A Meditative Environment

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When you come to a place like this, the surroundings are very conducive to meditation. It’s quiet. The work we do doesn’t impose a lot of demands on the brain. People are observing the precepts and generally have right views. The problem is, when you leave here and you go back to an environment where there are a lot of people with wrong views, it’s not quiet. The work is demanding. Things seem to be thrown at you all the time. What are you going to do to maintain your practice? It’s determination. You just make up your mind that this is something that’s really important in your life, and you try to give it a priority. But then there are ways in which you can influence your environment so that it does become a better place to practice. The Buddha has a list of five things that any new monk should keep in mind and should practice. And they apply equally well to laypeople trying to practice in the world outside. The first part of the list for the monks is being very strict in observing the rules of the padimukha. For laypeople, it would be observing the five precepts. If you really stick with the five precepts, you’ll be amazed at how much it changes your environment if you hadn’t been observing them already. Years back, when Ajahn Suwa was teaching in Massachusetts, at the end of the retreat, people asked him, “How do you maintain your practice in daily life?” He spent a lot of time talking about the five precepts. Some of the people there got upset, thinking that he was implying that laypeople couldn’t really seriously practice out in lay life, that all they could manage would be the five precepts. But that was not his point. The point was that you create an environment for the practice by observing the precepts. Of the five precepts, the Buddha said that the one against lying is the most important. Because you lie to people, sometimes they can take the information you give them and live their lives under a huge weight of delusion. And even if it’s not a huge weight, the fact that you’re saying things that are not true means that you have to think about, “Who did you tell which lie to?” Whereas if you tell the truth all the time, you don’t have to keep accounts like that. You don’t have to tell everything going on through your mind. As the Buddha said, if something would give rise to greed, aversion, and delusion either in your mind or the mind of the other person, you don’t have to talk about it. Find ways of avoiding it. But you do create a really good environment by being very truthful. You can trust yourself. Other people can trust you. And it creates a really good environment for the mind to settle down. Then the next two items in the list are forms of restraint. One is restraint of the senses, and the other is moderation in talking. Restraint of the senses doesn’t mean that you don’t look at things or listen to things. It means you’re very careful to notice when you’re looking at something. Why are you looking? What’s your purpose? Or in Ajaan Lee’s phraseology, he’d say, “Who’s doing the looking? Is it greed doing the looking? Is it anger doing the looking? Is it delusion doing the looking? Or is it discernment doing the looking? Who’s taking over your eyes? Who’s taking over your ears?” So what the Buddha wants you to see is how the way you engage with your senses has a big impact on the mind. And, of course, a lot of that impact comes out of the mind. What this means is that if you keep looking based on lust or based on greed, you’re going to be aggravating those qualities in the mind. There is also comeback. The mind gets more and more entrenched in those ways of looking, those ways of thinking. And that makes it harder to meditate. So if you find yourself looking out of greed, ask yourself, “What’s the negative side of that thing that I’m looking at?” Looking out of lust, “What’s the unappealing side of that person I’m looking at?” The same with listening to all the other senses. And primarily, of course, you say that the problem is the way you think, what your intentions are. This is really good, just as the precepts are really good for showing you your intentions. The practice of restraint of the senses is really good for showing you your intentions. If part of the mind wants to think about something, you realize it’s not really all that skillful. And so you say, “No.” And the part of the mind that wants to keep on looking that way will come up with reasons why that’s unreasonable, it’s too strict. After all, this is the middle way. The defilements have their middle way, too, you know. But it’s not the same middle way as the Buddhas. But it’s very easy for the mind to come up with all kinds of rationales for why this kind of restraint is taking things too far. You say, “Well, this is just for the monks.” Well, no, it’s not just for the monks. Everybody has these problems with how they look at things, how they listen to things. So do your best to see it as a causal process. What causes you to look that way? And when you look that way, what happens as a result? And is it good? As for moderation in speaking, John Foong had a good rule. He said, “If something is not necessary, why say it?” And you’ll find that cuts down a lot of your speech. Now, some things will be necessary simply for the sake of getting along with other people. But you want to develop the habit of saying things when you have a good reason to say them, and not just opening your mouth and seeing what’s going to come out. As the Buddha said, you want your speech to be purposeful. You want it to be useful. Useful to yourself, useful to others. His own standards for his speech were that, one, it should be true. Two, that it should be beneficial. Even true things that were not beneficial, he just put them aside. And then the third test was, is this the right time to say something pleasing to the other person or something displeasing? This requires a lot of subtlety, because there will be times when you have to say critical things to other people. You have to find the right time, the right place, the right way of phrasing it so that you’re showing respect for the other person. So that gives three tests for your speech. For most of us, our speech doesn’t have any tests at all. We open our mouths and it comes out. The John Swartz definition of someone who’s really foolish, or one of his definitions for a person who’s foolish, is someone who, as soon as something pops into the brain, it comes out the mouth. Without any filters. So