Quiet in an Unquiet World

October 16, 2021

Jon Sowert called this our quiet corner. It’s not quite so quiet tonight, but the noise outside is not the big problem. It’s the noise inside our minds. Fortunately, this is a noise we can do something about. The noise outside, if we try to try to force everyone else to be quiet, we’ll just be participating in the general run-of-the-mill way the world runs, people trying to force everybody else to be the way they want them to be. This is not to say that we can’t have some influence on others, but the best influence is the influence of goodwill, the influence of the stillness of our minds. Unfortunately, we’re working on our own stillness, our own well-being. And that’s what creates a good influence around us. So always have your true well-being in mind, your true inner peace in mind. Because it’s only when we have spots of peace radiating out like this that peace gets into the world. So let the sounds be. Remember, we’re practicing the perfections in an imperfect world. We can’t wait for the world to be perfect. If we did, we’d die. And we can’t say, “Well, we have to straighten out the world first and then we do our inner work.” The inner work would never get done, because the world refuses to be straightened out. If you could get everything to be the way you want it to be, there’d be a lot of people unhappy. And so it wouldn’t last. So look for your happiness within. It’s important to exert some control. We’re trying to exert some control right here. While you have the opportunity, these aggregates we have, as the Buddha said just now in that sermon we were chatting, if they really were you or yours, you could tell them exactly what you wanted them to be. The body would never be sick. The body would never age. It would never die. Our thoughts would all be good thoughts. Our feelings, all good feelings. So we don’t have total control over them. But we do have a measure of control, and it’s enough to get us across. Think of that image of the raft. It’s just twigs and branches bound together by vines, ordinary things on this side of the river. But they’re enough. When you put them together, you get across. It’s those twigs and vines. They’re the aggregates. Like the body you’re focused on right now. You can focus on the breath. You can focus on the bones. When we’re getting the mind to settle down, it’s to think of the bones, go through the skeleton. Visualize the bones, say, first in the first joints of your fingers. Then focus your attention on the first joints of the fingers. And if you feel any tension there, relax it. When that’s relaxed, then you go up to the second joint and the third joint, the bones of the palms, the wrists, the forearms, upper arms, shoulders. Then you go down to the toes, the first joints in the toes, then up through the foot on each side, up through the ankles, the legs, the pelvis, up the spine, vertebrae by vertebrae, focusing your attention on where those bones are, checking to see if there’s any tension there, and then relaxing it. Work through the body this way, up through the neck and into the skull. That gets you into the body. And you find that you do have a measure of control here. There are certain things you can relax, things you can change. If we had no control over the aggregates at all, we’d never be deluded into thinking that they’re ours. But in John Lee’s image, they’re borrowed. So while we have the use of them, let’s get the most out of them. The world outside may not be really ours. Even these may not be really ours. But no one else is going to move in on our inner sense of the body. They can’t fight us for it. This is ours for the time being. So use it while you’ve got it. Because there’s a lot of good use that can be squeezed out of the body. You can use it to perform acts of generosity. You can use it to observe the precepts, practice concentration. Use it as an object for discernment. Use it as your anchor to stay in the present moment so you can observe the mind. As for the feelings of pleasure that come as you begin to relax things and things begin to smooth out and the tension begins to melt in the body, that can be your nourishment on the path. The perceptions that guide your meditation, the perceptions that send goodwill out to the rest of the world, at least create the right atmosphere. Your thought constructs, your acts of consciousness, you can put them together to create a sense of solidity, stillness, well-being, peace, right here in the present moment. This is a path. It’s not the goal. It’s the twigs and the vines. But it’s good enough. And it’s much better than staying on the side of the river that we’re trying to get away from. Because that side is, in one of the Buddha’s images, is full of thieves, snakes, vipers coming to get us. Our defilements are based on the six senses, all the ups and downs of the world. The world is not a place to stay. It’s a place to go through and develop your perfections. It’s on your way to something better. It’s not that as you’re developing your perfections that you’re taking anything. You’re giving back to the world more than you take. So we’re not selfish tourists. We’re enlightened tourists. A lot of the giving back, though, is not just in acts of generosity, but in getting our minds to be calm, getting a sense of well-being in here so that we can radiate genuine goodwill so that this goodness spreads around. So instead of looking for something to take from the world outside, we’re thinking more of what we can give. That’s the right attitude. We think of all the people who’ve kept this Dhamma alive because they gave, up to Ajahn Sawat, who founded the monastery. Tomorrow is going to be the thirty-first anniversary of the signing of the papers that made this monastery a reality. It was because of his vision. He wanted a place where people could practice. He’d started three monasteries here in the States, all in the suburbs, different cities. One in the suburbs of Seattle, two in the suburbs here of Los Angeles. But he said they weren’t good places to practice. He wanted a place where it would be open to people of all nationalities. Not just a Thai cultural center, but a place where everybody could practice. He was in his early seventies at the time. It was the time when most people stopped this kind of activity, founding monasteries. But he felt it would be a good use of his energy. And he found other people who agreed and were willing to help. It was because they gave of their time, gave of their resources, gave of their ingenuity, that we have this place. So we think of them. And to keep this place alive, we have to keep on giving. Unfortunately, when the mind settles down, it’s in a position where it can’t keep on giving and I get depleted. So as you sit here, try to find that sense of well-being inside. Nurture it. It may be small to begin with. Think of it as being like a flame that you start. It’s trying to start a fire, but it’s a windy day. So you have to protect the little flame as you get it started. And then finally it’ll catch. So protect the stillness you have here, even though the world outside is kind of noisy tonight. Don’t make that the focus of your attention. Focus on the stillness you’ve got inside, and think of it as being permeable. Any noises that come through can go right through, just like cosmic rays going through the earth. It can go right through, but our mind can still be still. So you have a quiet corner that you can maintain even when you’re out in the world. You have that sense of mental seclusion, which is what physical seclusion is all about. It’s meant to be providing an atmosphere that’s good to practice. And on days when the atmosphere is not quite so good, this is when you really want to depend on your inner skills. To show that you have some resilience inside this goodness that you’re trying to develop.

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