Protect Your Meditation from the World

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One of the accomplishments of the forest tradition was to remove a lot of the ceremony around the practice of meditation. You read the John Lee’s descriptions of what people used to think they had to do before they could sit down and meditate. It’s long and very involved. He said, “All you have to do is sit down and meditate.” Think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Spread some goodwill and sit down. Close your eyes. And more than that, remember that meditation is something you can do in all your postures and all your activities. As the Canon says, even when you’re going to the bathroom, you can meditate. So it’s good to have a lot of the formalities stripped away. But there are times when they’re also useful. Especially when you’re meditating in the midst of a very busy life, you need to have something to cut off the attitudes of your daily life. As you come into the world of meditation, think of it as a totally different world. And it’s also not a luxury. There’s a tendency, we have to think, that our daily responsibilities, in terms of our jobs and our family, are something we really have to do. They’re what’s necessary in life. And meditation is something nice if you can have time for it. And even if you have a little time for it, you find that your other concerns start to invade your meditation time, because they’re pressing. They tell you they’re important, or you tell yourself that they’re important. So a good part of the meditation is not just the technique, learning how to stay with the breath, and so forth. But it’s having the right attitude, that the most essential work in life is getting your mind in good shape. And it’s not just for the sake of meeting your quarterly targets or having a little time to relax from your real work. The meditations are the real work. The state of your mind is going to determine so much in your life. Above and beyond your daily work, even your relationships with other people. Because there’s an awful lot that goes on in the mind, in that area of the mind, that nobody else can touch, nobody else can know. In other words, your mind, your body, as you experience them from within. That’s where all the big issues are. When aging comes, you have to deal with it. Sometimes this is where it’s going to be most felt. Illness comes, this is where you feel it. Death comes, this is where you’re going to be battling an awful lot of stuff inside. At that point, often, there’s a lot that other people simply cannot do for you. You’ve got to do it yourself. So you’ve got to get prepared. That’s one reason to give priority to the meditation. The other is simply that this is, as Ajahn Sawat notes, a very high level work. It’s a real honor to be able to meditate. You’re doing something noble. There’s so much in life that requires that you do things that are, I wouldn’t say necessarily ignoble, but at least just very ordinary. But this is something special. So as you come into the meditation, it’s good to be able to draw a line. Now that we’re going to do formal meditation, nothing from outside is going to be able to come in. There’s nothing that’s going to be allowed in. This is one of the reasons we have the chanting at the beginning of the meditation as a group. Think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha spreading goodwill. Chants having to do with the body, chants having to do with contemplation of death. These are often called the four guardian meditations. They’re guardian meditations because they protect you from a lot of your defilements. They also protect your space as you’re getting ready to settle down with the breath. You’re entering a world here with a different set of values. Material possessions are not important. Relationships are not important, except for the relationship of the mind to itself. So it’s good to have a few things to mark the fact that you are switching your priorities, you are switching your values. Your ability to understand your mind comes first. Your ability to get some control over your thoughts comes first. In the outside world, all too often, there’s a lot of competition and you have to beat somebody else out for a job or a project or whatever. Here in the mind, the competition is different. It’s competition between you and your greed and your aversion and your delusion. And victory is measured in different ways. Success is measured in different ways. Success in being able to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful qualities in the mind. Victory over your anger. Victory over your greed. These are the values of the world of meditation. Meditation is getting invaded by things outside. Use some of these guardian meditations. Think about the Buddha and the whole set of values that he represented, the values that he recommended the teacher have. You have to train your internal teacher in those values, to be truthful, to be harmless, to have conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, to be virtuous, to be compassionate. Generous, wise. Think about the qualities that he would look for in a student. The student had to be honest and observant. So see if you can stir up these qualities in yourself and then bring them to the breath. It’s in this way that the attitude plays a huge role. And even though we talk about bringing meditation into daily life, you want to make sure that the values of daily life don’t invade your meditation. It is a separate set of values here. You want to adopt those values for yourself. When I first went to Thailand, my very first day, my very first trip to Thailand, I woke up and looked out of my hotel window. Down in the street below there was a monk going for alms. Now, I’d seen documentaries of monks going for alms, but here I was seeing it happen right before my eyes. It wasn’t staged. It was something real. And just seeing the monk walk down the street, he stopped. A woman who was fixing up some merchandise in front of her store stopped for a bit, went into the store, came back, put some food in his bowl, and then he went on. It was all very quiet. It was almost surreptitious. But he seemed to represent something. There was another set of values that provides relief from the vows. The values of daily life remind us that there is a possibility that there is a noble happiness. There are people who live a noble life whose values are different. That’s what he seemed to represent. And it really hit me that this is something we’re lacking in our society, the ability to step out of the values. Our society seems to be so all-encompassing. They’ve gotten so now that we carry all the values around in a little screen that we can put in our pocket or we can put in a briefcase. We’re constantly bombarded. So we need time to set ourselves apart. Not just coming out to a monastery like this, but learn to set yourself apart as you go through the day. And really set yourself apart as you sit down to do formal meditation. This should be totally your time. And the values of the meditation should take priority. So learn how to talk to yourself in that way. Convince yourself that that’s really true and that you can do it. Because it’s then that you’ve got your priorities right.

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