Be Prepared

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In his book Arctic Dreams, Perry Lopez talks about spending time up in the far north of Alaska with the Native Alaskans. There’s a quality about them that he found hard to describe in English. He said it was partly fear and partly alertness, and a very strong sense of where they were and what possible dangers might happen. And yet they lived with this with a sense of humor and a sense of joy. In other words, they lived with their fears without being overwhelmed by them. Those of us with a background in the Dhamma recognize this quality as heedfulness, the realization that there are dangers, but also that something can be done about them. And at the same time, you have to be very alert. You have to be prepared. So meditation is partly a preparation for the dangers of daily life. Because the most dangerous people out there are the ones who are not prepared, the ones who live with a false sense of security. Things are going along okay, and all of a sudden something happens. They thrash around, they feel like they’ve been violated, and they can get very unreasonable and do very stupid things. One of the problems of our society is that we have a very strong sense of security, or we had one, and then when it was taken away, we’re just thrashing around. We don’t have to think about political insecurity, just plain old natural insecurity. Back when the big hurricane hit New Orleans, there were a lot of people saying, “Stupid people in New Orleans are living in a place like that. Of course hurricanes are going to come and get them.” So someone drew a cartoon in which someone from California is talking about how stupid the people in New Orleans are to live in such a dangerous place. And in the window behind the person you see these wildfires raging. And then someone up in Seattle is saying, “How stupid is it that people live in California with all those wildfires and there’s a volcano about to erupt?” And the people in the Midwest are saying, “People in Seattle are pretty dumb. They have volcanoes. Why should you live there?” And of course there are tornadoes visible in the background. In other words, everywhere you live there’s going to be danger. When I was down in Brazil, we were talking about having a very vivid sense that death could come at any time. And I mentioned that when you’re in California, we could always pull out the potential for a large earthquake. They said, “What would you use in Brazil?” And in one voice everyone in the room—this was a hundred people—said, “Robbers.” So we all have our dangers. And so the wise thing is, like the Native Alaskans, to be prepared. So when you’re meditating, it’s good to find a spot in the body that’s your spot, that you can with some confidence go to that spot, and know that you can manage to breathe in a way that makes that spot feel good. And try to keep it at a place that is especially sensitive so that when that spot feels good, then it can spread to other parts of the body. And don’t leave it. All too often when we get up from meditation, it’s like we’re holding something in our lap, and as soon as we get up it has to fall out of the lap. Remember, we’re holding this in our memory, we’re holding this in our awareness. And our awareness is still there as we get up. The problem is we tend to forget about the meditation and think about what we’re going to do next. And so the skill that we’ve developed gets tossed away. And then something drastic or dramatic happens where we remember, “Oh, I’ve got to have this skill.” But you haven’t maintained what you picked up in the meditation. So this is a good practice. Find the spot inside that is your spot, the place where you can go. If you’re not sure where your spot might be, you can start out with some of those bases for the breath that Ajahn Lee talks about. The middle of the head, the palate, the base of the throat, the tip of the sternum, the point just above the navel. Those are just something to begin with. There are other spots in it as well. It’s just simply a question of exploring and finding where is your sensitive spot, the place where you can breathe. And be fairly confident that when you go there it’s going to feel good and you can maintain it so it feels better. And then make it a habit when you get up from meditation to maintain that awareness of that spot in your body. It doesn’t have to be the whole body, just that one spot. Ajahn Lee’s image is of a piece of cloth that you can hold in your fist. But then spread out to a couple of meters when you need to. In other words, you can have that one spot that’s comfortable, and then when you have a need to spread that sense of comfort around the body, it goes. And then do your best through the course of the day to keep that spot in mind so that you will have something good to fall back on when you’re suddenly confronted with a difficult situation. In terms of the path, this comes under right effort, trying to prevent unskillful states from arising. You don’t wait for them to arise and then scramble around, trying to stop them. That’s the way most people live their lives. But as meditators, we should have some heedfulness. We should be prepared. The old Boy Scout motto, “Be prepared.” Because it’s when you’re prepared that you’re more likely to do something that’s actually skillful. So have a sense of well-being and create a frame of mind that’s sensitive to situations so you can sense when something is about to get bad. And before it’s gotten bad, you’ve already got your defenses in place. You don’t want to drift around careless and heedless and then suddenly get confronted with something dangerous. You have to scramble around. Because, as the Buddha said, heedfulness is the basis for all skillful qualities. Not just concentration, but your compassion, your wisdom, all the good qualities we’re trying to develop in the path. The ability to be generous. All these things come from heedfulness. Realizing that there are dangers, but there are ways of avoiding those dangers. We’re not going to be totally free of danger until nirvana. But in the meantime, we can help protect ourselves. In protecting ourselves, we protect others, because we don’t go thrashing around. So keep in mind the sense that the world is a dangerous place, but learn how not to be overwhelmed by that sense of danger. Take it in a matter-of-fact way. And be prepared. As I said, the meditation is the preparation. And you want to learn how to not simply leave it when you get up. The skills we’re doing here, the skills we’re mastering here as we sit with our eyes closed, are meant to be used in daily life. Because it’s not only here, say, that defying commandments may come up, or sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair in the terms of the text. These things can happen at any time, and you want to be prepared at any time. So cultivate the sense that you have the skills here, and just don’t leave them. That’s one of the things I was struck by with the John Foon. He was a very wary person in a lot of ways. When you got to know him, it took him quite a while before he would open up to you. He wanted to get a sense of you first. You think of all the forester johns. They had to be very wary. They’re going out in the forest, into the jungle. It’s a dangerous place. And if you know the dangers, you’re prepared. It’s not that overwhelming. You don’t expose yourself to anything unnecessary. It’s like living in Thailand. If you’re going to sit outside in the evening, you have to have a mosquito net. And we just take that as part of life. And you do all the things that you need to do in order to protect yourself from the foreseeable dangers, and develop your alertness so you can be ready for the worst. You take the ones that you don’t foresee, but you take the dangers in stride. And you learn how to be familiar with them as well. Before I went to Thailand, I never had much experience with snakes. So when I first ran across some cobras living right near where I was, it was disconcerting. But then I learned a few basic facts about cobras. One important one is that if you don’t move, they don’t see you. And, as Jon Fruin said, learn to have some goodwill and some compassion for those poor snakes. They have to go around in their bellies all the time. They don’t have any arms or legs. So no wonder they’re in a bad mood. So you will learn to observe them and learn to have some compassion for them. You begin to get a sense of what made them tick. When you can figure that out, then you can live with them and not be so afraid. You knew what you had to be wary about, but you didn’t overstep those bounds. But they were no longer the great unknown. I eventually became the person that people went to to get the cobras out of the kitchen. So in the same way, when you have a sense of your own ability to be aware of what’s going on around you, and you’ve got your sense of strength inside, and you can start learning how to try to figure out what makes the other people around you tick, you find that they’re not so fearsome. Then you can start handling them with more skill. As I said, all this comes under that principle of trying to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. All too often we’re told that meditation is simply a matter of being with whatever comes up in the present and being open to the present. Well, there’s danger in the present, danger outside, danger inside. I can’t find any place in the kind where the Buddha says, “Be open.” But he does say, “Think about the future. Your actions have consequences. What you’re doing now will have consequences on into the future.” So you think about both. You pay attention to what you’re doing now, but you also think about the long-term consequences. When you say that in the future there are potential dangers, okay, you prepare for them. And how do you prepare for them now? By getting to know your breath really well, getting to know your sense of the body, the breath energies in the body, and what Ajaan Lee calls the “resting spots of the breath.” knowledge, you can be prepared.

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