

Skills to Take Home

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The atmosphere of seclusion we have here is really conducive to the practice. Even though the seclusion isn't total—we're not living in silence—still the basic values are conducive to looking into your own mind, because that's the bottom line here: Each of us is training his or her own mind, so we don't feel strange or out of place. The values here point inward, and that set of values is as important as the physical seclusion.

The problem when you're not here is: How do you maintain those values? Because you can't take the physical atmosphere of the monastery with you. What you *can* take with you, though, are the skills you've been learning here: how to focus on the mind, how to focus on the breath, how to allow the breath to be comfortable—not just the in-and-out breath, but the breath energy throughout the body. That's an important skill right there. It gives you a link to what you've been doing here.

And these are skills that are useful not only when you're sitting here with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. They're useful all the time. When you're in difficult situations, you can still work with the breath and, at the very least, it gives you a sense of having your space when other people seem to be invading your space. You can have your own little fortress inside.

At the same time, the energy of the breath can form a shield. Because when your awareness fills the body—good breath energy fills the body—it's very difficult for other people's energy to penetrate, to invade. All too often we leave huge gaps, huge sections of the body undefended, and other people will invade them. We pick up their moods, we pick up their attitudes, and then it's hard to shake them off. But as you fill the body with your awareness, with breath energy flowing throughout all the different parts of the body, you feel at ease and you're also protected. The image the Buddha gives is of a door made of hardwood. If someone throws a ball of string at the door, it can't penetrate the door at all. Most people's minds, he said, are like clay. When people throw a stone into the clay, it makes a huge impression. So this is just one of the skills you can take with you.

But it's also important that you learn how to protect your values. Here in the West we have a problem with a society that doesn't even give lip service to Buddhist values. It's almost as if we were aliens surrounded by people who don't understand us. If you go to Thailand, though, it's not that much different. People do give lip service to Buddhism, but in the society in general you don't have to

scratch very deep to find a lot of misunderstanding—and a lot of values running contrary to what the Buddha taught. Really being serious about the practice is a counter-cultural thing everywhere. So you have to be very careful about what you pick up from your surroundings.

This is where restraint of the senses comes in. With the things you look at, the things you listen to, you have to ask yourself: “Why am I looking? Why am I listening? What am I getting out of the looking and the listening?” Of course, in some cases, things are right in your face, especially when there are people around you. But, again, you want to protect your sense of your own personal space. And when you’re not feeling invaded by the other people, it’s a lot easier to step back and look at their attitudes as being their attitudes, and not necessarily something you have to pick up.

So the sense of stepping outside of the culture is a necessary part of the practice. And, of course, you look at our culture: There are a lot of neuroses, and a lot of other problems that you really do want to step outside of, that you don’t want to be part of. So, as Ajaan Fuang used to counsel his students, “Your body may be in the world, but your mind doesn’t have to be in the world. Your mind can stay with the Dhamma.” And although it may be disconcerting at first to have that sense of separation, you find that it is for the sake of your own true health, your own true happiness.

So just as when you’re meditating and a thought comes up and you say: “Well, is that so? Is that so?” you can ask the same thing of other people. Of course you don’t ask it right out loud, you just pose the question in your mind—“To what extent is that so?” If you can’t do that with other people’s ideas, there’s no way you can do it with your own. If you start accepting their ideas, it’s going to be very hard not to accept your own ideas, your own attitudes, or the things you’ve internalized.

Ajaan Lee’s advice for any insight that comes up in the meditation is to ask yourself, “To what extent is the opposite true?” That way you can step back from the thoughts, and the freedom that comes from that really impresses itself on your mind. You can practice the same attitude toward the things that other people tell you, or the other things people insist on. There may be some truth to what they say, but it’s good to step back and gauge: How far does that truth go? Because, in the Buddha’s words, some truths are categorical. They’re true across the board for everybody. But other truths are personal. They may be true for that one particular person, but they don’t have to be true for you. And what we’re looking for here, as we practice, is that insight into things that is true across the board. The Buddha’s teaching on skillfulness, his explanation of how suffering is caused and how it can

be put to an end: These things are constant. They don't depend on the culture; they don't depend on the time or place.

