Daily Life in Practice

November 30, 2022

At the end of a retreat like this, the question usually is, “How do we bring the practice into daily life?” And that question actually has things backwards. It should be, “How do you bring daily life into your practice?” You want to give your practice top priority. You want it to be the container for how you approach everything else in life. You want it to be changing your environment. Because if you think of fitting the practice into daily life, it’s like trying to grow a tree in a crack in a sidewalk. The sidewalk may give a little bit, but it’s going to stunt the tree. And so you have to realize that you have the choice to shape your environment. You have the power, to some extent at least. And that extent is really important. If you were to go into whatever is around us, there wouldn’t be any time to practice at all, because the world doesn’t leave time to practice. You have to make time. And you also have to shape your environment by your actions. There’s a list in the canon where the Buddha talks about how a new monk should behave. And it’s really a good set of instructions for laypeople, too, for how you should approach the practice as you go through daily life. There are five things you want to keep in mind. One of the first things you want to keep in mind when you practice is that you want to provide the environment for your meditation so that your meditation becomes timeless. As John Fung used to say, we tend to divide our time up into time to eat, time to work, time to talk, time to do this, do that. And the day gets divided up into little times. But you want to make your practice timeless. When you’re eating, it’s time to practice. When you’re working, it’s time to practice. When you’re talking, it’s time to practice. And that way your practice develops momentum. John Sawat was leading a retreat one time back in Massachusetts. And at the end of the retreat, of course, the question came up how to practice in daily life. And he started out by saying, observe the five precepts. And the people who ran the retreat were upset, thinking that he was looking down on laypeople, that they couldn’t manage meditation in daily life. But that’s not what he meant. That’s actually the container for your practice, your learning restraint. You’re learning mindfulness. You’re learning alertness. You have to be mindful to keep the precepts in mind. You have to be alert to watch what you’re actually doing. And you have to be ardent in trying to hold to the precepts as best you can, even in difficult circumstances. All of these are good talents or good abilities to develop that will carry over in meditation. And, of course, living a harmless life. You don’t come to the practice or come to your formal practice with a lot of scars in the mind or having hurt this person or having harmed that person, or having harmed yourself. You can look back on the day, and it’s been a day well lived. And that makes it a lot easier to practice meditation. So that’s the first requisite, is that you observe your precepts. The second is that you exercise sensory strength. This doesn’t mean putting blinders on yourself. It simply means being clear when you’re looking at something or when you’re listening to something. Why are you doing the looking? Why are you doing the listening? As the Thayajans say, we’re not just on the receiving end of things coming in from outside. We have currents going out our eyes and ears, currents of the mind. So you want to ask yourself, who’s doing the looking and why? And what are the results? This is a good lesson on the karma of the present moment. What you choose to focus on, how you focus, is going to have a huge impact on your mind. You find yourself looking at something and greed is arising, or passion is arising, or aversion is arising. Try to look at it in a different way. Maybe you read news about somebody’s bad behavior. You have to remind yourself, this is the human world. The human world is like this. We’re not here to find salvation in our leaders or salvation in other people. So you move from aversion to sangvega. And sangvega gets you more focused back on the practice. So that’s the second part, restraint of the senses. The third is moderation in your conversation. When you say something, have a clear reason for why you say it. Again, it’s a lesson in cause and effect. Because not only do things coming into you through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body have an impact on you, but the things that you allow out have an impact as well. So think about the Buddha’s test for what should be said. It has to be true, it has to be beneficial, and it has to be at the right time and place. Or John Furing’s test, is this necessary? There’s so much we say that’s not necessary. So try to keep your speech to a minimum. Of course, there are times when you need some social grease to get along. That’s a good reason to talk. But have a sense of moderation, of how much is really enough and how much is too much. And this, of course, covers not only your conversation with real people, but also your conversations online. And conversations can be what websites you check out, where you go, what conversations you’re getting involved in. And you have to ask yourself, when someone posts something, why do they want you to read that? Why do they want you to believe that? Why do they want you to have some distance from what you take in in your conversations with other people? Because that’s what a lot of news is, it’s an ongoing conversation. So