Outside the Narratives

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When we meditate, we try to create a sense of space in the present moment, where all the concerns of the world don’t press in on us, where we have some breathing room, literally. This is why we have the chanting before the meditation, to help clean the mind, to help clean out our brains of all the concerns we’re carrying about the past, what happened today, what plans for tomorrow, the sound of the chanting, the meaning of the chanting, the activity of the chanting. That helps to create a sense of space, create a sense of boundary in which you have the space to be in the present moment without having to worry about what happened in the past, what’s going to happen in the future. So you can leave all your cares at the door. You come in and you have this space. It’s just you with a breath, the mind with a breath, sitting with a body. Mindfulness, alertness, the breath. That’s all you need. When you fully give yourself to the present moment, you find that you can put aside everything else and you step outside of the narrative of your life. We live in all kinds of narratives. The narratives are our relationship with our parents, our relationship with our friends, our relationship with our workers, other people in the community, the rise and fall of our emotional states, our inner narratives. There are lots of different narratives going on. One of the purposes of the meditation is to step outside of those narratives so you can get some perspective on them. Think, “What is it that makes a story interesting?” Basically, it’s what it has to do with your expectations. Sometimes it confirms your expectations. Sometimes it gets ironic and goes totally against your expectations. That’s what keeps your interest out. But they’re always built on expectations that things should happen in a certain way. It’s these “shoulds” that drive our lives, the decisions we make. Maybe they’re the “shoulds” we’ve picked up from other people or the “shoulds” that we’ve put together ourselves. But oftentimes they involve a lot of suffering and stress, a lot of unnecessary suffering and stress, both for ourselves and for the people around us, which is why it’s good to step out of those narratives. I remember when I went to Thailand my first year as a monk, I spent dealing with a lot of these issues of the “shoulds” that were left over from narratives of what my life had been up to that point. Having the perspective of meditation, having the perspective of being around a good teacher, allowed me to step back from those “shoulds” to see which ones really were worthwhile, which ones were the ones you should listen to, and which ones were the ones that were best put aside. Being with the breath, totally immersed in the breath like this, is one way of stepping out of the narratives. This is why the quality called citta, or intentness, is important in the meditation. When you hear that there should be nothing held back, you’re totally with the breath. Let the breath bathe the entire body. You’re surrounded by the breath. It’s not that you’re sitting off in one side, watching the breath in someplace else. You’re in the control room with a glass panel between you and the breath. That doesn’t work. You have to go out and jump into the breath, like jumping into a pool of water, and allow yourself to be totally immersed in the breath. The term they use in Pali, gayagattha, literally means that, immersed in the body. Mindfulness immersed in the body. It’s not off to one side. It’s right there in the middle. Because if you’re off to one side, you’re still carrying some of those narratives with you. And they can pull you away very easily. But if you’re totally immersed with the breath, down to the tips of your fingers, the tips of your toes, all around the body, there’s no space for the narratives to get in. Then when you return to the narratives from that space, from your own internal immersion like this, you see them with new eyes. So try to protect this space, because it gives you a sense of what your true values are. You can reflect on the way you’ve been behaving with other people, the way you’ve been treating yourself, which expectations that are driving your narrative really are helpful, and which ones are harmful. Which ones harm yourself but help others? Which ones help yourself but harm others? The ideal is actions that help both yourself and other people. Because if what you’re doing is helping other people but harming yourself, it won’t last very long. Your own inner strength gets worn down. And you have less and less to offer. If what you’re doing is helping yourself and harming others, that doesn’t work either. This is going to come back at you. So having this space in the present moment, it’s a very valuable space. You’ve got to protect this at all costs. Regard this as your most precious possession, your ability to plunge into the breath. As you get more and more skilled, you find you can do it at any time. After all, the breath is always there. Your body is always there as long as you’re alive. You’ve got this pool of immediate sensation that you can immerse yourself in. And as you get more skilled, you find you can take a dip just about any time. But in addition to having this space, it’s also important to have good friends. People to bounce your new insights off of. People who have experience in the practice. People who themselves are being able to step out of the narratives of their lives and get some perspective. This is why you have to be careful about what you read, what you listen to, in addition to the people you hang around with, because you’re picking up ideas from all over the place. In my first year in Thailand, I would try to trace back, “Where is this particular voice in my mind coming from?” Sometimes it was my parents, sometimes it was things I picked up at school, things I had read, crazy things that came out of TV, radio, who knows what. So you have to be careful about the voices you listen to, whether they’re actual people near you or they’re messages that are coming through the media. “Who are these friends I’m hanging out with? What are their values? What do they know? Why do they want me to