To Create a Practice Environment

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When the Buddha gives instructions for how to meditate, he often says to go to the foot of a tree or to an empty dwelling. In other words, you look for the right environment. So what do you do when there are no empty dwellings or trees around? You have to create the environment through your actions. We see this in the Buddha’s instructions for new monks, which apply not only to new monks but also to laypeople, for how to create a good environment for your practice. So even though there are some things outside that you can’t change, there’s a lot that you do affect by the way you act and by your attitudes. These create an environment, too. And they can turn what may not be a very ideal environment into some place that’s good enough to practice. After all, there’s no absolutely ideal place to practice. I knew a Western monk one time in Thailand who came to our monastery. He said he’d been looking for a quiet place in Thailand and hadn’t been able to find it yet. So I sent him up to the top of the mountain. He came back down that evening and complained. He said off in the distance there was the sound of a water pump. So I chucked, chucked, chucked, very quietly. As far as I know, this monk never found the ideal place to practice. That’s because his mind was not an ideal place to practice. But this is something we can do. We can affect the state of our mind. We can affect our actions and use them to create the environment we want. There are five points that the Buddha makes in all, plus the sixth that he makes in another spot. They aren’t that you start out with the right view, in other words, belief that there is an ultimate happiness, a true happiness, that you can find through your own efforts. I gave the example that this is something human beings can do. So it’s good to keep that in mind. One, it keeps you careful about your actions. You look more carefully at what you’re doing and saying and thinking and asking, “Does this lead to happiness or does it lead to something else?” At the same time, realizing there is an ultimate happiness means you don’t settle for second best or third best or fourth. You realize that happiness doesn’t lie in material possessions and doesn’t even lie in relationships. Relationships can bring us pleasure. But if we make our happiness depend on relationships, it’s going to be too big a burden for the relationship to bear. We live with people, we have affection for them, we look after them, they look after us, we help one another along. But you have to have a part of the happiness that doesn’t depend on any relationship at all. It depends on the skills you develop inside. So that’s the first factor, having the right view. The second factor is observing the precepts. For the monks, of course, this means all the precepts the Buddha laid down in the Vinaya. You want to know them well. As for the laypeople, you want to know them well. The five or the eight precepts, the five precepts as what they call your constant precepts. Then occasionally you take the eighth. That adds not eating afternoon, not watching shows, listening to music, decorating your body, and then not sleeping in luxurious beds. You take the afternoon, the part of the evening that you would normally take for a meal, and you use that to practice or listen to the Dhamma. You do this from time to time. But the five precepts are the constant ones. You begin to realize that by avoiding the kinds of things that are forbidden by the precepts, life actually becomes a lot easier. Sometimes when holding by the precept is going to be difficult in the short term. Say, for instance, with the precept against lying. There’s some information you don’t want to give to some people because you know they’re going to abuse it. Then you have to figure out some way not to get the information across at the same time without lying. But regard that as an exercise in your discernment. How do you get rid of pests in the house without killing them? You learn a lot about ants if you try to hold by the precepts. What ants like, what they don’t like, how you can keep them out without killing them. It’s good knowledge to have. Then you can meditate with a lot less on your conscience when you know that you harm someone. It’s like a wound in the mind. And the wound is either a raw wound, which you don’t want to go near, or it’s one of those wounds where the scar tissue has gotten really hard. In other words, you deny what you did, you deny what happened. In both cases, it makes it difficult for the mind to settle down. And it’s very difficult for the mind to get any insight or get any discernment if it’s losing off huge areas of its history. So you hold to the precepts and things are wide open. You can look back on your actions and there’s nothing for regret. Particularly if there have been things that you did that did cause trouble, but you did them with a good intention, those are a lot easier to look back on than the ones you did when you knew that the intention was bad. So by observing the precepts, you do create a new environment in the mind. That’s the second factor. The next two factors have to do with restraint. One is restraint of the senses. In other words, when you look at something, ask yourself, “Why am I looking?” And what’s going to come about as a