A Meditative Environment

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There’s a sutta where the Buddha is giving instructions for new monks. There are five instructions, and they’re good not just for new monks but also for laypeople and for monks who’ve been around for a while. They’re essentially about how to create an environment for your meditation that’s really conducive to the meditation and they remind you of the extent to which you do have control over your environment, especially in the modern day when the world outside is pressing on us so much, wanting us to buy, buy, buy, listen, listen, listen, believe, believe what they have to say. When the pile of work is coming on and all your other responsibilities, it’s good to remember that you do have some power to shape your environment through the things you do. The list is five. Holding to your precepts, having restraint over the senses, having some restraint over your mouth—the Buddha calls it moderation in your talking—looking for seclusion when you have the opportunity, and making sure your views are right. When you keep these five principles in mind, you find that your meditation goes a lot more smoothly because you’re cutting away a lot of the obstacles that you’ve been placing in your own path. In terms of the precepts, any of the precepts you’ve been breaking, you suddenly find that when you stop breaking them and you actually live by the precepts, you’ve taken a huge weight off your shoulders. It’s like removing the weight of barricades from your path. You don’t have to deal in denial or regret, because you look around and you see that you’re not harming anyone. You’re not harming yourself. You’re not harming other people in ways that really matter. So if your precepts are five or two hundred twenty-seven or ten or eight or whatever, think of them as opening space. Remember, when I first ordained, I was struck by all the books on the monk’s rules, and it seemed pretty oppressive. All these rules saying, “I couldn’t do this, I couldn’t do that.” But then as I began to live by the rules, I began to realize that they provided a lot of space and a lot of time. They cleaned up a lot of areas of the mind. Particularly in the area of time, you don’t have to spend so much time thinking about the precepts you broke or the ways you harmed somebody or harmed yourself. It gives you more time to practice. Restraint of the senses. This doesn’t mean that you don’t look at things or don’t listen, but you’re very careful about what you do and do not look at. You’re especially careful about, one, your motives for looking, and two, noticing the results of when you do look at something, or listen, or smell, or taste, or especially think about something. Why are you looking in the first place? Are you looking for the sake of greed? Are you looking for the sake of anger? We’re listening for the sake of anger. That’s why we have talk radio. Otherwise, why would anybody turn on some of those commentators we have today? They want to get angry about something. And sure enough, there’s plenty to get angry about, true or false, whatever. Particularly in terms of the internet and TV, you do have the opportunity to turn those things off. Because of the impact they have in your mind, the beliefs that lie behind a lot of the stuff that’s presented, telling you that the important things in life are things that other people are doing someplace else. Which is the opposite of what the meditation is all about, which is when you want to focus on what you’re doing right here, right now, because it is important. This is what shapes your life. And beyond your life, this is where your attention should be, not only the issues that other people cook up. I noticed in Thailand, I was there from a time when TV was not pervasive until it was totally dominant the way it is here in the States. And there was a lot more individuality in the days before TV. It was interesting talking to people about their theories of life and their ideas of what wasn’t important in their lives. There was a lot more variety. People were more independent. They were more in charge of the questions that they asked themselves. So this is one way you can assert your independence. I won’t say kill your TV. I’ll say unplug it, unplug the computer, and watch the news at your breath. Where is your mind going? Why is it going? Learn to come up with some questions of your own. What’s really important to you? My first year in Thailand as a monk, I found I spent a lot of time sorting through old stuff. And a lot of it had to do with attitudes I picked up from lots of different people as to what was not important in life. And I began to be able to step back and say, “Well, wait a minute. Do I really believe that? I used to associate with people who did, but now I’ve stepped out of that.” It took a while for the college I attended to track me down and start sending me the alumni magazine and all the other stuff that you get when you’re on their mailing list. And I had a greater and greater sense that it came from a really foreign place, because I had the sense that I was back more in charge of what I thought was important. So this is one of the things that really helps when you pull yourself out of the mass media. The questions you ask yourself and the answers you’re looking for really do have a lot more relevance to the well-being of your mind. And that’s for the things you just happen to look at or listen to during the day that, say, are for the sake of lust or whatever. You find when you spend less attention to that, when the time comes to meditate, you’ve got a lot less clutter in your mind. And if you feel tempted to look, well, remember that we have that contemplation of the thirty-two parts of the body. You’re a body, other people’s bodies, everybody’s bodies. We’re all made up of different parts. And we’re all made up of those things. And which one are you lusting for? The liver? The oil in the joints? As