get involved in the conversations that are useful, and leave the others for other people. The fourth principle is seclusion. Now this means, of course, finding some time to get off by yourself and to get back in touch with yourself. It’s so easy to be in touch with the world and forget about what’s going on in your own mind, that you really do need to give priority to the times when you can be alone. And of course, seclusion refers not only to seclusion from other people, but also seclusion from your defilements. This is why we meditate, is to give the mind a place where it can really rest. Because the mind gets so frazzled by all the input. And all the output that it usually gets involved in. That it’s good for it to turn its gaze inward. To see what’s going on inside. And to remember your priorities. Because this sense of your body as you feel it from within, your mind as you experience it from within, that’s your territory. That’s the territory of the practice. And the world is sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, the things you experience with the senses. In other words, he’s talking about your world as you experience it. That’s the world he’s interested in. That’s the world where there’s suffering and the cause of suffering. And the path to the end of suffering. It’s all right in here. And this is an area that no one else can do the work for you. So make sure that you take this as your container. That you’re meditating all the time. Remember the word meditation in Pali, bhavana, means to develop. You’re developing good qualities all the time. And especially try to be developing mindfulness and alertness. So when the time comes to sit down in formal meditation, the mind’s right there. You don’t have to pull it around from wherever it’s been. Otherwise it’s like a dog on a long leash. It winds its leash around trees, around bushes, around people. And then to get it back, you have to unwind all those things. Whereas if you keep the mind on a short leash, you sit down and it’s right there. The final thing to keep in mind is right view. This exists on two levels. There’s the right view of karma and rebirth, which we take as a working hypothesis. And take it seriously. I think I’ve mentioned the those courses they give where people get together and say, suppose you had only one year to live, how would you live your life? And people notice the different ways they would change their priorities, which activities they would let go, which other activities they would take on. In other words, try to live in a way where you focus on things that really are meaningful. It would be good to have similar groups that would say, suppose you really believed in karma and rebirth, how would you live your life? And see what actions you would drop, what actions you would take on, what you feel would be a really good use of your time and energy, given that perspective. And then, of course, there’s also the right view of the Four Noble Truths, remembering that wherever they’re suffering, it’s your clinging. People outside may be doing all kinds of things that are horrible, but the fact that you’re suffering from it is it comes from the fact that you’re clinging to something. If we had to wait until the world was perfect to put it into suffering, that would never happen, because the world resists being made perfect. And your idea of perfect, of course, will conflict with someone else’s idea of perfect, and there’s no end to the conflict. But if you realize, okay, changes that need to be made in the world first come from a mind that is centered, a mind that is clear. A mind that doesn’t have to feed off things being a certain way. So that focuses the attention back inside. So as you go through the world, and remember, the world here is the world of your experience as you experience it. Don’t think of you being a little person in this big, big world, insignificant little speck of dust. You’re in charge of how you run your world. You may not have any say in the things that come into the senses, but you have a huge say in how you fabricate all that stuff into a real experience, your experience at the present moment. And so don’t just surrender to the stuff coming in. Try to shape it well. Think of the things coming in from the senses as the results of old karma. There’s nothing much you can do about what the old karma is, but there are ways that you can fix old karma so that it’s edible. Think of being a cook who doesn’t have any control over the ingredients that come into the kitchen, but has a lot of skill in making good food out of anything. When you can think in those terms, then you really do have priority. Your need to overcome suffering has priority. And that’s how the practice becomes a context for daily life. The way that daily life goes a lot more smoothly, and your practice can gain momentum, so that whether you have the opportunity for a retreat like this or whether you’re back at home, the practice can keep going. Because you’ve got this good foundation right here. Wherever you go, the breath is there. Wherever you go, you’re surrounded by the breath energy. Okay, you can work with that. And if you have that perspective in mind, then the world outside doesn’t take over. And your world inside maintains its priority. And when the world inside has its priority, then the problem of solving suffering can be tackled. And tackled successfully. That’s the good news of what the Buddha had to teach.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2022/221130_Daily_Life_in_Practice.mp3>