Environment for Practice, An

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There’s a discourse where the Buddha talks about five qualities that a new monk should develop or should pay special attention to. And the five are useful not only for new monks, but also for old monks and for laypeople. They’re about creating the environment for your meditation practice. All too often, especially in lay life, we simply think we can stick the meditation into our lives as they already are, and that somehow the influence of the meditation is going to seep out and spread into the rest of our lives automatically. But it doesn’t work that way. Meditation requires an environment where we make special space for it, and you have to look at your life to see which parts of the life really are not helping your meditation at all, and be willing to make changes, be willing to make sacrifices. So it’s good to think about these five qualities and how they apply to your life. The list is pretty short. One is being very strict in your precepts. The second is showing restraint over the senses. The third is trying to see and speak as little as possible. The fourth is finding wilderness or secluded places to stay. And the fifth is having right view. So let’s reflect on them one by one, being strict in your precepts. For the monks, this means the 227 precepts plus all the other extra ones that are in the khandikas. As I explained in the video, the precepts for the monks serve several purposes, internal and external. Some of them are there for training the mind. Others are there for creating calm and peace and harmony in the community. And still others are there so that the community inspires respect. If monks are squabbling, if monks are competing with one another to get fancy things to have, it doesn’t inspire any support for the community. And not only does the individual monk who’s breaking the precepts suffer, the other monks suffer as well. But the really important ones are the ones that train the mind and foster harmony within the community. A peaceful community is the ideal place to meditate, where people are getting along. If there are squabbles, if there are rivalries, it creates a bad atmosphere. And a lot of time is spent on maneuvering, strategizing, trying to get people for your side whenever there’s a conflict. That’s wasted energy. So you want to live in a way that promotes harmony, that promotes a sense that we’re in this together. Theravada is often accused of being too individualistic and looking out for your own skin and not caring about other people. But you look at the way that the Vinaya sets out the life of a meditator, and it’s hard to believe that. It’s really an unfair accusation. You want harmony. You want to work together. Because if you’re in a community of people who are serious about the practice, it helps you. It gives you an extra little oomph. When you see other people being meticulous, it inspires you to be meticulous as well. If you see other people trying their best not to continue a particular squabble or inflate it, you start thinking about your own behavior and ask for the best. That’s one of the rules that deals specifically with training your own mind. One of the best ways of seeing your defilements is to put obstacles in their way. As I said before, you don’t know the strength of a river until you try to build a dam across it. Those hidden currents that lie under what seems to be a still surface tend to reveal themselves for how strong they are. So look at each of the rules as an opportunity to learn about the strength of your defilements, particularly the ones that you rebel against. Focus in on exactly why you want to rebel. What’s the problem? Which part of your mind feels constrained by the rule? None of the rules that get in the way of nirvana, but a lot of them get in the way of your particular defilements. This is one of the best ways to see them. This applies not only for the monk’s rules, but also for the five precepts as well. They’re not general principles that you apply when you want to and forget about when you don’t want them. You make them a rule to yourself. You make them a promise to yourself. These are the principles by which you’re going to adhere. You’re not going to let your behavior overstep those rules, and then you’ll find yourself wanting to overstep them. When you see it, you’ve caught a defilement. It’s like catching a fish. When you catch it, you can examine it. Otherwise, it just brushes up against your leg and you have a vague idea that there may be some greed, anger, and delusion in there, but you don’t see the actual instance of how it arises, how strong it can get, and the ways it can argue its case. That in the past you’ve so often fallen for. Well, here’s your chance not to fall for it. You’ve got a rule on your side. It says, “Nope, I’m not going to kill, I’m not going to steal, no illicit sex, no lying, not even the least little bit of lying, not even lying as a joke,” which is what most of American humor is. No intoxicants, period. You’re going to run up against something solid like that. Then you get a chance to see the defilement in action as it bangs its head against the rule and insists, “This is not the right time for that rule. This is a silly rule. It’s an ancient rule.” Whatever. Just hold on to your promise to yourself, and that way you get to see the mind. That right there creates a very important context for the practice. Years back, when John Swart was teaching retreat at IMS, one of the last questions they had the last night was, “How do you carry the practice into daily life?” So he mentioned the five precepts. A lot of people were offended. They felt, “He’s giving us Sunday School rules,” one of them said. But the precepts are an important part of meditation, because they help you catch your defilements. So you can see them clearly for what they are. It’s the same with the principle of restraint over the senses. The Buddha here is not saying, “Don’t look. Don’t listen.” He says, “Be careful about why you’re looking, why you’re listening, what motivates you to look at something, what motivates you to listen to something.” This serves two purposes. One, you find that the more you look at something, the more you get things that are unhealthy for the mind, the more deeply ingrained they become. But more importantly, you get to see your intentions in action. As the Buddha said, if you see that any unskillful mental quality is being developed by your looking, you’re listening. You say, “Don’t look there. Don’t listen there.” Or, “Change the way you look. Change the way you’re listening.” You’re looking for something that’s going to incite lust. Look for the ugly side of the thing you’re looking at. You’re listening to what other people are saying so you can get involved in some sort of conflict. Try to listen in a way that you can end the conflict and find common ground. Any time that you catch yourself looking or listening or smelling or tasting or touching things or thinking about things with a motivation or an intention that’s not quite honest, turn it around. Again, this serves two purposes. One, you really get to see your intentions in action. At the same time, you learn how to resist bad habits and create new habits in the mind. How many times have you looked at a beautiful body and just kept looking for the things that make your lust even grow stronger? It’s an old habit, and we have lots of defense mechanisms around it. But now make it a new habit. Look for the ugly side. Look for the unappealing side. Just keep at it again and again and again. Make it a new habit. Then you find that you create a better environment for your practice of concentration, a better environment for the development of insight. The third principle is speaking little, keeping your conversation to a minimum. When I first went to stay with Ajahn Fung, that was one of the rules he set out. He told me, “Ask yourself before you say anything, ‘Is this necessary?’ If it’s not, don’t say it. Period.” As in meditation, we’re trying to control the mind. And if you can’t control your mouth, there’s no way you’re going to control your mind. So even with things that are true, you have to really be careful about how much you say. Try to keep your words to a minimum. Speak what will serve a purpose and then stop right there. Because a lot of the disturbance both for yourself and the people around you in the community comes from just running off at the mouth, saying things because they’re amusing, saying things because they’re whatever. This doesn’t mean you have to be grim and serious. There is a time and there is a place for being amusing. But don’t overdo it. Get a sense of how much is enough and then stop right there. You’ll be amazed at the effect it has on your meditation. It’ll also give you insight into how you create your environment. So much of our environment is verbal, not just the physical things we have around us, but it’s the words that are in the air. If you keep churning out worthless words, people will stop listening to your words. And when they don’t listen to your words, you create trouble for yourself. You create trouble for them. So try to have each word you speak serving a purpose and then leave it at that. The rules in a meditation community, the rules for politeness, are much different from those in lay society. Two people sit alone in a room. They don’t say anything. It’s not because they’re angry at each other. In this environment, it’s because they’re focusing on their minds. It’s understood that that’s okay. Not only okay, but desirable. Back when I was living in Thailand, most of the time I was the only Western monk there. Then, toward the end of a Chan Fung’s life, we had a French monk come and visit and stay with us. He stayed with us for three months. One morning, he and I came back from our separate alms rounds and set up the food for the meal. Neither of us had anything to say, so we just went and did everything we had to do. We had our meal and finished it. It turned out there was a Thai person watching us. He came up afterwards and said, “It’s really amazing. Westerners can do this. They can be quiet. They know how to respect each other’s space. They know how to respect each other’s concentration.” He hadn’t imagined it would be possible. So that’s the third principle for creating a good environment. The fourth is finding wilderness places, secluded places to stay. Going in the wilderness really does something to the mind. It helps cut you off from all the assumptions and all the values you just happen to pick up from the people around you, the people you choose to be with, the people you happen to come into contact with throughout the day, all their ideas of what’s important, all your ideas of what’s important about you. You go out in the wilderness and values are different. You really have to be careful. You have to be very heedful. Because the support network out there isn’t the same. And the way of living intelligently among people is one thing. Living intelligently in the wilderness is something else. It really fosters heedfulness, which means thinking about what you’re doing and the consequences of what you’re doing, and also taking a good, long look at what’s really important in your life. You’re going to meet up with difficulties. Things aren’t as convenient as they are when you’re living with a lot of people. It’s great training in endurance, resilience, finding out what your strengths are, finding out where your weaknesses are, and what you can do to counteract those weaknesses. You really get to see yourself. Sometimes what you find out about yourself is encouraging. Sometimes it’s discouraging. But don’t let yourself get discouraged. You’ve got the training. That’s the fifth quality, which is having right view. It’s one of the reasons we don’t send monks out right to the wilderness right away. You have to hang around people who’ve been practicing and get a sense of what’s important about your mind. What are the things to focus on? What are the things not to focus on? What are the real important issues in life? The Buddha once made the point that a large part of wisdom lies in knowing which questions to answer, which ones not to answer, which questions need to be reformulated, which ones have to be dropped, which questions require a quick counter-question. This applies not only when you’re talking to other people, but also questions that come up in your mind. What’s really important in your life? The Buddha says the whole issue of suffering, the unnecessary suffering you’re creating for yourself, that’s important. Yet we have all sorts of other agendas, all sorts of other issues that we carry around with us. It takes a while, it takes quite a while, to learn how to drop those issues and really focus on how you’re creating suffering for yourself, as opposed to what you thought was important. It’s a major shift in where you stand, how you look at things. Right view is defined in terms of the Four Noble Truths. It’s basically that question. What are you doing that’s causing unnecessary suffering? These are the things you can do to stop. That’s it. Those are the truths that are really important. Other truths about all the other things in the world that you can think about, study about, read about. Those are distractions. They pull you away from the real issue. It’s easy when you’re off alone in the wilderness to get involved in your distractions. So a good grounding in right view is necessary. You have to keep coming back to this one question. Or what the Buddha said was, what his teaching was all about, suffering and the end of suffering. And where is it happening? It’s happening right here, right now, in the movements of your mind, in the processes of the mind. So you have to learn to look at what you’re thinking about, not in terms of the content, but how you’re doing the thinking. What are the motivations? What are the qualities that create suffering in that way of thinking? That requires a radical reorientation of how you look at things, where you look at things from. Bit by bit, as you keep reminding yourself at this point, the mind really does begin to change its frames of reference, change its perspective on things, issues that you used to be really important to you begin to fade. Things you never noticed before suddenly come into the foreground. So these are the five qualities that create an ideal environment for your meditation. Notice that only one of them has to do with the actual physical environment. The other four are things that you do. Because after all, what you’re doing creates your environment. It’s like creating a magnetic field around yourself that pulls in things that are useful or pulls in things that are harmful. So pay special attention to this mental environment, the verbal environment, the intention environment. You create with your thoughts, your words, and your deeds. You realize that meditation is not simply a matter of sitting with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. It’s developing good qualities of the mind all the time, so that your interaction with other people is not a distraction from the meditation or an obstacle in meditation. Meditation becomes part of the meditation, part of your quest to put an end to suffering.

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