A Meditative Environment

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You’ve probably heard the saying, “The way you do anything is the way you do everything.” And it certainly applies to the practice. The way you ordinarily live your life is going to have a huge impact on the way you meditate. You didn’t just talk about right concentration or right view. You included the factors of right speech, right action, and right livelihood, because these create the environment in which you practice. So if you tend to lie, then it’s going to create an environment where a lot of lies are flying around. It’s a difficult environment to find the truth, and it’s a difficult environment to be truthful. If you’re not honest with other people, they’re not going to be honest with you, and you’re not going to be honest with yourself. When people are lying and puffing themselves up with their lies, everybody has to get puffed up. People start living in a world of dreams and unrealistic notions, like we’ve seen recently. When someone is truthful, they seem to be at a disadvantage. It’s only seeming. When you’re truthful, you really have an advantage. But sometimes people don’t see that, or they don’t want to see that. So it creates a very bad environment for the practice, which is why when you’re practicing, you really are separating yourself out from the practice. That’s not that in taking on the Buddha’s values we’re trying to become Asian in our values or Indian in our values. After all, the Buddha in his day set himself apart from a lot of Indian values. His idea of karma, which we often take as standard-issue Indian ideas on action and rebirth and all, was really very different from what was going on at the time. He established what’s called the customs of the noble ones, which were in many ways different from the customs of India, the customs even of his family. There’s a story that when he returned home after his awakening, the very first morning he went out for alms. His father, the king, was upset. He was the son of the king going out for alms in the streets. So he berated him for it. He said, “Look, this is not among the customs of our family.” Then the Buddha said, “Well, I belong to a different family now, a different clan, the clan of the noble ones. This is a custom of the noble ones.” The same with Ajahn Mun in Thailand. When he was trying to establish the practice of following the Vinaya in the forest and adhering to the ascetic practices, people would berate him, saying, “Well, this isn’t the way we do this in Thailand or in Laos. Our customs are different.” He’d say, “Well, I’m not interested in the customs of the Thais or the Laos or any nationality, because these are the customs of people with defilement. I’m interested in the customs of the noble ones.” You’re going to become a noble when you have to follow their customs. Among their customs are truthfulness and harmlessness. It’s a principle that if you are true, you’ll be more likely to see the truth. And if you’re true in being harmless, you’re also more likely to see the truth. You’re going to set up areas of denial in the mind, areas that you don’t want to look at, actions you don’t want to admit or you don’t want to admit that they had a bad set of consequences. And all of this denial, of course, becomes delusion. And yet our practice is one for overcoming delusion. What this means is that you can’t overcome delusion simply by sitting down and following a meditation technique. You have to look very carefully at your words and your deeds as well, how you live your life, even how you look at and listen to things. That creates an environment for meditation as well. If you’re going out looking for beautiful people to get excited about, if you’re looking for horrible people to get angry about, and then you go home and try to meditate, it’s creating a set of cross-purposes in your mind. So even when you look at things and listen to things, you have to ask yourself, “Why am I looking? Why am I listening? What am I trying to get out of this?” And if you notice that you’re actually feeding greed, anger, and delusion, you’ve got to learn how to starve them. Remind yourself that those parts of the mind really don’t need to be fed. You can feed other parts of the mind. Give them a chance to grow, parts like mindfulness and alertness. And so it means you also have to bring right view into your life. Realize that the important issue in life is why you’re suffering and what you’re doing to create that suffering and how you can put a stop to it. The Buddha classes this both as right view and as something called appropriate attention. Appropriate attention is basically defined by the issues you pay attention to, that you give importance to. It’s the questions you ask and the questions you try to find answers to, because these frame everything you do. I was talking recently to someone who was reporting a column in a newspaper where an economist was saying that the standard paradigm for how people make decisions is, one, you perceive a problem; two, you survey the alternatives. Three, you weigh the alternatives as to which will give the best benefits; and then, four, you finally make your decision. The economist was saying that up until recently, everybody was focusing on number three, thinking that if people saw the problem and saw the alternatives, they would be very rational and wise in how they weighed the alternatives. What they were forgetting to look at was that first factor of how you perceive the problem. What are the problems you feel are really worth looking at in life? And if your perceptions are all skewed, you’re going to go heading off in the wrong direction. This