Conducive Context, A

May, 2002

One of the goals of meditation is being able to maintain your center, being able to have clear insight in any situation, not only as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but whatever you do in the course of the day. Now notice that’s one of the goals, the means there. It requires that you have to be very careful about the environment in which you practice, the environment in which you live. This is why the Buddha recommends finding secluded places, or as Ajahn Suwat used to call it, metta, a quiet corner, a place you can get away from the rough and tumble of daily life and all the disturbances and turmoil of daily life. Create a quiet space for yourself, not just your physical surroundings but also your social surroundings. It’s important who you hang around with, who you associate with. As that chant we had just now said, you avoid friends who are not reliable, friends who lead you off in the wrong direction, and cultivate friendship with people who are helpful in the practice, who really are compassionate, who really are kind, who have wisdom. Many times in daily life we can’t choose the people we associate with, say, at the job, that you meet here and there. But the people that you take as your true friends, you really do have to be selective. The people you open up with, the people you go to for consolation, for help, you have to be very careful about who those people are. This is not advice to be anti-social. It’s just advice in being judicious. There’s a difference between being judgmental and being judicious. Judgmental means making snap judgments that are unfair. Judicious means really looking at cause and effect, seeing that when you hang around with people of this sort, what happens? When you hang around with people of that sort, what happens? What effect does it have on the mind? So when you meditate, it’s not a question of simply fitting the meditation into the cracks and corners of your life. You have to make adjustments in your life as well, because it’s an all-around training. When the Buddha taught the path to awakening, it wasn’t just meditation. There’s also virtue. There’s also generosity. Right action, right speech, right livelihood. All these factors shape the environment in which you practice. And so you look at your life. What are the elements in your life that are getting in the way of the practice? For instance, when you talk about having the right friends, it’s not just the people you hang around with, but it’s also the books you read, the magazines you read, the TV programs you listen to. Which ones are helpful to the practice and which ones are not? If you were to think in terms of food, which of these things are good food for the mind, nourishing food for the mind, and which ones are junk food? It’s important, when you’re looking at the results of your practice, to say, “Meditation doesn’t seem to be going where I want it to, or it doesn’t seem to be having the results I want.” It may not just be the meditation. It may be the environment in which you’re trying to meditate. So you do your best to create a good environment and to come out to quiet places like this as you can. It’s true. Just create that sense of space. For laypeople, it means coming to the monastery. For monks, it means leaving the monastery and going out in the woods every now and then. The more solitude you can find, the better. Because that way you can see your mind in and of itself, on its own terms, with the least interference from the situation around you. When you’re dealing a lot with other people, with a lot of outside responsibilities, your attention gets focused outside. The whole purpose of the meditation is to create the kind of space where you can turn your attention inward. Because, as the Buddha said, the suffering we have in our lives, it is most important, the suffering that goes to the bone. It’s not the suffering that comes from outside. It’s the suffering that the mind creates for itself, through its own mind. Through its own craving. Through its own clinging. So you have to learn how to turn your eyes around and look inward. Turn your mental eyes around to see exactly what the mind is shaping, what the mind is doing to create suffering and stress right now. To see this, you have to be very quiet. This is why we practice concentration. Give the mind a good, quiet place to stay so it can see things clearly. It’s not like allowing water to settle down or like tuning in a radio station. When there’s a lot of static, you can’t hear what’s being said or what the music is on the station. You have to tune it in very precisely. The less static, the more clearly you can hear things. The sense of quiet also helps in creating a sense of well-being. There are a lot of the Buddhist teachings that sound awfully negative. They point out the drawbacks of attachment to this, the drawbacks of attachment to that, how you can’t really trust your own body, how you can’t trust feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. These things are inconstant, stressful, and not self. These teachings sound awfully negative, but you have to remember, all the Buddhist teachings are part of a training program. There are certain steps. This particular part of the teaching, these negative statements, he didn’t usually apply to people, didn’t teach them to people. In other minds, it settled down. They had a good sense of well-being that comes in the practice, a sense of well-being that wouldn’t be knocked over by these statements. In other words, once there’s a sense of ease, a sense of stability in the mind, then you can look at, “Okay, what are the things that still disturb that ease, disturb that sense of well-being?” Then the teachings on the drawbacks of attachment are there to precisely get rid of those disturbances, to get rid of the mind’s habit of creating unnecessary suffering for itself. So though the statements may sound negative, they’re actually positive when applied. They just create a greater sense of space within the mind, a greater sense of well-being, a greater sense of stability as you let go of your attachments to these things. Within the context of that stability, you really see that your attachments really do cause suffering. Your clinging, your cravings really do cause suffering. The things you crave, the things you cling to, are really not worth it when you come right down to it, because you’ve got something better, a sense of ease, a sense of well-being that comes as the mind settles down. The deeper and deeper levels. It begins to clear away a lot of this underbrush inside. So this is what we do. As we practice, we’re creating a context. First, we start out with the external context of our lives, the context we create through our own actions, through the people we associate with. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha teaches the precepts. You find that as you follow them, it’s not that there are rules that he’s forcing on anyone. He says, simply, as you follow the precepts, as you avoid lying, as you avoid stealing, killing, illicit sex, intoxicants, you’re creating a better space in your life, a better context to get the mind to settle down. The same with the books you read, the people you hang out with. You’re creating that context for the practice to allow the mind to settle down and be still. And as the mind settles down and is still, that’s creating a context where you can start prying away your attachments, learning to undo the habitual ways of creating suffering. And it’s then, when you’ve been able to retrain the mind in those habits, that’s the point where the mind is able to go anywhere, can live in any context, because it realizes the problem, the real problem, wasn’t the context. The problem was the mind’s habit of creating suffering. But you can’t dig down and uproot that habit unless you have created that context in the practice to begin with. It’s like a musician. A musician has to go off to a very quiet place. Practice and practice and practice to develop the skills needed to perform. Then you can begin to go out and start performing for small groups of people, larger groups of people, perform for strangers. The really consummate musician is one who can play anywhere. But you first have to start by finding that quiet spot, finding that quiet corner, creating the right conditions, that allow you to practice, that allow you to develop the skills you need. Then, bit by bit, you apply them in less conducive situations. You’ve got them so mastered that you can apply them anywhere at all. So keep in mind, there are stages in the practice. You’ll have a good sense of what you need at your particular stage. As you keep that in mind, the training becomes clear.

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