Ajahn Lee used to say, if you find yourself looking for the sake of lust, turn your eyes around and look for the ugly side. If you’re looking for something to get worked up and angry about, well, look at the good side of the things you’re looking at. In other words, learn to use your perception. Learn to use your mindfulness to counteract any wandering thoughts. It’s not only when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, focused on the breath, that you want to cut wandering thoughts away or pull yourself outside of those wandering thoughts. It should go throughout the day. If you let them have control of your mind for twenty-three hours and then you just try to fight for one hour, the odds aren’t good. You’ve got to learn how to keep your thoughts—not only your wandering thoughts, but your wandering eyes and your wandering ears, nose, tongue, body—on a short leash. When you come to sit down and meditate, you’ll be right here. Moderation and conversation. Be very careful what you talk about, and be careful about why you’re talking. All of the aspects of right speech have to do with motivation. You’re not trying to deceive anybody. You’re not trying to break up friendships. You’re not trying to hurt people’s feelings with harsh words. When you speak, you want to have reason for why you’re speaking. The issue of idle chatter is a really difficult one, because there isn’t enough time to raise an extent to which you need some conversation to keep the workplace going smoothly, to keep your house going smoothly. It’s like lubrication for a machine. But if you put too much grease in it, of course, everything just gets mucked up. So you have to be very careful in how you measure what is just right in terms of your conversation. And again, you find that if you’re careful about what you say, it’s not going to be helpful. It helps a lot when you decide you want to be careful about what you’re thinking. As for seclusion, try to find some time to be alone, both externally and internally. Internally is your conversation with the past and the future, your conversation with your cravings. Try to cut that as much as possible. Just be right here. Have some time for the mind just to be with itself right here, to heal its wounds, to gain some nourishment, to gain some energy. It takes on so many responsibilities in the course of the day. It needs some time for itself. And so when you do have time for yourself, don’t clutter it up with what the Buddha calls “your companionship with craving.” Give it some noble silence, which in the Buddhist sense of the term means starting with the second jhana, where you’re not even chattering to yourself. Then find the right views. Remember that your actions are the actions of the mind. The actions that matter. What other people say, what other people do, that’s their business. They’re the ones that are going to be responsible for it. And even if they’re not responsible for it, they’re the ones that are going to be experiencing the results. You don’t have to pick up the results of their actions and put them in your own pocket. Your primary focus should always be, “What choices are you making right now, and are you going to make them well?” That’s what right view is all about. Realize that these are the things that are shaping your life, which is the message of all of these principles. The Four St. Johns would often talk about this. People would come and say, “I don’t have any time to meditate.” And their answer would always be, “Do you have time to breathe?” Of course you do. Why can’t you have time to be with your breath? Meditation doesn’t have to be sitting here with your eyes closed. The word bhavana means to develop. You can develop good qualities all the time. As the John Fuang would say, “Try to make your practice timeless.” In other words, it’s not that now you have time to work, and now you have time to eat, and now you have time to do this, that, and the other thing, and then now you have a little time to meditate. You’ll be working and developing. Developing your mind all the time. Don’t let your day get divided up into little times like this, because that squeezes the meditation into a very small corner. Make the meditation your foundation, in other words, the practice of developing your mind. And this is not adding just one more task to all your multitasking you’re already doing. It becomes the foundation from which you do everything. It becomes your basic motivation as you go through the day. You’ve got to keep watch on your mind. It’s not just work. There is the pleasure that comes when the mind has a good, solid sense of foundation inside. As in the chat just now, there’s a sense of pleasure and rapture that can come simply from gaining a little sense of seclusion in the mind, secluding it from your unskillful thoughts, your concerns for sensuality. Simply being able to drop those kinds of thoughts gives you a sense of well-being inside. As the mind gets more concentrated, that becomes a source for pleasure and rapture. That becomes food. The Buddha would often compare the practice of concentration to food of different kinds. He talked about the gods who feed on rapture. Well, those gods got there because they were practicing concentration, feeding off the same rapture you can get as you get the mind to settle down. That gives you energy. Another analogy the Buddha gave was of a post, especially when you’re trying to exercise restraint over the senses. You can get pretty dry unless you have this sense of being with the body and enjoying being where you are in the body because it feels good, because you know how to breathe. So working on these principles helps your meditation. Keeping your meditation going as you go through the day helps to keep the principles strong. They help each other in this way. So your meditation, the whole practice of developing the mind, can take on momentum and have the space to grow.

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