An Alternative Place to Go

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When I was first ordained in Thailand, during my first stay with Chan Phuong, there was a young man who came and spent a couple of weeks at the monastery. He’d been ordained in Bangkok and had his fiancée’s wishes. Before they got married, she wanted him to have some time as a monk. Hence he was ordained, not because he wanted to, but because she wanted him to. Then he came out to the monastery and found that he really liked the life of being a monk. He’s the one I’ve told you about before. We did a meditation duel up on the mountain where I was sitting there, being eaten alive by mosquitoes and pain. I looked over at him and he just seemed to be very calm and composed. I figured, “I can’t let the good name of America go to waste here by stomping my meditation.” I found out later that he had been eaten up by mosquitoes and pain, getting ready to give up. He looked over and I looked so calm. He said, “I can’t lose out to an American.” At any rate, at the end of the two weeks, his fiancée and his parents came to pick him up, take him back to Bangkok to disrobe. He was really reluctant to go. So that night of Jon Foon gave a Dhamma talk on how we come into the world, we don’t come alone. We have our parents. We have our responsibilities to them. So the next day he went back to Bangkok, disrobed. A few days later, I was beginning to think about my responsibilities to my family, thinking, “Maybe I should go back to the States.” He said, “Look, we come into this world alone. We each have to look after ourselves.” Of course, the lesson you get there is that the lesson of renunciation, who has to give up how much and how quickly they have to give it up, is really an individual matter. As the Buddha said, if there are pleasures you find during renunciation, creating unskillful qualities in your mind, you should give them up. But if there are pleasures that are not, you just need to give them up. And this is going to be an individual matter. Some people, enjoying certain pleasures, find that a lot of greed, aversion, and delusion build up around the pleasures. And other people have those same pleasures, but the mind is hardly affected. You see this among the monks in Thailand. Some can stay in monasteries and their meditation goes really well. Others, when they’re staying in the monastery, get really lazy. So they have to go out in the forest and subject themselves to a lot of hardship before the mind is willing to settle down. So there’s no hard and fast rule. But if you find that you can’t give something up for whatever reasons, you’ve got to provide yourself with an alternative place to hang on to. Because all the things we’re attached to are going to leave us one way or another. And we have to be prepared for that fact. This is why the meditation is taught to everybody. It’s not just for monks. It’s why virtue is taught to everybody. It’s why discernment is taught to everybody. Because these are things you’re going to hang on to. The description of concentration is secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental qualities. You enter the first jhana. Sensuality here does not mean sensual pleasures. This means the mind’s fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. And it’s an important distinction. We really are more attached to our fantasies and plans and commentary on our sensual pleasures than we are to the actual pleasures themselves. Now there’s one way you can take that, which is an unskillful way of saying, “Well, it means all I have to do is not get obsessed about thinking about my things and keep everything I’ve got.” There was actually a cartoon I saw one time. This man is living in a very lavishly decorated house. The window opens out onto this large expanse of land. And he’s telling a friend, “The beauty of it all is, as long as I’m not attached to my things, I don’t have to give them up.” Which, of course, means you’re just hiding your attachment. The skillful way of taking this is realizing that if you stop thinking about sensual pleasures and anticipating them and then reliving them, after all, you begin to realize that there’s not much there. And if it’s a burden and you have no responsibility for it, you can let it go. Because so much of our pleasure is in the anticipation, so much of it is in the reliving of old experiences. “This is going to be great. This is going to be great.” And then there’s a little moment, “It wasn’t that great. It wasn’t that great.” And then, “This is going to be, and it wasn’t that great.” And it can go on for a long time. But the actual moment of the pleasure is pretty short. So if you can strip away the commentary and realize that there’s nothing there, then you can ask yourself, “Why burden myself with this?” We all have our responsibilities in life. Sometimes there are things you simply cannot give up. But you learn to work around that. And as I said, you try to develop this ability to have an alternative refuge. This is one of the reasons why the laypeople in the time of the Buddha, those who didn’t ordain would take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. They were trying to learn the skills that they had, develop the qualities inside the mind that they had, so that you have something inside that you can depend on when the things that you’re holding on to get taken away or when you have to leave them. So as you’re meditating here, this is your place of safety. This is your alternative place to go. I remember when I first went to Thailand, the very first morning, I woke up and looked outside my hotel window down on the street, and there was a monk going for alms. He stopped in front of a store, and there was a woman who was arranging things in the store. She came out. Almost surreptitiously, it seemed, she put some food in his bowl and then went back in. And then he went on his way. It was like some sort of secret society. As I got to stay in Thailand, I realized the whole society was infiltrated like this. And having the monastic order there act as kind of an escape valve for all the pressures of lay life, to remind people that even in the rat race, it is possible not to be measured by your wealth. Your happiness doesn’t need to be measured by your wealth. There are other ways of measuring happiness in life. And simply having that alternative available takes a lot of the pressure off the misery that comes when you’re just out there struggling and fighting, trying to make a living, trying to hold a family together. The fact that there is an alternative makes things easier. And when you have the ability to step out of your daily life, step out of your daily concerns, that makes it easier too. Which is why having some time by yourself every day is an important necessity for your mental health. No input from the media, no input from other people, just time to be with your own mind, sitting here with your breath, trying to find a sense of ease. Just with your eyes closed, breathing in, breathing out. Then you find that, yes, you have a source of happiness that doesn’t have to depend on other people, doesn’t have to depend on pleasures outside, doesn’t have to depend on your fantasizing about pleasures outside. You’ve got an alternative place to go. So even though the renunciation may be temporary, you go back later, you still have a place to step out that airs out the mind. And as I said, when the pleasures of daily life suddenly turn on you, you do have another place to go. So you’re not totally left adrift. You’re not totally devastated. So think of this as your refuge. This is your place of safety. Jahn Chah said he always kept a couple huts empty in the monastery every time husbands and wives would be arguing. And just to let off steam, one of them, either the husband or the wife, would come and spend some time in a hut at the monastery, just to get away, to allow things to cool off. It’s like having a pressure valve. That’s another way you can think of the meditation. It’s your pressure valve. It not only gives you time away, but also gives you a new perspective on things. So the burdens of daily life don’t weigh so heavily. And whatever happens, you always have an alternative place to go.

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