Clearing a Space for Yourself

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After an active day, it takes a while for the mind to settle down. But don’t make that an excuse for not getting it down as quickly as you can. The main problem with settling down has two sides. One, there’s the physical side, and then there’s the mental side. The physical side is that the body is agitated or maybe tired, and that you can tackle with a breath. In fact, the fact that the breath can act as a kind of a medicine for the body gives you more incentive to stick with it. When you see that good results are coming, you breathe in a way that’s more energizing because you need energy, you tend to be more dedicated to doing that. The same when it needs to be calmed down by the way you breathe. A calming breath can take care of that bit by bit by bit. Because you see the results, it’s easier to stay with the breath. The mental side is all the conversations left over from the day. Conversations with other people, conversations with yourself. You’ve got to learn how to cut through those. So whatever good conversation stoppers you’ve learned, try to use them with your own mind. One of Jon Fuen’s talents, I noticed, was that if you wanted to put a stop to a conversation, it just required a word or two. You can read them in the book Awareness Itself. Learn how to apply that talent to yourself. The mind goes chattering on about this, that, and the other thing. Death is usually a very good conversation stopper. Some issue comes up from the day and you’re worried about how it’s going to carry on to tomorrow. Just tell yourself, “You could die between now and then.” Death comes without any warning. And you want to die as you’re worried about tomorrow. Another more important issue is at hand. I.e., the shape of your mind. Or you can simply remind yourself that you don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow in any event, but you do know that you’re going to need mindfulness, you’re going to need alertness, you’re going to need discernment, concentration, all the qualities that come from meditating. All too often, all the plans that you’ve laid out, expecting x, y, and z, are going to be for nothing when it turns out to be a chance y, j. But if you’ve practiced your mindfulness, your alertness, your ability to be present for a problem and to see it more clearly, you’ll be prepared for anything. So whatever conversations come up that have anything to do with the day, try to find some way to put them to a halt and look after the body. Because the body has been worn out by the day. You need some breath medicine. Work with that. Of course, the other way of dealing with the problems that come up during the day is not to wait for the meditation to start, but to look at the way you live your life. The Buddha gives five pieces of advice for new monks, useful not only for new monks, but also for laypeople who want to practice, who want to have some space to create some space in their lives so it’s easier to get the mind to settle down and easier to get the mind on the right track. The first one for the monks is adhering to the padimokkha. These are the rules that the monks follow. It’s the basic code. There are actually more rules than that are in the basic code, but the basic code is kind of the lowest common denominator. For laypeople, this would be the five precepts. You can cut through a lot of difficulty in your life. You can do that by not killing, not stealing, not having illicit sex, not lying to anybody, not taking intoxicants. That cleans up a huge space. You see, so many people’s lives are ruined by breaking one or another of these precepts. Relationships are ruined this way. So take the precepts as offense. These are kinds of behavior. The ones that are warned against in the precepts, just want to keep them outside the fence. They’re just out of the question. That helps clean up your life in a lot of ways. It makes it better for you to settle down without any sense of regret for having harmed other people or going into denial about the harm you’ve done. The next is restraint of the senses. When you look at something, ask yourself why you’re looking. When you listen, ask why you’re listening. What’s going to happen to the mind as a result? In other words, you’re not so much interested in what the object is, but you want to be interested in it as part of a causal process, i.e., what’s the mind looking for when it’s looking at it, and what’s going to happen to the mind when it gets focused on it. And how are you focused on it? Instructions for a new monk when he’s ordained, to look at the various parts of the body that might excite lust and learn how to look at them in a way that doesn’t excite lust. The object itself is not the problem. It’s the attitude we bring toward it and the results that come from aggravating that attitude. Often it’s not that an object excites lust or excites anger or whatever. It’s that we’re out looking for something to get lustful about, looking for something to get angry about. You have to hold that in check. Because if you can’t hold that in check in the course of the day, it’s going to be hard to do it as you settle down, because you’ve probably brought all kinds of things into your mind as a result of looking for anger or looking for lust or greed or whatever. That becomes part of the clutter. You’ve got to clear away. So look at why you’re looking, look at why you’re listening. What’s the purpose of who’s doing the looking and listening? Is it you, or is it your anger? Is it you, or your lust, or your greed, or your jealousy? Try to catch these things as soon as possible before they come into your house. Think of your senses as the windows and doors of the house. You bring a lot of clutter in in the course of the day, and then you’re going to spend all your meditation time cleaning it out. Sometimes you get tired of cleaning it out, and so you give up. That’s just not helpful at all. Keep things at the level of the door, at the level of the window. Don’t let them in. If you find that lust is doing the looking, well, have some other part of the mind start looking. You can look at the same object, or if you can’t think of any way to deal with it right now, look away. The same with the listening. That helps keep the house clean as well. The third instruction is probably one of the most relevant ones, which is that you try to keep some control over your conversation. As the Chan Fung used to say, ask yourself each time you speak, “Is this necessary?” Like those old cartoons from World War II, they would say, “Is this trip necessary?” A lot of speech just gets out of hand. The main Buddhist questions were, “Is this true? Is it beneficial? Is it