Cleaning Up Your Personal Environment

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Yesterday we were talking about becoming, and it’s a very deep and sometimes abstract process. But the implications are very immediate. You do play a role in shaping your own identity, and you play a role also in shaping the world around you. There are some limitations based on your karma. But there are also possibilities for greater freedom, for greater happiness. And those are the possibilities you want to make the most of. This is especially relevant when you’re leaving the monastery, going back home to meditate—hopefully to meditate, hopefully to practice. There can be a strong sense of how the world out there comes rushing at you and doesn’t seem to respond very much to what you’d like it to be. The trick here is to focus on the areas where you can make a difference, where you can create a better environment for your meditation, a better environment for your practice. And the practice itself, if you really do it, in all of its dimensions, does create a different environment. In other words, you’re not simply trying to squeeze your meditation time into the rest of your life, leaving the rest of your life as it was. But the way you approach your life as a whole creates the environment in which you practice. It’s like grass growing up in a sidewalk. After a while, it begins to create a crack. Like the grass we have there in the asphalt ruins, it creates a crack. It creates more and more space for itself. Even though it’s surrounded by asphalt, it can live. You read that book, The World Without Us, and you realize how plants can finally come back, how the forest can take over, how the vegetable kingdom can take over in areas where there used to be just a lot of concrete and asphalt and nothing very promising. But by steady persistence and by doing what they do best, they create a space for themselves. And so it should be with your practice. There’s a set of instructions for monks, for new monks, and it helps the new monks get started on their way as new monks. But it’s also a useful list for laypeople as they go about their practice outside of the monastery. The first element on the list for the monks is being strict in terms of the body moka. For the laypeople, this translates into being strict in terms of your precepts. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. As you really hold by the precepts, you realize that it does shape your life around you, especially the precepts on speech. You can expand that one in lying to include not speaking in a divisive way, not speaking in a coarse way, and not engaging in idle chatter. The idle chatter tends to be the one where most of the energy of the practice gets fruited away. One of Ajaan Fuang’s students once complained to him that she’d been sitting and meditating with a group there in Bangkok and then left to go home. She started gossiping with one of her neighbors, and she said, “All that nice peace and quiet in my mind just got fruited away.” He said, “Well, what you did is you took the gold you had and you traded it for excrement.” Idle chatter just eats away, eats away, eats away. It not only takes up your time, but also fills up your mind with all kinds of garbage that you have to clean out the next time you go to meditate. So as you’re at work, there’s a certain amount of speech that does have to be used for social grease. But try to make it useful and also have a sense of how much grease is needed. Many people spend their whole days just with nothing but grease, grease, grease all over the place. If it were an engine, it would all get gummed up. The problem with social grease kind of speech, if you’re really not paying attention to what you’re saying, is you end up getting involved in other forms of wrong speech. Because of that kind of idle chatter, by definition, you’re not really paying much attention to your intention, why you’re speaking. But if your intention is to put the other person at ease, to create a better atmosphere in the work environment, then keep that intention firmly in mind. When you realize that you’ve said enough for that purpose, then you can stop. And you’re going to be talking about other people in the workplace to make sure that it’s useful speech, that there’s something to be gained from it. Critical speech can be useful. If you want to warn the other workers, well, you don’t want to act in that way yourself. But if it’s to create a sense of us versus that person or us versus those people, that’s divisive chatter. That’s another form of wrong speech. You’ve got to be careful. But you’ll find that as you are more sparing with your words, your words begin to take on more value. And when you give more value to your words, your words other people will start giving more value to your words as well. That creates a better environment for the practice. The next two items on the list are forms of restraint. One is restraint of the senses, which means that you’re very careful about what you’re looking for when you look, what you’re listening for when you listen. There’s a common misunderstanding that restraint of the senses means you simply don’t look, smell, don’t taste, don’t touch anything, don’t think about anything. But that’s not restraint. That’s imprisonment. You have