result of looking in that way? When you listen, again, why are you listening? Is your discernment during the listening? Is your desire for something to be greedy about or something to be angry about during the listening? And what kind of actions are going to result from looking and listening in that way? People sometimes think that restraint of the senses means that you put blinders on your eyes and stop up your ears. In other words, you don’t look, you don’t listen. But that’s not what it means. It means seeing the activity of engaging in your senses, or with your senses, as a kind of karma. It comes from certain intentions and it leads to certain actions. So you have to be careful about how you look, how you listen, how you engage with all the senses. Because if lust is doing the looking or anger is doing the looking, it’s going to develop bad habits in the mind. You’re going to clutter up the mind. You’re going to clutter up the mind with all kinds of things that, when you sit down to meditate, are going to be hard to clean out. Especially when you’re going to be checking the internet, turning on your computer, turning on TV, turning on the radio. Ask yourself, “Why?” What are you looking for? Sometimes it’s innocent, sometimes it’s not. This way you really can have some control over your environment. One of our monks was recently visiting his parents, and they had TV on all day long. That’s kind of a background noise, I guess, to make sure that they didn’t feel lonely. But at the same time, it was filling their heads with all kinds of garbage. So you do have some choice on what you turn on and what you don’t, and why you turn it on, and when you’ve had enough and you can turn it off. That way you give yourself more time to meditate. The second kind of restraint has to do with restraining what you’re saying, not getting involved in too many conversations. When you say something, think about it first. All too often we say things and then we start thinking about them afterwards. But when you speak, have a clear intention about why you’re speaking and what you hope to accomplish. When we say something because we feel we want to say it or we want to get it off our chest, you have to ask yourself, “Is this the right time, the right place? Is this true? Is this beneficial?” Those are the three things. Right time and right place, true and beneficial. That starts out with truth. Make sure the things you say are true, and then you ask yourself, “Is this beneficial right now? And is this the right time and place for it?” Then we cut down a lot of speech that could otherwise cause trouble. If you find yourself saying less, becoming a quiet person, there’s nothing wrong with that. If you choose your words carefully, other people will listen carefully to what you have to say. So restrain in your speech. That’s the fourth factor. The fifth factor is finding seclusion, finding some time to get away. So overexposed to the media, overexposed to other people’s opinions. Our society has no rite of passage where people go off and be on their own, really, in a systematic way. We have a little of it when we go out into the wilderness, but it tends to be pretty undirected. When you practice concentration, you find that you find a quiet, secluded place and keep the mind just focusing on itself. That’s a more systematic way of taking advantage of the fact that you have some time by yourself. You have to make sure you make that time for yourself, because otherwise society keeps pushing in, pushing in. So those are the five factors. They’re both for new monks and for laypeople, factors that create a good environment. The sixth factor, which is mentioned in another context, but also having to do both for new monks and for laypeople, is finding admirable friends. People you respect, people whose behavior you find inspiring. And hang out with those friends so you can pick up their attitudes. Be very careful in who you choose as your friends. You’re going to want to become like those people, so you want to make sure that you’ve got a good mold. If that one comes out of the mold, it’ll be well-shaped. The Buddha says you look for someone who has conviction in the principle of action, principle in the Buddha’s awakening, generous, virtuous, discerning. And then you try to develop those four qualities. Develop your conviction. Find ways to be generous. If you don’t have much in terms of material things, you have your skills, you have your knowledge, you have your time, your forgiveness. These are things you can be generous with. And it creates a more spacious mind. When the mind is more spacious, it’s a more pleasant place to be, an easier place to meditate. It’s the same with virtue. And then, of course, developing discernment, which is basically right view. So these are the ways in which you can create a good environment, even in places where the environment may not be totally ideal. You create the environment of your actions. This is the Buddha’s basic understanding of what’s called samsara. All too often we hear samsara being described as a place. Actually, it’s a process. We go wandering around. And as we wander, we create the worlds in which we wander. Our actions create worlds. So, through your actions, try to create a good world in which to meditate. It is within your power.

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