

Daily Life in Meditation

January 8, 2007

An important question is how to bring meditation into your daily life. When you're not sitting on the cushion, when you're not at the monastery or at a retreat center, how do you bring the practice into what you are doing, given all of your other activities?

Well, the first thing you have to understand is that you have to make room for the meditation. It's not a matter of squeezing the meditation into the cracks of the life you already lead. Meditation requires space of its own and it has to take first priority. After all, the Pali word for meditation, *bhavana*, means developing. You're developing the mind. When you think of all of the things you could be doing with your life, the development of your mind should take first priority, because the mind is the treasure you take with you everywhere. The pressures of daily life make their demands, but you need a clear sense of priorities. There are things that are pressing but not really important. Deadlines are pressing, but you've got to ask yourself: How important is that particular job? How important is that particular deadline in the larger scheme of things? If you focus only on what's pressing, you end up with lots of trivial accomplishments, but the important issues, the important tasks of life never get done.

So meditation in daily life is not just matter of squeezing meditation into your life as it already is. It means you have to change your life. A good perspective on this is to look at the Buddha's instructions to new monks. He says there are five things that a new monk should focus on, and, with a little tweaking, they apply equally well to all meditators.

The first thing is the precepts. For the monks this means the precepts of the Patimokkha; for lay people, it means the five and sometimes the eight precepts. These create an environment in your life that's really helpful to the meditation—because, basically the precepts are promises to yourself not to do anything harmful to yourself or to other people. These aren't things you're forced to obey by some arbitrary outside power. The Buddha simply observed that if you engage in killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants, it makes it difficult to train the mind. With intoxicants this is obvious. You get used to being mindless. They're not helpful to mindfulness at all. With lying and illicit sex, there are lots of things to cover up. If you tell a lie to one person, you've got to remember that lie. You've got to remember who you told it to, and who you didn't tell it to. This creates lots

of burdens in your mind. If you're always telling the truth, you don't have to worry about who you told which lie to.

Now, the Buddha said that you don't have to tell everything to everybody. You have to be selective in who give what information to, but whatever comes out of your mouth should be the truth. This makes life a lot easier when you get used to it.

At the same time, when you sit down to meditate, you don't have to think about ways you've harmed other people or harmed yourself. As often happens, if you have harmed someone, you can keep it out of your mind by filling your mind with other activities and other preoccupations. But when the time comes to sit down and meditate, the mind tends to be a little bit more quiet, more open, more sensitive, and these things will come rushing in. The usual reaction is regret or remorse on the one hand, or denial on the other, and neither of those is helpful for the meditation. Regret and remorse fill the mind and make it hard for you to stay focused on the present. With denial, you begin to block off parts of your mind. When you block off parts of your mind, you're placing limits on the amount of discernment you'll be able to develop. There are areas you just don't go to, things you don't look into, whole areas of your awareness that get obscured. That makes discernment hard. So to create the right atmosphere, the right environment for your meditation, the first requisite is the precepts.

The second quality is restraint of the senses. When you look at something, when you listen to something, ask yourself why. What is your purpose in looking? What is your purpose in listening? What's going to happen as a result? If you know that the way you look at things, the way you listen to things—or smell or taste or whatever—is going to give rise to either greed or aversion, don't look in that way, don't listen in that way. So often when we're looking and listening, we're looking for trouble. And again, if you can't be honest with yourself about your motivations for doing these things, that dishonesty is going to carry over to your meditation. If you can't restrain yourself with these things, that lack of restraint is going to make concentration practice, mindfulness practice very difficult. If you let the mind wander around and get into trouble in the course of the day, then when you try to make it behave itself when you sit down to meditate, there's going to be a real conflict. The training of the mind lacks continuity, doesn't build up the momentum that you need.

Related to this is the third quality, which is moderation in your conversation. Ask yourself carefully, before you say something: "What I'm going to say here, is it really necessary, is it really going to serve a purpose?" The three requirements for right speech are: (1) Is it true? (2) Is it beneficial? And (3) is this the right time

and the right place for it? You should make a continual practice of asking yourself every time you open your mouth: Is this going to be right speech or not?

This practice has two advantages. One is that you find yourself saying fewer things that get you entangled in trouble, things that you're going to regret later on. At the same time, it develops that same attitude to your thoughts. This will very useful when you try to get the mind to stay with the breath. You find it wandering off thinking about this, that, or the other thing, ask yourself: (1) Is this true, (2) is this beneficial, and (3) is this the right time and place for that thinking? Some thoughts actually are related to the breath, are related to what you are doing as you practice. Those are going to be useful, those are true and beneficial, and this is the right time. Other things might be true and beneficial, but this is not the right time for them. Get used to having a sense of this. When you speak, you develop the same sense as you meditate. So it's a good habit to get into.

The fourth piece of advice is to find seclusion. In the instructions to monks, this means going off into the wilderness. Lay people can go off camping, but it's also good to find a spot, make space in your daily life where you really are alone. That is one of the advantages of having either an external wilderness to go to, or an internal sense of being separate. You can look at society as whole and get a different perspective on the concerns of your day to day life.