eyes, you have ears, you’ve got to see, you’ve got to hear things. The question is, it’s not just a passive process. The active side is, what are you doing? Why are you going out to look? Why are you going out to listen? Sometimes we’re looking for something to get lost, excited, or greedy. We have to be very careful about that. Again, think of your state of mind when you’re going to meditate. If you’re cluttering it up with all those defilements in the course of the day, then how is it going to be easy for the mind to settle down at night or early in the morning when you’re taking your time to practice? Think of yourself practicing all day, keeping watch on what you’re looking for. Are you looking for the purpose of greed, or are you looking for the purpose of discernment? Are you looking for the purpose of anger, or the purpose of discernment? Looking for the purpose of discernment means understanding what’s going on in the mind, what sights, sounds, smells, tastes are useful, or what ways of looking for these things are useful to gain a sense of dispassion, to gain a sense of equanimity. That kind of looking is fine. You can look as much as you want. The same with listening. You also might think of these reflections that we have on the requisites. This too is a kind of restraint. When you’re clothing yourself, what’s the purpose of your clothing? What’s the purpose of your eating? What’s the purpose of the shelter you have? When you take medicine, what’s the purpose for that? If you’re very clear about the purpose that you need these things in order to keep on practicing, you’ll have a sense of enough, a sense of what’s just right, so you’re not wasting your time getting more clothing than you need, getting fancier food than you need, getting a fancier shelter than you need. So the money that’s wasted on excesses in that area can actually be turned into something more useful. The other kind of restraint has to do with restraint with your mouth. This gets back to the precept on speech. It’s not just that you hold by right speech, but you try to speak as little as possible. In John Fuehring’s Basic Meditation Instruction, he says, “Before you even think about training your mind, you’ve got to train your mouth.” And the first way to train that is to ask yourself, when you open your mouth, is this necessary? What are the consequences of this speech going to be? There’s a famous Peanuts cartoon where Lucy says, “If you go around watching everything you say, you never get much said,” which is probably a good idea for most of us. A lot of the stuff we say is verbal pollution. The verbal pollution in this country right now is a lot worse than the carbon in the air or the other chemicals in the air. The verbal pollution can destroy a civil society. It can destroy a family. It can destroy a workplace. So be very sparing with your words. And again, the more value you give to your words, the more value they’ll have for other people. The fourth principle on the list is to try to find as much seclusion as you can. Have a quiet spot in your house where you do nothing but meditate. Try to find some time to be by yourself and let the other members of the family know that you need some time, you need some downtime. And this is a basic principle of any healthy relationship, is to have some time outside of the relationship where you can be by yourself. Have a clear sense of where you are, what you really need. One of the sad things in our society is that we don’t have any rites of passage from going into childhood into adulthood. You can go off and be by yourself for a while and think about what is really important to you. What do you really want to do with your life? All that instruction you received all along, there’s got to be a time when you sit down and you sort it through. So even though we don’t have that kind of rite of passage here, you can use the meditation, you can use your seclusion time to sort things through. Sort out the stuff you’ve picked up in the course of the day, but beyond that, things you’ve picked up from the past that have been sloshing around in your mind. The influences of the narratives that you’ve been bringing to your life, you can stop and look through those and, again, clean those out. Realize that your past is now just a thought in your mind. There are influences in your mind, there are thoughts that are still there in the mind. But you’re in a position now where you can sort through them and decide, okay, which influences from the past do I want to continue to have an important role in shaping my life, and which ones do I want to put aside? We talked about this a while back. How you live the present moment is also reshaping your past. In other words, the choices you make now either reflect good influences that have come from the past, or else they can reflect bad influences. And you’re basically choosing which influences you want to have continue to play a role in your life. So if somebody down the line decides to write your life story, they can say, “Well, this person had some really bad problems in her childhood or his childhood, but was able to overcome them,” rather than the more deterministic kind of storyline, which says, “Well, this person started out really bad and it just kept on going downhill from there. There was