In the Shape of a Circle

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When you meditate, you’re practicing a kind of restraint. When you make up your mind, you’re going to keep the mind in one place, on one topic, and the territory is this body. Anything outside of the body, you just let go. You don’t have to block it out, but you make up your mind. You’re not going to follow it anywhere. In Ajaan’s comparison, concentration is like a fence for the mind. You establish a certain territory, and you try to keep your mind within that territory. Don’t let it go outside the fence. But as Ajahn Mun explained to Ajahn Chah one time, during that brief period when Ajahn Chah was staying with him, you have to make your practice in the shape of a circle, which means you don’t keep boundaries in the mind only when you’re meditating. But also as you go through the day, you continue with the image of the fence. You want a fence that goes all around your property. It doesn’t have any big gaping holes. Otherwise, it’s as if you didn’t have the fence. You can slip through the holes. And when the mind has that habit of slipping through the fence, as you go through the day, it’s hard to fight the habit when you’re sitting down with your eyes closed. So you have to exercise some restraint. Restraint goes both ways, in and out. In has to do with what you take in as you look at things and listen to things. Ask yourself, “What effect is that having on you?” Part of it has to do with the things you look at and listen to. And part of it has to do with your attitude, your reasons for looking at things, listening to things, and all the way down through the senses. We tend to go out looking for pleasure. And sometimes the pleasure is okay. As we’re talking today about the pleasures of nature, the pleasures of a harmonious community, those things don’t aggravate the mind. Other pleasures though do. They inflame the mind. And when you’re suffering from inflammation, sometimes it stays with you for a long time. So you have to be careful about what you’re looking at, what you’re listening to, and also how you’re doing it. Who’s doing the looking? Who’s doing the listening? Is it greed? Is it lust? Aversion? If you let these take over your senses, they’re going to take over your mind. And they’re going to color everything you see. In the Buddhism, they’re going to set fire to everything you see and everything you listen to, because the mind itself is burning. So if you encourage the fires, encourage the flames, again, they’re going to be smoldering as you sit here and meditate. So you have to exercise some restraint over your senses as you go through the day. The Buddha’s image is of six different animals. A crocodile, a monkey, a dog, a jackal, a bird, a snake. And you tie a leash on each one of them, and then you tie the leashes together. And if you don’t have a firm post, you tie the leashes too. Then whichever animal is strongest is going to pull all the other ones in its direction. And given that the crocodile is the biggest and the strongest of the animals, it’s going to pull the other animals down into the river and they’re going to drown. So the Buddha recommends that you get a firm post. What he says is mindfulness of the body. In other words, you continue meditating as you go through the day, even when your eyes are open and you’re away from the meditation seat and you’re away from the meditation path. You can still have a firm post inside. The breath is still there. The breath energy in the body is still there. And it can be made harmonious as much as you like. Nobody has to know. It also gives you something firm to hold on to when there’s a tendency to want to pull to sights you like or sounds you like or sounds you don’t like to resist the pull. Because you’ve got a good place to stay here. So you notice with the image of the animals, it’s not just things coming in, it’s also what’s going out. In this case, it would be greed, aversion, and delusion. But there’s also the going out of another kind, which is basically what you’re doing, what you say, what you think as you go through the day. Particularly what you say reverberates in the mind. Things you’ve said in the course of the day tend to hang around. Which is why the Buddha recommends moderation in your conversation. We all have our ideas of what’s a moderate amount of conversation. But the Buddha’s ideas tend to go on the side of being very quiet. He talks about guarding the truth. This is particularly important as you’re sitting around the table in the morning and a lot of people like to talk about the Dhamma. You have to ask yourself, how much knowledge is there in those conversations? And how much ignorance is there? How much do you really know? What does guarding the truth mean? If you were to say, “I think this,” or “This is my opinion,” that’s one thing. But it’s all too often that you hear people talking about the Dhamma as if they knew what they’re talking about. You have to be very careful about spreading your ignorance around. Because, again, these conversations reverberate through the mind. The Jon Foon talks about a time when he was in the forest. He was staying with one other monk, and they would go for alms together. One day, when they went to the Hill Tribes village nearby, one of the Hill Tribesmen was putting food in their bowls. He asked the question of the other monk, and the other monk answered. It struck Jon Foon that that was the question that was being asked. It wasn’t necessary to answer. He had a very strong sense that the guardian devas of the area where they were were very strict about this kind of thing. Sure enough, later in the day, the other monk had a case of diarrhea, which he attributed to the fact that he spoke unnecessary things. So think about that. That’s Jon Foon’s idea of what moderation in conversation means. How does your conversation measure up? This is why it’s good to stop before you speak and think. One, is this true? Two, is this beneficial? Three, is this the right time and place? Four, this is Jon Foon’s added question, is this necessary? In the time of World War II, you see them sometimes in some of the cartoons. They’d have signs on the trains and the buses asking each passenger, “Is this trip necessary?” Trying to minimize the use of gasoline. So before you open your mouth, ask, “Is this speech necessary?” Because you tend to speak a lot of unnecessary things in the course of the day, your mental habit of speaking lots of unnecessary things will carry over. So you can focus on the real problems going on in your own mind. As you’re eating, as you’re dealing with other things, it’s possible that greed, aversion, and delusion can come up and you’ve got to deal with them. You can’t just say, “Well, it’s normal when I’m not meditating.” These things can take over. If they can take over during your non-meditation times, they’re going to take over during the meditation times. They’re used to wandering around freely, saying and doing what they want. So you’ve got to exercise some restraint as you go through the day. And do it in such a way that you’re not chafing under the restraint. This is why the Buddha again recommends mindfulness of the body as you go through the day. Think about the breath. Think about the breath energy in your body. Make it comfortable. Can you do it with a sense of good breath energy running through the body? Can you work in the kitchen? Can you work in the grove? Can you do it with a sense of the breath energy flowing nicely in the body? If you focus on that, you find that you don’t have much time to talk about things, which is perfectly fine. Out in the world, when people talk and you’re not engaged in the conversation, too, they might think of you as being standoffish. But here, you’re expected to be quiet. If, as they say, silence is golden and you’re going to break the silence, you’re going to have something better than gold. When that’s your attitude, then your practice does take on the shape of a circle. It’s all around you, all around the day. And that’s when it can protect you from whatever’s going to come up in your mind. Because the things that come up in your mind are not very picky about what time and place they come up. So be prepared.

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