You've probably had this experience. You go out camping, sitting and looking at a beautiful vista, and all of a sudden you think about all of the petty things that you've been involved with from day to day to day, and they seem really, really petty. You develop a sense of what's called *samvega*, dismay over the way you let petty things fill up your mind, fill up your life. This is an important perspective to maintain. It helps you keep a sense of proper priorities as to what is really important in your life, and what is not.

This leads naturally to the fifth piece of advice, which is to develop right view, remembering that the big issue in life is your quest for happiness. You don't want just any old kind of happiness, you want something that lasts. You realize that you have to do something. It's up to you. It's your actions that will make all the difference in the quest for happiness. The basic question, the Buddha says, which helps bring about or develop insight—discernment, wisdom—is this question, “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” That's a question that should be there in the back of your mind all of the time, together with two other qualities: the quality of *samvega* or dismay that comes from seeing how petty most of the concerns of life are, and a sense of heedfulness, realizing that you can't be complacent about the practice. Death could come at any time.

That reflection we had just now: “I am subject to aging, illness, and death, separation; we’re the heirs to our actions, heirs to our intentions, through the things we decide to do, and say, and think.” The Buddha said that this is a useful reflection to have every day. It helps keep your day-to-day choices in perspective. You realize the importance of not putting things off for tomorrow, if they’re really important.

But the reflection the Buddha recommended doesn’t stop there, with the reflection on your own aging, illness, and death. He says to think about the fact that everybody is subject to these things. No matter where you go, no matter what state of being there is in the universe, it’s all subject to these things. The only people who escape these things are those who gain total awakening. That thought helps to keep everything in perspective as to what is really important in life and what’s not. The Buddha said that when you reflect on that—the universality of these things, and the universality of the principle of karma, of action—that’s what gets you on the path.

There’s a famous sutta about Bahiya. He was an ascetic who was highly regarded. People came to him and gave him all kinds of gifts because they felt that he was very advanced in the practice. The thought arose in his mind one day, “Have I really reached the end of where the ascetic practice leads?” It so happened that a deva who had been a relative of his in a previous life time overheard his thought and felt pity for him. “No, you’re not even near the end.” Bahiya’s next question was, “Well who *does* know the end of the path of practice?” “The Buddha.” So Bahiya immediately traveled all the way to see the Buddha that very day. This shows what a strong sense of heedfulness and samvega he felt.

He comes to the Buddha and asks him, in essence, the basic question that lies at the basis of wisdom or right view: “What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The Buddha gives him some very short instructions, and Bahiya is able to gain awakening right there.

What’s interesting about this story is the qualities that Bahiya brings to the question: samvega, heedfulness, and this basic seed for wisdom and discernment: What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? These are the qualities that enabled him to gain awakening quickly. His mind was primed.

So these are qualities we should try to develop in our lives day to day to day. Right view is defined as knowledge of the four noble truths, but think of it as being activated by these emotions of heedfulness and samvega, and the knowledge that your actions really do make a difference in whether you’re going to find long-term, short-term, or no happiness at all—or if you are going to find the ultimate happiness. Actions here deal not only in terms of what you say and what you do to

other people, but also how you relate to events in the mind, how you relate to sensory impressions. Everything that you do in every way is important.

This means that all of your choices are important. This would be a real burden to carry around all of the time if we didn't have the sense of ease and well-being that comes from concentration practice, for concentration gives you the energy to keep up this sense of heedfulness without getting worn down, without getting burned out.

Because it is so easy, as you try to bring meditation into your day to day life, that it becomes one more multi-task in all the other multi-tasks that you're doing. But if you see it instead as the primary place where you take your stance, that changes the equation. When you've got this sense of well-being that comes from concentration, learn to maintain that in all of your activities. That's the strength, that's the energy that enables you to keep up with the practice, to prime the mind to gain the insight it needs, at the very least to free itself from the power of its moment-to-moment defilements, and then, when the conditions are right, to see more deeply into how you're causing suffering for yourself, and how you can stop.

So these are the qualities that you should bring to day-to-day life. The development of the mind, the development of skillful qualities in the mind should take top priority. So instead of squeezing the meditation into the given of your daily life, you make the development of the mind the centerpiece of your life, and then you put the rest of your life around it. Instead of making daily life the container for your meditation, make meditation the container for daily life. Instead of thinking about practicing meditation in the context of your daily life, think about living daily life in the context of meditation. That's how the quest for true happiness really can be continued no matter where you are.

As Ajaan Fuang once said, our problem is that our life is full of times. There's the time to eat, the time to drive, the time to teach, the time to study, the time to wash dishes, or time to fix whatever needs fixing. Because our life gets eaten up with all of these times, we don't have any time left to meditate. The proper attitude is to make every time the time to meditate, so that the meditation becomes timeless. Make that the center of all of your other activities. Only in that way can the meditation develop momentum and maintain strength. Only in that way can you maintain strength in trying to get the mind developed, and to take the proper care in what you do and say and think.

So always keep this in mind, wherever you are, because this is what keeps the practice alive.