no hope for this person from the very beginning.” The choices you make now determine which of those two narrative lines is going to be the one that applies to you. And then the final principle is right view, straightening out your views about where true happiness lies, where true suffering comes from. I mean, living in this world is bound to have lots of suffering, but there are different levels of suffering and different types. The type that comes from the influence of your past karma, the type that comes from other people’s actions, that’s suffering outside of you. But there’s also the suffering that you create by pulling these things in through your craving, through your ignorance. And it’s because ignorance is the source of the suffering that really does weigh down the mind. You want to make sure you straighten out your views, because the ignorance, of course, is ignorance as to what is suffering and what is the cause of suffering. The fact that you’re holding on to not only your body but also your feelings and your perceptions, your thought constructs, even the act of consciousness. All those are things that, if you hold on to them, if you cling to them, you’re going to suffer. Now, the holding on to them doesn’t mean your mind has a hand. What it does mean is that these are activities that you get engaged in and you identify with them. And you can develop that sense of the observer, that peace, that peace that heals these things away. You can just simply watch them as events. You know when there is that event and there’s this event. When you put yourself in a position where you can choose which of these events are actually useful for the path and which ones are not, you get closer and closer to finding what is of core value, what the Buddha calls the heart word of the practice, which is release. We call it release because on attaining it, you find yourself liberated from all the things that have worn you down, all the things you’ve been clinging to. As you cling to them, you get stuck to them. But there’s something, there’s a dimension where there’s freedom from these things. That’s what we’re peeling away to look for. When you realize that, you realize that your true happiness doesn’t have to conflict with anyone else’s true happiness. That thought in and of itself makes a lot easier to develop the right view that goes along with thoughts of universal good will, universal compassion, universal empathetic joy, universal equanimity. There’s no reason to wish anybody ill. If you see anybody you’re able to help, you’re happy to help them. If you see people who are already happy, you’re happy for them. Because you realize that your happiness and their happiness on the ultimate level don’t have to conflict. This, too, is an important element in creating that environment. Many times in the Buddha talks about trying to maintain your precepts and all the other aspects of the practice as you deal with other people. The nourishment for that determination to act skillfully is greatly strengthened by developing the Brahma-viharas. So try to make that part of your daily practice as well. Every morning when you wake up, thoughts of good will for everybody, without exception. Every night before you go to sleep, thoughts of good will for everybody, without exception. These are important points throughout the day. When you find yourself getting flustered by your dealings with other people, stop for a minute and say, “I really would like these people to understand what true happiness is. It would be for their own good. I wish everybody could do that.” That takes the issues of your daily life and puts them in an entirely different perspective. So try to take advantage of the fact that you can shape your environment. The practice of meditation makes it easier to have the determination to do that. And, of course, your determination to do that creates an environment which is easier to meditate. Years back, when Ajahn Suwat was leading a retreat at IMS, the question came up, “How do we bring the practice into daily life?” And he talked about the five precepts. Some of the people got upset, thinking, “Well, he’s looking down on us laypeople, thinking that’s all we can do is five precepts.” But that wasn’t the case at all. He was pointing out how important it is as you’re meditating. It’s important to create the environment for your meditation through the five precepts and through these other elements on the list I mentioned just now. It’s all of a piece. It gets back to that teaching on becoming, that your sense of who you are is very much connected by your sense of the world in which you live. So your identity as a meditator can be improved greatly by acting in such skillful ways that creates a better world for yourself. And it’s one of the good features of the practice, as you create a better world for yourself to meditate in, you’re also creating a better world for the people around you. So try to keep these principles in mind. Observing the precepts, restraining the senses, restraining your speech, finding time for seclusion, and straightening out your views. Those are the principles that get rid of the pollution in your environment and make it a much better place. A much better place to live and practice.

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