is something the Buddha taught a long time ago. He said, “How you perceive the issues in life is going to determine how you perceive how you live,” which is why he started out his teaching with the issue of why there’s suffering, the fact that there is suffering in life. And even before he mentioned that, he said there’s a way out of suffering, a way to the end of suffering. So he’s not focusing on suffering to be negative or pessimistic. He starts out by assuring you that there is a way to act that will put an end to suffering, the important issue. Everybody else in those days was arguing issues about whether the world was eternal or not. In other words, whether there was a creator or not, something to start it with, whether it was finite or infinite, the kind of questions that scientists like to ask now. And there are also questions of how you perceive whether your life principle is the same as your body or there’s something separate from your body that’s your life principle. When someone gains awakening, do they exist or do they not exist, both or neither? Those are the hot-button issues of the day. And the Buddha refused to answer them, refused to get involved in those discussions, because he said they don’t lead to the end of suffering, because that’s the big issue. This is another area where his teachings went against the main thrust of his society. So as we practice, we have to create our own set of values. In other words, live in a society which doesn’t see the end of suffering even as possible, and therefore it’s not on anybody’s agenda. We have to resist that view and hold to our own set of values. We have to realize that this really is an important issue and it really can’t be solved. These are some of the issues that we have to keep in mind as we take our practice into daily life. It’s not just a matter of how you stay with the breath, although that is very helpful. The practice gives you the grounding from which you can deal with suffering. But in order to protect that grounding, you have to have right view and you have to have a clear sense of what actions you do are going to destroy your inner center and which ones are going to help maintain it. It’s interesting to note that these issues—the issues of right view, following the precepts, having restraint over the senses—fall into a set of teachings. These are teachings that the Buddha would give to new monks on how to live, how to create the right context in their lives for the practice. There are five of those teachings altogether. In addition to right view and precepts and restraint over the senses, there’s also restraint in your conversation. Be careful about what you talk about. I’ve been doing a survey recently in the Canon about the Buddha’s teachings on right speech. Of the four forms of wrong speech—lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter—the Buddha seems to focus most attention on the first and the last. In other words, being truthful and also avoiding idle chatter. The kinds of conversations that accomplish nothing at all, have no real purpose. So you have to ask yourself, when you’re talking about something, what purpose does this fulfill? Sometimes you do have to talk in a kind of social grease way to keep your relationships with other people smooth. But we know what happens when there’s too much grease. In an engine, it clogs up the works. So when you open your mouth, keep asking yourself, “Why am I opening my mouth? What do I hope to accomplish by this?” John Foon used to say, “It’s best to think about what you’re going to say and then speak. Much better than speak first and then think about, ‘Oh my gosh, what have I done? What have I said?’” Another point of John Foon is that each time you speak, ask yourself, “Is this necessary? Does it really accomplish a purpose? And if so, then go ahead and speak.” Even the Buddha said that when you’re going to speak, it’s not only a matter of saying things that are true, but also things that are beneficial and things that are timely. Those two qualities of being beneficial and timely are the ones that divide idle chatter from non-idle chatter. This is another area in which you create the environment for your practice. Restraint in your conversation. And then the fifth quality that the Buddha would teach to new monks is the principle of seclusion. You do need time to get away from all the daily cares of society. Give the mind a chance to be by itself so it can really see what its issues are and what can be done about them, without being distracted by the other issues that come up in the course of the day. For monks, this means going out into the desert, going out into the forest or the wilderness. For laypeople, it means usually coming to the monastery, getting away from their daily issues so they can be in a place where they can really look at themselves and have some time to devote full attention to the practice. If you can’t get away from home, at least find a quiet corner in your house where you take time to do formal meditation every day. That way you establish a continuity. The way you live the rest of your life will help with your formal practice, and that way the formal practice can begin to seep into your life. You’ve got all these five principles working together. Right view. Restraint of the senses. Following the precepts. Restraint in your conversation. Seclusion. This way you can maintain the momentum that you’ve built up during the course of your time here at the monastery. It’s like loosening up the soil when you plant something. In other words, some meditation can take root in your life. That’s how the practice grows.

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