Advice for a New Monk

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Close your eyes. Focus on your breath. Notice where you feel the breath. Which part of the body it’s easiest to stay focused on and to know. Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out. Try to stay focused right there. If thoughts come into your head, remind yourself they’re not destroying your breath. The sensation of the breathing is still there. Try to maintain your focus on those sensations and just let the thought pass through. Think of your body as being like a big window screen. The breeze flows through the screen. The screen doesn’t catch it. It goes right through. Thoughts can go right through. You don’t have to catch them. You don’t have to look at them, turn them over, decide whether they’re good or bad. Just let them go. You want to give the mind at least some time of freedom here where it doesn’t have to think about its thoughts, doesn’t have to deal with this issue or that responsibility or any of the issues that it normally has to carry around. Give it a few moments of freedom where it just be aware on its own and not carry a lot of needless burdens around. This is a good skill to have, the ability just to drop all your concerns and let the mind be still for a while. It’s a basic skill for maintaining your sanity, because otherwise the world can drive you crazy. You’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do that, and you need about 75 hours in a day to take care of all the responsibilities that would come your way. The mind never has any chance to just simply rest and gain its bearings. It’s always being pushed around. It spins around here, gets pushed up here, pushed down there. At the end of the day, all you can do is lie down and go to sleep because you’re worn out. The meditation allows you to take some time to rest without having to go to sleep. In fact, it’s a much better kind of rest because you’re awake, you’re alert, you’re aware. This kind of awareness, once it settles down and it’s very stable, still is a healing awareness for the mind. So give the mind a chance to just settle down and be by itself. You don’t even have to listen to the Dharma talk. Just focus on the sensation of the breathing. Allow the breathing to be comfortable. Think of good breath energy filling every cell of your body as you breathe in, bad breath energy flowing out as you breathe out. So the breath is nourishing and cleansing. This way, both body and mind will benefit. This is an activity you can do in any place. It’s a lot easier when the environment is conducive. The environment here means two kinds of things. One is finding the right physical environment, like the quiet place we have here. But that’s not nearly as important as the general environment of your life. It’s not so much a matter of where you’re meditating, but the kind of life you live. Otherwise, the meditation is fighting against everything else you’re doing in your life. You can’t just take the meditation and stuff it into any old life. It’s like trying to grow plants in a concrete sidewalk. The plants may grow in the cracks, but that’s it. Just a few stunted little plants that grow in the cracks. That’s not what you want. You want a luxuriant garden that requires that you find a place with good soil, lots of sunshine, and lots of water. In other words, you have to look at your life as a whole to see if it’s conducive to the meditation. The Buddha once set out five teachings for new monks to help them with their practice, to create the right environment for the practice. But the teachings don’t apply only to new monks. They apply to everybody who’s practicing lay or ordained. So, as you try to train the mind, it’s good to keep these five principles in mind. The first principle is virtue. In the case of the monks, this is holding to the Bodhi Moka or the monastic code. For laypeople, it means sticking to the five precepts. The precepts are promises you make to yourself that you’re not going to harm anybody, you’re not going to kill anybody, and you’re not going to steal. You’re not going to have any illicit sex. You’re not going to lie. You’re not going to take intoxicants, because you know that these activities are harmful. You see other people doing them, and you realize how harmful they are. If you want to be fair, you have to realize that if you do them, it’s harmful as well. So, you make this promise to yourself that you’re not going to overstep these precepts. Now, does this help the meditation? It means that when you sit down and meditate, you don’t have the harm you’ve done to yourself or to others filling up your mind. You don’t have to be filled with regret. As John Furman once said, “It’s much better to think about what you do before you do it than have to think about it afterwards.” Because when you have to think about it afterwards, usually it’s a matter of regret, remorse, wishing you hadn’t done it and wishing you could go back and undo it, but you can’t. That kind of thinking is really frustrating, really miserable. Thinking beforehand means, “Okay, I’ve got this opportunity to act. What’s the best