Community of the Wise, The

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Practice doesn’t take place in a vacuum. It’s not just a method. It’s also a set of values, your ideas of what’s important, what’s not important. Those are going to affect the way you practice, what you focus on, what you ignore. So it’s important to reflect on your values. See what your mind is really telling you. You may hear things in Dhamma talks that sound good, but when you’re actually sitting on your own, sometimes the Dhamma talk isn’t there at all. It’s other values you’ve picked up from other places that have a more powerful impact, largely because they’ve been hanging around in your mind so long. They’ve become part of the landscape, so much so that you’re hardly noticing them. It’s like staying here on the mountaintop in Wat Metta. You see the same view every day, every day, every day. After a while, you begin to forget that it’s a really nice view. It just seems normal, unremarkable. It fades into the background. The same applies to a lot of our attitudes. Things that have hung around in the mind so long, we think that they’re actually a permanent part of the mind, that they’re innate, that come with us. But they’re not. All our attitudes are things that are constructed, things that have been put together, habits that have developed over time. We want to be able to look at them to see which ones are really conducive to the end of suffering and which ones simply create more suffering. My first year as a monk back in Thailand, I noticed I was spending a lot of time sorting through my attitudes. At first I was concerned about this. I felt I really should be spending all my time focusing on the breath, and yet issues related, ultimately, to the value of what I was doing kept coming up. Then I had to deal with them. It was only in retrospect that I began to realize that that, too, was an important part of the practice. It’s not that you can ignore them and simply plow away at the practice. You have to learn how to question some attitudes that are really unhealthy. Learn how to recognize them when they’re unhealthy. This is why we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, because they exemplify healthy attitudes. They give importance to the quest to put an end to suffering, and they’ve worked out all the ramifications of that value. This is why study is an important part of the practice. We like to think all you have to do is do a particular technique, and that takes care of everything. It’ll answer all your questions, but it doesn’t. It’s a question of why you’re doing this, how you apply it in your daily life. For that, it’s good to have exposure to other people who are practicing, knowledge about the Buddha, what his Dhamma taught, what the noble Sangha has found. That way you can throw your commonly accepted values into sharp relief. You begin to see that they’re questioned, and you have the opportunity to ask yourself, “What do you really believe, deep down inside?” Because so many of the beliefs that we think are ours are simply things we picked up from our parents, our teachers, friends, TV, magazines, who knows what, all kinds of stuff. And the inarticulate ones tend to be the most powerful, because you can’t really pinpoint them. So sometimes one of your first steps is when you notice that there’s a resistance to something in the practice. Demand that the mind articulate the resistance, that if you can’t articulate it, “I’m not going to follow you.” That has to be one of your first rules. Because many times when you articulate these things, you see how stupid they are. In fact, that’s probably why they remain inarticulate. Part of the mind knows that if you put this into words, nobody would believe it. Many of the attitudes that lead so easily to greed, anger, and delusion tend to be this way. So it’s important not only when you’re sitting and meditating, but also at any time when you see a particular attitude is pushing itself in the mind. There’s an attitude that seems to be very strong, but it’s not all that clear. Try to get whatever opportunity you can to sit down and clarify it to yourself. For example, attitudes that lead to anger. A lot of times we’ve got this belief somewhere in the mind that if you give in to other people, you lose. If you let them have the last say, you lose. If you allow them to get away with something, you’ve lost. But you have to learn how to question that. When is the proper time and place to take issue with someone, and when is it wiser not to take issue? Reflect back on your experience. So many times our attitudes block out our experience from us. We don’t see what’s going on because we have a particular attitude. But when you learn to throw it into sharp relief, call it into question, and then look at what your experience has been. Has it been your experience that it’s good to argue with everybody all the time? Has it been your experience that it’s good to get upset with everything you don’t like? Well, no. Then what is your real value around anger? Your set of values around anger? Your set of values around disagreements? Your values about how to deal effectively with external situations that are not to your liking? If you’ve found that your views are simply the ones that you’ve picked up from the people all around you, it’s good to have an alternative community, like the Buddha and the noble disciples in their dharma. Ask yourself, which community do you really want to belong to? The Stoics had the idea that a person belongs to two separate communities. One was your day-to-day community of people in the city or the town you lived in, and the other, they said, was the community of the wise. They said, “This is a community you belong to, not depending on where you are, but your attitudes, what you respect in life.” And it was their experience that many times you might really not feel that you’re that much of a citizen of your locality or the place right around you, but you’re very much a citizen of what they call the community of the wise, which could be scattered all over. And sometimes this is difficult to hold to, because the people around you seem to be so important, so much in your face, let’s put it that way. Whereas the community of the wise seems very far away. But if you remember, the community of the wise are people who are close to your heart, the people you really respect. Keep them in mind. They talk about the Buddha being a sāraṇā, being a refuge. The word sāraṇā is also related to something you remember, something you keep in mind. So always try to keep the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sankhya, and the values that they represent in mind. Remember, they’re your community, because it’s a community that’s formed not simply by being in a particular place or by accidents of birth or economic circumstances. It’s a community of choice, a community based on respect, having the same values in common. There’s a phrase in the Dhammapada, “Trust is the greatest relationship. For those you trust are your true relatives, your foremost relatives.” So as you go through life, making your choices, dealing with day-to-day situations, keep reminding yourself, “Who’s next? Who do I belong to? What system of values is the one that I really want to follow? Who embodies those values? Who are the people you really trust?” Try to keep their values in mind. Keep their example in mind. That’s where you find it’s a lot easier to deal with whatever situations come up and not get carried away by the immediate surroundings, your immediate environment, to the point where you find you forget what your deepest values are, your deepest intentions. Always try to relate to those in a wise way, in a consistent way. So even if the immediate world around you is not a good context for the practice, you can create that world that is a good context through your attitudes, through your clearly articulated values. The ones that, when you examine them, you have no qualms about giving them your total assent. It’s then that you have refuge.

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