A Meditator’s Environment

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The Buddha has some advice for new monks on how to create a good environment to practice, and the advice applies to lay people as well, reminding you that there may be a lot of things you have to put up with in your life that you can’t change, but there are a lot of things that you can change through your own activities that create the right environment. The first is that you go by the precepts. For the monks, of course, this means the precepts of the Bodhimokta, and all the other precepts in the Vinaya. You make them the measure of what you’re going to do and what you’re not going to do. For the lay people, this means the five precepts, and on occasion the eight. The five precepts are not killing, not stealing, not having illicit sex, not lying, not taking intoxicants. Because when you get away from those activities, you clean up your life, you remove a lot of burdens. Take lying, for instance. If you say one thing to one person, give another version of this truth to somebody else, you have to keep remembering who received which version. That’s a lot to keep in mind. But if you stick to the truth all the time, all you have to do is remember the truth, and there you are. You create an environment which has a sense of trust. People can trust your words, you can trust your words. That sense of trust makes it a lot easier to practice. You’re not always second-guessing what other people might really think, or really have going on. They may be not observing the precepts, but as far as you’re concerned, your life is straightforward. And the important thing is that you can trust yourself. The Buddha talks about how good background and virtue is important for concentration, because it keeps your concentration honest. There’s so much that can happen in a quiet mind. Sometimes you get the idea that a quiet mind, anything that arises in a quiet mind, can be trusted. That’s not the case. A lot of people go crazy through their concentration, because they’re used to lying to themselves, and then their concentration starts to lie to them as well. So you start with honesty. You get used to holding yourself to the precepts as a standard. Some people complain that these are just conventional precepts, but we live through conventions. This is how we communicate with one another. A lot of the mind’s inner conversation is based on convention. We didn’t have the conventions of language, how could we learn the Dhamma? How could we talk to ourselves? So we pay attention to these conventions. We find that they stretch us, make us honest. That’s a good environment for the practice. The second part is restraint of the senses. As you go through the day, you have the choice of how you’re going to look at things, how you’re going to listen to things. All through all the senses. Now, there may be a lot of things that you have to look at and have to listen to, but the question is, how do you do it? Who in your mind is doing the looking? Is greed doing the looking? Or is wisdom doing the looking? Anger? Jealousy? Are these things doing the looking and the listening? Is it the desire for something to get angry about? Because it’s not the case that something outside will come in and just set off defilements in a perfectly innocent mind. Sometimes the mind is out looking for trouble. Listening for trouble. So you’ve got to get some control over that. Because if you can’t control that in the course of your daily life, it’s going to be really hard to control the mind as it settles down and concentrates. So you pay attention to your engagement in the senses with a strong sense of cause and effect. When you look in a certain way, what is the effect on the mind? When you listen in a certain way, what is the effect on the mind? When you try to choose ways of looking and listening and taking in aromas and tastes, tactile sensations, that doesn’t stir up a lot of defilements inside. One can actually counteract the defilements if they do arise. That’s what’s meant by restraint of the senses. It doesn’t mean you don’t look or don’t listen all the time. Sometimes it does mean that you realize that the only reason you’re looking at something is out of lust. In that case, you just don’t look. Or you look at the same object and say, “Can I see the unattractive side of this?” If you’re listening to something that makes you angry, can you listen to the side of the same thing to not make you angry? Especially in our politicized environment nowadays, that’s going to take a lot of doing. But it’s important for the sake of your mind. The goodness of your mind, the survival of your mind. The skill with which you can extract yourself from the entanglements of the world. Because that relates to another quality, seclusion. Trying to find some time just to be by yourself. So that you’re not taking on the concerns of other people. You look at what are the concerns of your own mind. What are its issues? When you pull it out from society. All too often we let the concerns of society at large govern our lives. We don’t even have a sense of what our own real issues are. The Buddha teaches us to deal with issues of aging, illness and death in a way that really is for our own good. Those are two very different things, two very different approaches. So you’ve got to get out, find some time to be by yourself every day. As the Buddha pointed out, if you enjoy a lot of companionship, the mind doesn’t really get a sense to settle down and know itself well. So make seclusion part of your schedule. It’s not going to happen on its own. You have to make time. Another quality is having some moderation in your conversations. This includes not only conversations with other people, but your involvement on the internet. As you take in the news, remember, you’re taking in other people’s idea of what’s important, and their idea of how to look at it. And you don’t know who these people are, what their concerns are, what their purpose is. So moderate your intake. Moderate your conversation. And you’ll have more time for your inner conversation. You’re making your inner conversation really directed toward your genuine concerns, directed toward the Dhamma. The final quality is trying to develop right view. This is where it’s important to listen to Dhamma talks, to read, to upstraighten out your ideas about what the Buddha’s teachings are all about, and what he actually said, and how it might apply to what you’re doing right now. This relates to a quality called appropriate attention. Paying attention to the right questions, and having a sense of what the right answers are. Years back, I happened to be sitting next to a Zen teacher at a gathering. He was commenting how he’d like to read the Pali Canon. He said, “It’s full of koans, like what is the end of suffering. There’s no answer to that,” he said. I always thought the purpose of asking that question was to get the right answer, so you could look at your own cravings, your own desires and passions, see which ones are skillful, which are the cause of suffering, which ones are actually part of the path. Not all desires are bad. You’re not going to learn that if you take just a cursory look at the teachings, but if you look more in detail, you find that there is a role for desire, but you might say the Four Noble Truths are all about figuring out which desires are worth following and which ones are not. Have a strong sense of what’s skillful, what’s not. When you’re suffering, learn where to look, both to understand the suffering itself, to comprehend it, and to find out what the cause might be. Right now. We don’t learn about these things only in the abstract. We read about them and they’re in the abstract because they’re words. But when we actually deal with them inside, you see their movements of the mind, and their specific desires, specific cravings. You have to learn how to deal with the specifics. Keep the general outline in mind. But simply seeing one time, “Oh yeah, that particular craving caused suffering,” and feeling that you understood all cravings. Cravings are very tricky. They have lots of disguises. That’s something you have to figure out through the practice. But you start with the right view in general, to give yourself the right perspective, to focus your eyes in the right direction. Then do your best to see clearly what’s there. This is how you create a good environment for the practice. This applies to monks, it applies to laypeople. It gives you a strong sense that you’re not just on the receiving end of things, having to squeeze your practice into the confines of what society forces you to do. It forces on you in the way that a tree might be squeezed into cracks in a sidewalk in a city. Remember that the really strong face can break the sidewalks, expand, create their own space. So you have to be strong in your determination that you will create an environment in which you can practice. And that’s half the battle right there. you

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