way to act? What’s the least harmful way to act?” If the least harmful thing is something you don’t like to do, what can you do to talk yourself into doing it? That kind of thinking is useful, productive, and actually leads to happiness. So, think about what you’re going to do before you do it. Think about what you’re going to say before you say it. Always keep in mind that you want to act and speak in a harmless way, so your mind is not filled with regret and it’s also not filled with denial. That’s often our response to ways we’ve been acting foolishly or carelessly, thoughtlessly. We deny that any wrong was done or that it doesn’t really matter or that somebody was hurt. That person doesn’t matter. There are lots of ways of rationalizing a wrongdoing. If your mind engages in that kind of rationalization, it’s lying to itself. A mind that lies to itself is not going to do well in the meditation. It’s going to at least try to keep lots of things covered up. That’s what makes insight difficult to arise. Even if there is concentration, it’s going to be very partial concentration with huge blind spots. So, for the sake of your own peace of mind, you want to make a result that you’re not going to act in any harmful way at all. You’re not going to speak in any harmful way at all. This is the first quality that creates a good environment for your mind. The second quality is restraint of the senses. This means that you’re very careful to keep watch over how you look at things and why you look at things, or listen to things, or smell things, or taste things, or touch things, or think about things. Who’s doing the looking? Is mindfulness doing the looking, or is greed, or is anger, fear, lust? If you’re looking at things for the sake of provoking lust, you’re stirring up more trouble in the mind. If you’re listening to things for the purpose of provoking your own anger, again, you’re stirring up trouble. In cases like that, you have to learn to look and listen in a different way. The Buddha is not saying that you grow up with blinders on. You don’t grow up with blinders on your eyes all the time, or plugs in your ears. Simply that if you see something that’s giving rise to lust in the mind, you try to look at the other side of whatever it is. For instance, the body. You can look at the body, any human body, in a way that’s attractive, but there are lots of ways you can look at it that are unattractive. So, when you look at the attractive side for the purpose of giving rise to lust, you’re looking at only part of the truth, part of the reality. So, if you want to be fair, and also if you want to keep your mind from getting run ragged by its lust, you’ve got to look at the other side as well, all the parts inside the body, things we don’t like to think about. But if they’re useful for getting rid of lust, you’ve got to think about them. In other words, you have principles in your looking and your listening. Look at things that help. Keep the mind calm. This doesn’t mean that you don’t deal with the problems that you have in life. Simply that you learn how to deal with them in a way that’s motivated by mindfulness, alertness, wisdom, compassion, and discernment, rather than simply using them as chess pieces in the game of trying to get whatever pleasure you can get out of life, whether it’s the pleasure you find in lust or the pleasure you find in anger or whatever. Learn to make every time you look and listen part of your meditation practice. When you find that when the time comes to sit down and close your eyes, you don’t have a lot of garbage in the mind. You’ve kept things simple. You’ve kept them in line with the practice so that your meditation and the rest of your life are pulling together, not pulling in opposite directions. Similarly with the third principle, restraint in your conversation. Not only do you resolve that you’re not going to engage in false speech or divisive speech or harmful speech or idle chatter, you try to keep your conversation to a minimum. John Foon used to say, “A good lesson for any beginning meditator is to watch what you have to say.” If what you’re planning to say is not really necessary, don’t say it. You’ll find that it cuts through an awful lot. If you ask this question every time you’re about to open your mouth, “Is this really necessary?” The same way in World War II they used to say, “Is this trip necessary?” That’s a way of conserving energy. Well, it’s the same way. You conserve energy of the mind when you keep your conversation to a minimum. It’s so easy for one sentence to turn into two, and then five, and then four, sixteen, two hundred and fifty-six. When there are lots of sentences, there’s the opportunity for misunderstandings. Hurt feelings rise as well. The opportunity for useful entanglements rises as well. That, again, makes it harder to meditate. If you’re thinking about a lot of things to talk about, it makes it very difficult to keep the mind still when you come to meditate. But if you keep things pared down, again, when the time does come to meditate, there’s not a lot of clutter in the mind. You haven’t opened yourself up so