spotlight, but also the areas that tend to be obscured because of the spotlight.

This is one of the reasons why we try to develop a state of concentration that fills the whole body. I don't know how many people have said that concentration has to be one-pointed if you want to see things really precisely. Well, you can see a few things very precisely that way, but you miss the big picture. Parts of the mind can hide out in the darkness and never get attended to. So learn how to look all around and be responsible all around. Then you're likely to see some unexpected things.

That's what wisdom and discernment are all about. It's one of the reasons I translate *paññā* as "discernment." It's the ability to detect things you've been missing or you've been overlooking. They've been there all along in plain sight, it's just that you've been looking right past them. But if you learn how to adjust your focus and look around, you can gain some of the insights that can really make a big difference in the mind.

So don't overlook the little things. Your ability to catch a little bit of craving or a little bit of clinging before it gets large and obvious will be one of the most important skills you can develop as a meditator. If you develop good habits outside, they'll translate inside. This is why the training is not just a matter of sitting around and talking about Dhamma. It's a matter of your ability to be observant.

Realize the teacher's teaching you lessons not only during Dhamma talks, but also throughout the day, even when he's not saying anything. I remember Ajaan Fuang's instructions to me. He said, "You've got to learn how to think like a thief." In other words, don't expect that everything's going to be told to you. You have to observe and figure out, "The teacher has reasons for doing things this way. What would be a good reason?" That exercises both your powers of observation and your ingenuity, which are precisely the qualities you're going to need in order to see.