

Seclusion

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We live in a world where it's hard to establish priorities.

So much information is coming in from all directions. We start out with the eyes, ear, nose, tongue, body. The mind gives us memories of the past, anticipations of the future. And on top of that we now have the mass media with eyes and ears all over the world; Internet connections that keep us connected all over the world.

With everything pulling at us like that, we have to make a very concerted effort not to get pulled. We have to pull back. We can't allow the world to establish our priorities. We have to establish ours.

After all, look at your life. You've only got so much strength. The body is going to be alive for only so long. And you've got issues you've got to take care of inside.

So this requires focus—which is why we come to a place like this, to get cut off from things outside, to give the mind some space so that it can see what its priorities are.

This is a basic principle that goes way back. Even in the time of the Buddha, when they didn't have mass communications, it was still necessary for people to get out from their ordinary connections.

Think about the Buddha: He left his wife, his children, his family. He was out of touch for six whole years. But it was only through physical seclusion like that that he could bring the mind into focus.

So this is an important part of the practice: to pull away so that you can straighten out what your priorities are, given the body, given the state of the mind, what needs to be done.

As for the clamor of the world, on the one hand you've got to have goodwill, compassion, appreciation. And it's interesting: The Buddha calls these the unlimiteds, or the immeasurables. These attitudes should have no limitations on them.

But our lives impose limitations. You can't go out and help everybody for whom you feel compassion. You can't provide for the happiness of everyone for whom you feel goodwill.

Which is where equanimity comes in: a realization of what our limitations are and of the need to establish priorities.

Ajaan Fuang once said that you need the equanimity of jhana so that the attitudes of goodwill, compassion, and appreciation don't cause you suffering.

You look around and you can see that there are lots of people you feel goodwill for but they're not happy; people you feel compassion for and you can't help them out of their suffering. There seem to be a lot of people who are thriving in the world who don't deserve it. And there's really not much you can do about it.

When you see that, that's when you've got to pull back. You have to establish equanimity.

In other words, you don't start out by being indifferent. Your basic attitude is one of goodwill. But the attitude of equanimity has to be there in the background for whenever you need it.

In particular, when you see your own mind unraveling as you get too involved with the world: This is something you can't have equanimity about because this is where you are responsible.

You can't be responsible for the happiness of other people.

That old line when someone says, "I can make you happy": Nobody can really make you happy. It's up to you. And it's up to each of us.

Other people are unhappy: Try as you may, you can't really ultimately make them happy. What you *can* do, though, is to show them the way. And the only way to show them the way is by your bringing the path of practice into your life, embodying it in your life, and showing that, yes, it really does lead to happiness.

You explore it. You develop it. That way, you can give advice to other people who would also like to follow the path. But ultimately the problem is our own lack of skill. This applies to each person: Everyone is unskillful in approaching happiness.

There's no way that you can make other people skillful. Think of a music teacher. The teacher can't make your fingers more nimble, can't do the practicing for you, can't give you new ears to listen to the music. These are all abilities you have to develop on your own.

The teacher can give you advice on how he or she worked through those problems. But then you have to work through those problems on your own, to develop your own ingenuity, your own application, your own focus.

The purpose of equanimity is to keep us focused on where we're unskillful so that we don't get distracted and pulled away in other areas which really have nothing to do with our lack of skill.

In fact, the way we allow ourselves to get pulled away: That's a lack of skill right there, something we've got to work on.

First, though, you've to establish a good solid center in here, firmly based in the breath, firmly based in the present moment here in the body. Then you've got to learn how to maintain that center in different situations, so that the pull of the

world doesn't pull you away.

Actually, it's not so much the pull of the world. There's what the Buddha calls our *asavas*, these things that flow out of the mind. The mind has a tendency to go flowing out the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body.

Think of it as your brain is going out the eyes, the ears, the nose. It's a pretty disgusting image, but that's what the mind does. It goes flowing out, flowing out, flowing out all the time. So you've got to rein it in.

Ultimately, you can't really blame the world. It's your own tendency to go looking for trouble outside, looking for distraction. You've got to unlearn that habit and remind yourself of what the Buddha said: The real problem is here inside, in the mind's own lack of skill.

We look inside and what we see is dis-ease, a sense of discomfort, so we want to run away. But you can't run away from it. No matter how hard you try, you keep getting pulled back by the suffering you're causing yourself. No matter how hard you try to cover it up, to disguise it, it's always going to be there.

So there's only one thing you can do: Just turn around and look at it squarely, "Okay, what are you doing that's causing the suffering?"

Often you find that it's your old habitual strategies for trying to find happiness, trying to find pleasure. Now, the Buddha doesn't say that it's a bad thing to have strategies. He says simply that the really effective strategy is not what you think. Instead of ignoring the suffering, you have to look at it squarely, to understand it.

Or as I was saying yesterday, instead of trying to create a sense of self and hold on to the things you think are yours, you have to learn how to analyze them, to see that no matter where you define your sense of self, the raw materials from which you build that sense of self are going to turn on you at some point. So you'd be better to drop your attachment to them.

Again, the Buddha's not saying that our quest for happiness is wrong. He's saying simply that we're doing it in the wrong way, we're doing it unskillfully, and the skills that really work are things we wouldn't anticipate. Often, they're counterintuitive. We each look for *my* happiness, yet it turns out that part of discovering true happiness is learning to drop the "my."

All this requires very detailed work, very subtle work. This is why we have to maintain this focus. Think of it like practicing music. You've got to go off and be in a quiet place to practice. Then, bit by bit by bit, you can start to perform—first for your friends, then for larger groups of people.

In other words, you learn to take that skill and over time you get so that you can take it into any area because you've learned how to be with the world and yet

maintain a sense of equanimity about what's going on around you.

While that sense of equanimity is still weak, you have to find seclusion, physical seclusion like we're doing right here, getting out away from our normal connections. Then the real skill comes in maintaining an inner sense of seclusion even as you go back and get more involved with the world again. But you don't want to get involved until you really have something genuine to offer.

That way, your involvement really can be based on compassion, it really can be based on goodwill, and not on a hunger just that you want companionship, you want this, that or the other thing because you're trying to run away from your own unskillful habits inside. That doesn't do anybody any good.

You want to come from a place of fullness. To establish that fullness requires focus, a strong sense of priorities, so that you can keep this center that you've developed. You can keep it full. It's only then that you can really trust yourself as you engage with the world.

This is why your practice is a gift not only to yourself but ultimately to everybody around you. You no longer have to feed off them. That's the ultimate goal.

At the same time, you offer them an example that, yes, it is possible to overcome suffering, to develop the skills that are needed. Often that's the best thing you can do for the world around you.

Again, the equanimity here is not cold-hearted. It's simply a very practical, very intelligent way of husbanding your resources so that you get the best use out of them: a solid happiness for yourself and the example of a solid happiness for everybody around you.