So you start by holding to that. You try to keep your precepts pure, keep your views straight—in other words, understanding what causes suffering, and what doesn't. And that right there offers you a lot of protection.

These three principles—sense restraint, right view, and pure precepts—fall under a set of five that the Buddha taught to new monks. Another principle in the set is keeping control over your mouth, trying to have restraint in what you say. Do your best to not get entangled. And, again, when you can keep restraint over your mouth, it's a lot easier to keep restraint over the mind.

The fifth quality is trying to find some seclusion, having time for yourself, so that you're not constantly surrounded by other people and their attitudes. That way, you can step out both physically and mentally from the general current of thought. At home, this may mean having a little corner where, when you go in that corner, all you do is meditate. Or it can mean actually going out and finding some time in nature to help clean out the mind, and to gain some perspective on the issues of the day, the issues at work, the issues at home, the issues in the family.

This is a universal antidote to our general immersion in society. We've all noticed that when you get out and are alone in nature, you start thinking about a lot of the issues back home, a lot of the issues at work, and they seem so small and petty. The Buddha talks about this: As you get out in nature, the perception of wilderness overcomes you—that you're alone in nature—and nature has nothing at all to do with what's in society. All of the perceptions and concepts of people back home, all the issues back home, seem small and far away. It's good to have the mind in that space as often as possible so that it can really turn around and look at itself—so that you can realize the extent to which you're still carrying something around is right there in the mind. If you're busy with other people's issues, it's very hard to look at your own. You want to see that you really are causing yourself unnecessary suffering, there's an opportunity to see it happen, and there's an alternative: You don't have to do that.

This way, you get some perspective on which thoughts coming into the mind are useful and which ones are actually defilements. When you're in society, it's a very easy to get defensive about your opinions, your ideas, especially when they're under attack. Your ideas seem to be the only thing you can hold onto to maintain a sense of your own independence, a sense of not just giving in to other people. This is why, in the context of society, it's very hard to give up your ideas. Because it's as if you're giving in to somebody else. Whereas if you can step outside those concerns, that context, it's easier to be more objective—when you see an idea

come up, and it's not an issue of whether it's your idea versus somebody else's idea, but simply this idea appearing in the mind.

Then you can actually watch what it's doing to the mind. Where is it adding a burden? Where is it adding stress? And you can look at this again and again and again, until finally you're tired of the whole thing—not tired of the meditation: tired of these ideas that weigh down the mind. You realize that you don't want to keep feeding on them.

The word *nibbida*, disenchantment, is also the word for feeling revulsion in a certain kind of food. You've been eating it for a long time, and then you suddenly realize, "This is garbage, this is something I don't want to feed on ever again." The Buddha makes a comparison with an enticing beverage: It tastes good, it looks good, and you keep wanting to drink it until suddenly you realize there's poison in the beverage. And then no matter how good it tastes or how good it looks, the knowledge that it's poisonous is enough to develop a sense of *nibbida*. Well, that's the same attitude you want to take toward your defilements: your greed, your aversion, your delusion. You've had enough.

This is another reason why it's good to have the breath as your defense against other people. Because, so many times, we keep our defilements up as our armor to protect ourselves, or we think we protect ourselves, from others; staking out our place with our anger, staking out our place with an aggressive attitude. And so we're unwilling to let it go because we think without that attitude, we'd be defenseless. But now that you've got other defenses—the shield of your energy, the shield of your concentration—you're actually better equipped. Because no matter how good the armor of your defilements can be, there will always be a spear that can pierce the armor and penetrate a weak spot. But with a shield of the concentration, the shield of the breath, things go right through, but they don't touch anything inside.

This is another reason why it's good to have the breath as your defense, because nobody can even see what it is. They don't know where to deal with it. It's just that you know inside you've got this protection.

This is why it's useful, even when you're at home, to try to find some quiet time just to be by yourself, so that the mind can take care of itself, watch itself without issues of other people getting in the way.

So when you leave the monastery, remember that you're taking skills with you. And these are skills necessary for life—i.e., the life of the mind's goodness, the life of the mind's awareness, the life of its potential for freedom. So don't forget to pack those skills with you when you go.