The Buddha’s Rules of Order

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Life at the monastery has its rules and restrictions and its physical limitations. Our accommodations aren’t as luxurious as it may be back home. But we have one luxury here that money can’t buy, and that’s time. Life in what they call the real world. Time is hard to come by. Then you come out here and you’ve got whole days with very few responsibilities, hour after hour after hour, where you can simply be with your mind. That’s a real luxury. So you want to make sure that you don’t waste it. You may have come here with the express purpose to practice meditation, and then you sit down and you find that your mind has a mind of its own. It’s got other purposes. You can fill the time with all kinds of stories. It’s like you’ve got a committee in there and all of a sudden some crazy person has taken the floor. So it’s good to know the Buddha’s rules of order for how you meditate. Manage a meeting like this. There are basically five approaches to keep the discussion on topic. The first one is simply to note when it’s gotten off topic. Remind yourself you’re here to be with the breath. You want to get to know the breath. It’s not just in and out. The breath has lots of ins and outs. It can be in long, in short, in heavy, in light, in deep, in shallow, and the same with the outs. So it’s something you want to explore. This helps you stay with the meditation. It’s not simply a matter of tying the mind to the breath and giving it no reward. The breath is the basic energy in your body. It’s the energy of life. The better that energy is, the better it’s going to be both for your body and for the mind. It may be that the way you’ve been breathing normally is really not good for you. So you want to experiment. Try other ways of breathing. See what results you get. Learn how to read the results for yourself. That way, you can get absorbed in the breath without having to force it so much. That’s the first rule of order. When the conversation gets off topic, bring it back. If you want to talk about something, talk about the breath. Two factors of jhana, or right concentration, are directed thought and evaluation. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath and then look at it. Be sensitive to it and ask yourself, “Could it be better?” What kind of breathing would feel better right now? Explore the sensations of breathing in all the different parts of the body. Try to be systematic about it. You can start at the back of the neck. You can start at the navel. Any place where you find it easy to stay focused for a while and then move on, on, on, to have been through the whole body, all the way down to the tips of the fingers, all the way down to the tips of the toes. There’s plenty to explore here, in John Lee’s comparison to having a doll to play with. Lots of dolls. The breath element, the fire element, the water element, the earth element. In other words, the feelings of energy, warmth, coolness, solidity in the body. He said there are like four big dolls to play with. That should help keep the conversation on topic. If it doesn’t, and you find it veering off again and again and again to some particular obsession, remind yourself of the drawbacks of that obsession. What do you gain from thinking about those things? Here you are, all this time to meditate, and you squander it with something that’s actually bad for you. Many times you’ll find it’s like turning on the TV late at night with nothing better to do, and there’s a pretty lousy movie on. You know it’s a lousy movie, but you watch it anyhow, because there’s nothing else to do. Well, remind yourself there’s plenty else to do, better things to do. If the thought involves anger or greed or lust, remind yourself of the drawbacks of those attitudes, where they would lead you. If you kept with that train of thought for 24 hours, where would it take you? Many of these movies are movies you’ve seen many times before. You know the plot. You know what Humphrey Bogart’s going to say. The problem is, your movies probably don’t have Humphrey Bogart. They’re the kind of movies that, if you had to pay money to see them, you wouldn’t pay any money. Sometimes they’re actively bad for you. Remind yourself you’ve got better things to do. Sometimes it’s helpful to look at exactly what gratification you do get out of that kind of thinking, even if it seems obviously harmful. Why do you like it? Why do you feed on it? What kind of nourishment do you hope to get from it? Watch it for a while until you see that the nourishment is pretty miserable. It’s really not worth the effort that goes into it. Then bring the conversation back on topic. That’s the second rule of order. The third rule of order is simply to ignore the thoughts. It’s like you’ve got a crazy person in the committee. You give them a place off in the corner of the room where they can expound their views, but you don’t have to get involved with them. You can keep the rest of the meeting on topic, and you find that that kind of crazy person thinking off in the corner of the room. If you don’t pay attention to it, you’re not feeding it. After a while, it’ll begin to die out. So even though there may be kind of a background chatter in the mind, remind yourself that the breath is still here. It’s still coming in, still going out. You can still feel it in the body. Try to be in the body as much as you can and in the mind as little as possible. Think of yourself melting down into the body so that you fill the chest, the stomach, your legs, your arms, your fingers, your toes. Don’t pull yourself up into the head, where you’re perched up here on your shoulders like a strange bird looking down at the rest of the body. Be in the body. Allow the breath to bathe you. If there are going to be any patterns of thought, let them be off in the corner of the room. But you don’t have to pay them any mind. That’s the third rule of order. The fourth rule of order is to realize that when you get involved in thinking like this, it takes a certain amount of energy in the body. You’ll find there are patterns of tension that go flickering through your arms, your legs, different parts of your anatomy. And it’s those patterns of tension that help you keep the thought in mind. So, when you find a particular pattern of thought coming back again and again and again, look for that area where the pattern of tension is. Think of relaxing it. Let it loosen up. Breathe into it. Breathe around it. Breathe through it. Whatever you find helps loosen it up. That’s the fourth rule of order. The fifth rule of order is to get a pale left to come in and sit on the guy. In other words, you’ve tried all these other techniques, and you’ve got a crazy person in the committee who just will not yield the floor. As the Buddha says, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, grit your teeth, and remind yourself, “I will not think that thought.” The analogy he says is of a stronger man crushing down a weaker man. So get the pale left to come in and pin the guy down. Now this last one is of all the different rules of order. This is one that involves the least discernment and just the most force of will. You’ll find that it will work only for a little while, but at least it gives you some space in the mind where you can get back to the breath. You can think of the word “Buddha.” You can even think of it very fast, in the same way that they used to do. Jam Radio Free Europe. Or you can think of it as being said by every cell in your body. Each time you breathe in, the whole body goes, “Bud,” and then the whole body goes, “To,” when you breathe out. “Bud To,” awake. It’s a title of the Buddha. Anything that’ll jam the circuits for a while. Then after a while, as you let up, see if the thought comes back. If it comes back again, we’ll just keep pumping in “Buddha.” Otherwise, if you find that it doesn’t come back, you’ve got some more space in the mind. Then you can get back to the breath as you were before. Start exploring the breath again. See where it was that you lost it. Was it not comfortable enough, or was it so comfortable that you began to lose focus? Be careful about the comfort that comes up in the meditation when you finally get a sense of ease. Don’t just wallow in it. You’ve got work to do, and now you’re going to use the ease to give the mind a more solid foundation. Those are the Buddha’s rules of order to keep this committee in line, so that the crazy people in the mind, the vagrant intentions, don’t take over the meeting. Don’t fill up your time. Don’t waste this luxury we have. All this time to watch the mind, to train the mind, to get the various committee members working together on a project that’s really useful. Developing the path, letting go of the cause of suffering, so you can realize what the cessation of suffering might be like.

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