easily to the possibility that some idle chatter might slip out, or some slight exaggerations, or other forms of wrong speech that may not be quite as blatant as the ones you’re more commonly aware of. But they’re there, and they can eat away at your meditation if you’re not careful. You find that all these are good for your meditation, but if you’re really careful about your speech in this way, people will listen more to what you have to say. A person of few words tends to say words that are more worthwhile. The fourth quality is for the monks looking for wilderness places. In other words, trying to find some seclusion, an opportunity to be off by yourself where you really can look at yourself and have your mind clouded with all the responsibilities that you pick up from other people and the views you pick up from other people. Try to find a space in your life where you can go off and be alone. This may simply just be a corner of your home or a small time set aside every day. But the mind really does thrive when it has an opportunity to find some time off alone. It can really get in touch with itself. See what’s skillful inside and what’s unskillful inside. You get to know yourself a lot better when you spend time alone. So try to find as much seclusion as you can. The fourth principle is right view, trying to see where there is suffering and stress in your life and learning to look in the right place to do away with that suffering and stress. In other words, you have to look inside. You realize that even though people outside may be doing harmful things, the real reason you’re suffering doesn’t have anything to do with them. It has everything to do with what you identify with, what you claim is you and yours. So you look at your clingings. In your clingings, you dig a little deeper and you try to find what’s the craving that underlies this clinging, because that, the Buddha said, is the true source of suffering. And you’re very clear on how you’re going to get to that source. You’ve got to develop virtue, concentration, and discernment. These things are the path. Once you’re understanding, if suffering falls in line with the right general principles, you’re going to be a lot more likely to see the genuine cause and then dig it up. Really understand the suffering enough so you can put an end to it. Most of us know that we suffer, but we don’t really understand our suffering, and so we keep pushing and pulling at the wrong places. We never get to the real root of suffering. But if you understand that the root cause is craving and ignorance, as that chant just now said, we’re a slave to craving. This doesn’t mean that we’re not allowed to want happiness. After all, that other chant we had, “May I be happy,” that’s how it starts out. The Buddha encourages that attitude. He encourages you to look for true happiness. And to shape your desire for true happiness in a skillful way. There is right effort on a path. Right effort starts with generating the desire to let go of unskillful qualities, generating the desire to develop skillful ones in their place. That kind of desire is the path. But it’s the craving to have the sensual pleasures that you’d like, or the craving to be in a certain sort of way, or once you’ve got something that you’ve developed an identity, you don’t like, the craving to destroy that. Those things cause suffering. And if you dig down in whatever suffering there may be in the mind, you’ll find that ultimately you can trace it back to these three sorts of cravings. Sensual craving, the craving to become this or that, or the craving to destroy what you become. That’s where you look to put an end to suffering. You look using the virtue of the concentration and the discernment you’ve developed here as a meditator. Once you understand that, it’s much more likely your meditation is going to get results, because you look in the right places and you look for the right purposes. It’s not simply the case that simply having a still mind or just letting go, letting go, letting go, without understanding, is going to bring any awakening. It will automatically give rise to discernment. The concentration, the stillness, has to be primed in the right direction, having a good sense of where to look, how to look, what to do. So those are the five qualities that create the right life environment for your meditation, whether you’re a monk or a layperson. You hold by the precepts, exercise restraint over the senses, restraint over your conversation, try to find seclusion and develop right view. When your life is shaped by these factors, you’re creating the right environment for your practice to progress, to prosper, whether you’re in a quiet place like this or a place with a lot more activity. Remember, the really important elements of the meditation are not what’s happening outside, but the decisions you’re making in terms of what you do and say and think, how you look at things, how you listen to things, how you talk about things. This is what creates the really important environment that makes all the difference in the practice.

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