the Buddha recommends three filters—true, beneficial, the right time and the right place. The fourth thing that’s important for creating a good environment for your practice is to find some seclusion. When you’re at home, have a space where you live. If you’re going to sit in that space, you meditate so that the association of the space with the mind is calming for the mind. If you can’t find a space like that, give yourself times, as we were saying this afternoon. Take a little time off, several times in the course of the day, for meditation breaks. But also try to find some good time every day when you can just be by yourself, looking at your mind, stepping out of society, basically. One of the big problems with modern society is that we don’t have rites of passage. In the old days, when a child was reaching adulthood, the elders of the tribe would take the child out, allow the child to be alone, so that the child could sort through the lessons that he or she had learned and gain some idea of what he or she wanted to do with adult life. Now we’re at the age of the socialization. The process of socialization is so all-encompassing. You get the impression that society doesn’t want you to have any time for yourself at all, or any concern for what really is in your true best interest. They have other ideas for you, other purposes for you, which are not necessarily for your benefit. You even get some domesticated forms of Buddhism that will tell you that you should put your own happiness aside, put your own well-being aside, and work for the well-being of others. If your well-being is worth nothing, why would other people’s well-being be worth anything? The Buddha said, “You want to work for your happiness.” The ideal person is someone who works for the happiness of both self and others. Next down the line is the person who works for his or her own happiness, even if it’s not for the happiness of others. Further down the line is the one who doesn’t work for his or her own happiness, but does work for the happiness of others. And, of course, the lowest is the one who doesn’t work for the true happiness of anybody. But it’s interesting that those who work for their own happiness, but not that of others, are placed higher than the people who work the other way around. Our desire for happiness is nothing to be ashamed of. It’s simply a question of learning how to do it wisely in a way that really does lead to true happiness. So you need some time to be by yourself to figure out what really is your goal in life, what is your purpose. And even though we don’t have rites of passage, you can write a passage daily on a small basis as you sit and meditate. So even though you go back into society outside, you’re not entirely taken in by society. It’s always good to be able to stand apart from it. This is one of the things I admired in Nachan Phuong. I’d been in Thailand for two years, and all the Thai people I knew had very definite Thai ideas about things. There was a very strong groupthink. Then I met him, and realized he was somebody who stood outside, someone who’d been trained to question things and come up with his own independent answers. This is what the meditation is all about, learning how to question things, both inside and out, and having enough quiet time so you can see the subtleties of some of the things going on in your own mind. This is why, simply making up your mind, you’re going to be mindful as you go through the day. But without doing formal practice, you miss an awful lot. There are a lot of things in the mind that don’t show themselves until you’ve given the mind time for things to settle down. It’s like shaking a bottle of salad dressing. If you want things to separate out, you have to let it sit for a while, and gradually the oil and the vinegar will separate out. In the same way, the mind needs some quiet time to be still so things can separate out inside. You can see them clearly. This relates to the fifth and final member of the list, which is you straighten out your views. Remember the basic lesson that the Buddha teaches? That our lives are shaped by our actions, and our actions are shaped by our state of mind. So if there’s suffering, it comes from what we’re doing. People may be doing all kinds of negative things, but you have to remind yourself that the reason you’re suffering from that is not because of their negative things; it’s because of how you process what you know of those negative things. And there are many times when you can take even positive things and make yourself feel like you’re suffering. So when there’s something weighing down the mind, keep looking inside. What’s going on inside? This is not to blame you and let other people off the hook. It’s simply to point out that of the many voices in your mind, you’ve got to learn how to sort them out, because some of them are unskillful. Those are the ones you’ve got to watch out for. There are other voices in the mind that are skillful, after all. If we didn’t have a skillful side to the mind, we couldn’t practice. The fact that the Buddha trusts us with his Dhamma means he senses that there is something skillful in each of us, there’s something in us that wants true happiness. But there are so many parts of the mind that are deluded as to what true happiness might be, or even if it’s possible. So part of Right View is remembering that true happiness is possible when it comes from training the mind. That should be your primary focus. When you develop these five qualities—following the precepts, restraining the senses, moderation in speaking, finding seclusion, and straightening out your views—you’re creating a good environment through your practice. It’s like bamboo. You put bamboo next to a sidewalk, and even though the sidewalk is concrete, the bamboo does its thing. As it grows out, it can actually break the concrete. Just doing its bamboo thing, doing your practice thing, you can shape the environment around you and things that seem to be solidly set against you. You find that if you’re persistent enough in your practice, you can crack them. You can create the good environment in which to practice. So the more you practice, the better the environment is for the practice. Don’t underestimate your ability to change the world around you. You may not be able to change the things you read about or hear about through the media, but you can change the world immediately around you. Don’t underestimate that power. Learn how to make the best use of it.

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