The Best Place to Meditate

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I’m sometimes asked where is the best place to meditate. And the answer always is right where you are, wherever you are. If you put off meditating because your location is not ideal, it becomes a habit, the putting off. You have to remind yourself that even though there are some things in your environment that you have no control over, a lot of your environment is shaped by your own actions and your own attitudes. So you want to bring the right attitudes to wherever you are. Here at the monastery right now, the outside environment is pretty ideal. But when you leave the monastery, you go to places where it’s not so ideal in terms of the things you can’t control. So you have to place more emphasis on the things that you can. The Buddha has a list of five qualities that he says are good for a new monk, but they’re also good for anyone who wants to create the right environment at home to meditate. And a lot of them, of course, require that you have a strong sense of priorities, that this is something you really want to do. And you have to make the time and make the place, because society at large is not going to make it for you. This is not that world imagined by Aldous Huxley, where there are loudspeakers saying “attention, attention” all the time to remind you to pay attention. You’ve got to have your own internal loudspeakers, your own reminders. And your own sense that what society pushes on you as pressing is not always important, because their priorities are different from yours. Their needs are different from yours. You’ve got to look after the state of your own mind, because no one else can do that for you. And that requires that you take time and give yourself some space. And that you resist a lot of pressure from outside. This is why one of the factors for creating this environment is having right view. Right view is a matter of how you talk to yourself about what you should do, what you shouldn’t do, what’s worth doing, what’s not worth doing. And a lot of it is the reminder that you’ve got to set these priorities for yourself. Don’t let yourself get swallowed up by the views of the world outside. And that relates to two of the other factors. One is restraint of the senses. Be careful how you look at things. Be careful how you listen, especially with the internet. If you have to get on the internet, get on for whatever real business you have and then let out. Because there are whole worlds of opinions in there, and they’re all clamoring for your attention. You have to keep asking yourself, “Why do they want your attention? What do they want out of you? And is it in your best interest to provide them with what they want?” When you look, when you listen, have a very clear sense of why and what inside you wants to do the listening and what wants to do the looking. As the John Lee says, sometimes there are things in your body that don’t have your best interest in mind. He talks about the germs going through your blood vessels, the spirits that may be hanging around. Sometimes they plant ideas in your head. And so we look at something and say, “You’re not the one looking.” Greed, aversion, and delusion are doing the looking. And then they leave their scars. There are cases they have in Thailand of people who are possessed by spirits. The spirit wants to drink alcohol. The person whose body they’re inhabiting does not ordinarily drink alcohol. And so when the spirit leaves, the person who’s inhabiting it is drunk. Greed, aversion, and delusion do that to you. They come in, they take over, and then they leave you in a bad shape. So regard your engagement with your senses from the point of view of cause and effect. In other words, why are you doing the looking? And then what are the results of doing the looking? The same with the listening and all the other senses. So you don’t just go looking for what you want. Whether it’s for something to get greedy about or something to get angry about, you’re trying to have your discernment doing the looking for things that are worth knowing and that will actually have a good impact on the mind. This is one way in which you exercise your priorities so you’re not the kind of fish caught by clickbait. Your discernment sees what’s happening and can cut things off when they don’t get the right results. Restraint of the senses is sometimes thought to mean that you don’t look, you don’t listen. That’s not always the case. Now, there are some things you know, if you look at them, there’s going to be trouble. But the real trouble is not with the thing outside. It’s with the mind. It’s not the case that our greed is always excited by something outside, or that our anger is always excited where it wasn’t there before. There are many cases where the greed goes out and looks for something to be greedy about, and the anger goes out for something to be angry about. This is what the Ajahns are talking about when they talk about the currents of the mind. You have to make sure that you nourish only the good currents. Give the other ones pendant. That applies also to your speech. Be very careful about what you talk about. There’s a lot of speech that’s entangling. If you’re faced with a social situation, exactly how entangled do you want to get? And, of course, be very careful with your precepts. That creates a huge part of your environment right there. You have to be very careful not to lie. On the one hand, the fact that you’re giving more value to your words means that other people are likely to give more value to your words as well. And when you get very sensitive about not lying at all, even in little cases, you know, a little exaggeration here and there, a little embroidery there, when you get very strict with yourself about that, you begin to notice other people who are not so strict. And it strikes you. And you begin to realize, “That’s what I was like before. This is what it looks like.” And so you create an atmosphere of truth around you. And by being truthful in your words, you create an atmosphere of care, that you think about your words before you let them out the mouth. The final factor here is finding some seclusion. It’s good just to get away, even if it simply means turning off the computer and being alone at home. Just away from outside influences, away from other people. Because your relationship to your mind is something only you can work on. You have to have some time when that’s the direct relationship you’re dealing with. There are a lot of cases where you’re working with your mind as you’re dealing with other people. And that’s all for the good. But you want to have some time when you’re alone. And your own mind can be your primary focus. And try to develop not only physical seclusion but also mental seclusion. The Buddha says that we spend too much time with our cravings as our companions. This is what establishing a right frame of reference for mindfulness is all about. You focus on the breath in and of itself. You’re being ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. It’s that reference to the world that you want to cut off. Because otherwise you’re constantly thinking about the world. Even though you’re alone, you can be thinking about this person, that person, these events outside, those events outside. And you’re not alone at all then. That’s the in and of itself that you want to cut off. Because when you can focus on the breath in and of itself right here, then you can get to focus on the mind in and of itself, which is where the big issue lies. Because you want to see how your mind deceives itself. It’s one of Ajaan Chah’s comments. He says, “When you watch the mind, the first thing you get to see when you’re really honest with yourself is how much your mind has been lying to you.” The mind has been lying to you about what you enjoy, what you like, what you think is worthwhile. But you do things and then the mind hides the results from you, or hides the results from itself, because it wants you to keep on doing those things and to ignore the results. You either say, “They don’t matter,” or “They’re not really connected to what you did.” All of which places huge barriers inside the mind. Here’s the point where we’re trying to pull those barriers away so you can really learn from your actions. Because that’s the only way you’re going to learn anything in life that’s really worthwhile. What, when you do it, will lead to your long-term welfare and happiness? What, when you do it, will lead to your long-term harm and suffering? You’re not going to see that if you can’t see the connection between your actions and the results, realizing that the results do matter. Your actions do matter. That’s probably the most important message of Right View that you want to keep reminding yourself as you keep talking to yourself. Your actions really do matter. The quality of mind you bring to your actions, the quality of mind with which you receive the results of your actions, that really matters, too. The world just arrives rush-on over these things. So you have to keep the world at bay. Even though you’re living in the world, you have to have a sense of your own priorities and carry those priorities everywhere you go, even when you leave physical seclusion. Then you may be going against the currents of the world. But again, do you want to pick up their currents and make them the currents in your mind? Because society is based on greed, aversion, and delusion. And if society gets you flowing along with it, it’s not responsible, or doesn’t take responsibility for what happens to you as a result. It wants certain things out of you. And then it throws you away. But you don’t want to be a thrown-away person or a disposable person. You want to take your true happiness seriously. That requires that you protect your desire for true happiness and all the actions you need to do to gain that true happiness. You’ve got to protect those, because nobody else is going to protect them for you. Let’s say the world is swept away. Well, don’t get swept away with it. It has no one in charge. But make sure you’re in charge of your life. The world is a slave to craving. But you want to put your mind in a position where it’s nobody’s slave.

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