time friendly?” You would have to pass all three tests before you’d say it. For most of us, there are no tests at all. If something comes into the mind, it immediately goes out without any thought as to what the long-term consequences might be. Ask yourself, “When I say this, what’s the likely result? Is it going to result in more or less peace, more or less understanding, or is it going to result in just simply speaking out of a mood?” Moods are very unreliable as guides for what you should be saying. When you find that you can gain some control over your speech, there are times when you have to engage in what might be called social grease speech. In other words, pleasantries and a little bit of chit-chat to keep the group that you’re working with running smoothly. But as with any grease, you want to make sure you don’t add too much. Otherwise, it comes up the works. And don’t be afraid of being regarded as a quiet person. If you’re quiet, then when you do speak, people tend to listen a little bit more. If you’re chattering away all through the day, people won’t see much value in your words because there are so many of them. When you’ve learned how to control your speech outside, then it’s a lot easier to control it as you’re sitting here and meditating. The child of the mind that wants to run off here and there, you don’t have to pay it any attention. The fourth instruction is to try to find wilderness places to live, places away from people. Now, for laypeople, this means having a quiet spot. In your home, in your apartment, have a spot that all you do when you go to that spot is to meditate. Take some time away from the computer, away from your social media. There’s this insane set of values now that if someone sends you a message and you don’t respond immediately, that you’ve wronged them somehow or insulted them. You can’t give in to that kind of pressure. You have to decide which messages are worth responding to and which ones are not. And people just have to learn that this is the way you are. Turn off all the connections. Give the mind some time to be by itself. That way, this inner center of peace that you’re trying to develop will develop further and further. You can grow it and gain some momentum. Because the whole purpose of a wilderness spot is not just that you’re away from other people. You want to pick up wilderness attitudes as well. Because what happens when you go into the wilderness? You realize that a lot of the daily issues that loom very large as you’re engaged with other people get smaller and smaller. The whole issues of gain and loss, status, loss of status, other people’s praise and their criticism, the pleasures and pains of daily life in domestic life. When you go into the wilderness, all these things become very trivial. You want to have that perspective of stepping away from these things. It’s probably one of the best gifts you can give to yourself as you go through the day. You don’t want your life to be controlled by other people and their attitudes, other people and their values. You want to find something inside that’s of value and of worth, totally independent of social conventions. Finally, the fifth point is right view. The view that your actions matter. And because your actions matter, that your training of the mind really matters, too. Because that’s where your actions come from. And that you have to be careful. Heedfulness is part of right view, seeing that your choices can either do a lot of good or a lot of harm. So you have to be very careful about the choices you make. Be responsible. Be accountable. As with your looking through your senses or listening through your senses, the question is, where is this choice of an action coming from and where is it going to lead? Those are the questions you want to ask. It’s not a question, “Do I feel like doing this?” The question is, “What’s going to be the consequence? What do I expect to be the consequence? And where is this action coming from, anyhow?” What’s the driving force? These are important issues. Now, the world will tell you that there are a lot of other things that are more important. But again, you’ve got to learn how to pull yourself out of the world. Even if you can’t leave it physically, you have to have a part of the mind that’s independent. Keep in mind all the noble ones. As with the talk to the new monk today, people often wonder, “What is that the preceptor is saying to the new monk?” Well, at the very beginning, it’s all about taking refuge. And what refuge means is that you think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as your guides, as your models for your life. Now, we live in a society where the model of the Buddha gets blotted out by everything else. You have to make some space for that. As the Buddha in his last lifetime, when he gained full awakening, there’s the Buddha in the many lifetimes leading up to that, where he’s trying to develop good qualities of the character. These are things you can take in as an example. You want to keep that example in mind. The word sarana means refuge, but it also means something you remember. When you can remember these things, they do become your refuge. You try to remember the qualities of the Buddha, his wisdom, his purity, his compassion. When you take refuge in these things, it means that you decide you want to take those values on as your values. Take on his example as the example you want to follow in your life. This gives you protection, because it gives you a clearer and clearer sense of what you should and shouldn’t be doing. That’s one of the Buddha’s statements. The gift he gave to his students was a clear sense of what should and shouldn’t be done. It makes going through life a lot easier. You learn which values to put aside and which values to take on, because you’re taking as your example an expert, someone who’s been through it before, seen all the possibilities. These are the things that are really worthwhile. So what you’re doing is you’re creating your space, not only as you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, but as you go through the world. You’ve got your space, both physically, as you stay with the breath, the sense of the energy in the body as you go through the day, and then mentally, in terms of the values that you hold to in spite of whatever else is coming in through your ears and eyes. You have a clear sense that you want to do something with your life. You want to train your mind. So it’s getting closer and closer. It’s getting closer to the end of suffering. Make that important. Make that your priority. So that in this space you’re clearing for yourself, some really good things can begin to appear.

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