believe the things they’re telling me?” It requires a certain amount of skepticism, but it’s your protection. And when you find a friend you can really trust, then you can be more open. Think about what you’ve discovered, the mistakes you’ve made, or the mistakes you think you’ve made, to get some sense of what really is a mistake and what’s not, whether your powers of observation are a circumspect or not. That’s the other quality that builds on the quality of intent, which is circumspection. If you had determined he was going to stick by a particular ascetic practice, there was no way he was going to give it up, no way he was going to let it lapse. He was seeing other people around him lapsing, and there was a certain amount of pride that he had that his wouldn’t lapse. Occasionally, Jon Munn would come and actually force him, gently, to break the ascetic practice once or twice, just to remind him that the purpose of the practice was not pride or comparison with other people. There are many other stories that Ajahn Mahaprabhu tells about how Ajahn Munn was an extremely circumspect person, looking at things from all angles. And he was special in that way. After all, he had to rediscover a lot of the path on his own. In order not to wander off on false paths, he had to be extremely circumspect. The more you can develop that quality through listening to yourself, listening to the different voices in your mind, deciding which ones really are worth listening to, and then listening to the voices outside, deciding which ones out there are worth listening to as well. The basic rule of thumb is what leads to long-term welfare and happiness, what leads to skillful actions, skillful attitudes, skillful intentions. If a particular idea or particular way of living your life leads to unskillful results, then you know you’ve made a mistake. You’ve got to back up. First, look at the attitudes that were driving that behavior, exactly what were the values that were influencing your decisions, and then turning them around. And Ajahn Lee has a good rule of thumb. Once you gain an insight in your meditation, immediately turn it around. Ask yourself what if the opposite were true, or what way would the opposite be true? Exactly how far does this insight that I’ve gained go? Is it a rule that I can take for the rest of my life, or does it have its limitations? How can it be most skillfully applied? You look at it from the left, you look at it from the right. Turn it inside out. That way, your insight becomes more three-dimensional. It’s not just two dimensions. It’s not a caricature of insight. It’s actually genuine, livable insight. So these two qualities, jitta, or intentness, when you’re with the breath, and circumspection, which is called vimamsa, actually form part of a set of four. The earlier two are desire, just the desire for the practice, the desire to train your mind. This is important. If we lose desire in our practice, it becomes dry. Even though you do it day after day, if there’s no real desire, no real sense of inspiration in what you’re doing, then it gets dry, and the other good qualities begin to dry up as well. Assuming you have that desire, the next thing is to stick with it. It’s something you do every day. It’s regarded as your most valuable possession, the state of your mind, having your own place here where you can step out of all the crazy narratives in the world. At the very least, immerse yourself in the present moment for a while. Immerse yourself in the sensation of the breath. When the time comes that you have to think about past and future, you come to it with new eyes. If you can do that every day, every day, it helps maintain your sense of values. Your sense of perspective, your sense of direction in what you’re doing, your priorities in what’s important and what’s not. Remind it every day, every day. When the question is how do we succeed in bringing the practice into our lives, whether we’re in the monastery or outside, these four qualities—I call them the qualities, the bases for success, the desire, the persistence, the intent in what we’re doing, and the circumspection in what we’re doing—these things guarantee the success of the practice. Make sure that our practice is a living practice and that it informs our lives. It begins to rearrange the furniture in our minds so that our priorities really are in line with our deepest intentions. Ask yourself, “What is my most basic intention in life? What do I really want out of life?” Ask that question every day, and then look at your everyday life to see how it fits or doesn’t fit into that intention. Don’t put off the decision when you see that changes have to be made. Don’t put that decision off. You never know how much more time you’re going to have. However you feel is the best way of balancing the practice with your life, at the very least, have this daily space where you can step out of the narratives of your life to get a sense of whether the narrative is going in the direction you want it to or what changes need to be made. This way you have at least a taste of the freedom that comes from the present moment. This is one of the most interesting aspects of the Buddha’s teachings on karma. There is an element of freedom every moment, every time we make a choice. Our choices are not totally predetermined. If they were, there’d be no purpose in practicing. But it’s because we have that element of freedom that we can direct our lives in more and more skillful directions. So try to immerse yourself in as much of this freedom as you can, day in, day out, day after day, setting aside specific times. Try to maintain this sense of immersion whenever you can find the opportunity in the course of the day. After all, the breath is always there when you need it. So what we’re doing as we’re meditating is we’re learning how to take that simple fact, the fact that we’re breathing here in the present moment, and get as much use out of it as we can. John Lee once said that that’s a sign of a person with real wisdom and discernment, that you take whatever you’ve got. Sometimes it’s just the simplest, most ordinary things, and you explore how far they can take you.

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