

## *The Ivory Intersection*

*December 10, 2010*

My mother was an author. When I was young, she did most of her writing in the kitchen. She set her typewriter a table in the middle of the room and she'd sit there typing away. We'd come running in with all our childhood emergencies. And she'd stop, take care of us, and then go back to her writing. Someone once asked her how she was able to get her writing done. And she said that she didn't have an ivory tower, but she had an ivory intersection. The middle of the house, the place where everybody was coming past: That's where she did her writing.

And it's a good image for our meditation. We're in the middle of an intersection here and we have to learn how to create the ivory part, the part where we can have a space for ourselves to do the work that's really important. The world comes at us from all angles with all kinds of pressing issues, and we often mistake something that's pressing for something that's important. As a result, the really important things don't get done.

Sometimes you think, "If I could only take care of everything else, if everything else got settled and tied down, tied up, then I could find some time for the mind." But if you wait until that point, you'll never get around to the mind. Because there's always going to be something that comes pressing on you. So you have to learn how to develop some mental seclusion: your ability to pull yourself away from your pressing responsibilities, and make the mind your top priority.

As you've probably found, when you come here, even when there's physical seclusion, thoughts about work, thoughts about family—what, in Thai, they call "108 different issues"—all come rushing in. And even if we were to put up seven fortress walls around the monastery, those thoughts could still come in and invade your mind, invade your meditation. And even more so when you're in the midst of your life out there, where there's no physical seclusion at all.

So you've got to learn how to develop this mental seclusion, the ability to say No to those things. And that involves having the right attitude: remembering that there are only so many things you can be responsible for; you have limited resources, limited energy, limited time on this Earth. You've probably seen people who were strong willed, physically strong, mentally strong, who reach a point when they get so old, and their strength is no longer there, that they become like withered flowers that fade away. That's a shock. What happened to the strength? It seemed so strong at the time. And for many, many years, these people seemed strong. And it's just not there anymore. You have to realize that that could happen to you, too, very easily.

So we only have so much time. And you're going to have to ask yourself, "When your physical strength goes, and when strength of the brain goes, what kind of strength of mind will you have left? Where will your refuge be at that point?" You've got to develop that refuge now. That's your top priority. The Buddha's image is not of an intersection, but of an island surrounded by a flood. You can't wait for the flood to go down, but you can develop your island, and develop a solid foundation there.

This is why we work with the body in and of itself; feelings, mind states, mental qualities, in and of themselves: looking at these things as events in the present moment, learning how to be ardent about it. In other words, not just being here, but also learning how to develop what's skillful—and then trying to fend off the floodwaters. If you do have to get out and row your boat around in the flood, you realize you can't stay out in the flood forever, you've got to come back here. But at least you have a place to come back to. This is where your strength lies. This is where nourishment lies.

And however much you may want to be responsible for other people in your family or your work, you have only so much strength. And if you don't look after your own strength, you're also letting them down. So the voice that says, "If you don't keep thinking about these things and worrying about these things, you're irresponsible": You've got to come back and say, "Look, looking after the mind is your number one responsibility." Because if the mind starts breaking down, then how are you going to take care of other people? It's like a tool you need in your occupation. You've got to take really good care of your tools. If you let them get broken or dull, then you can't do your work. So the time it takes to stop and sharpen your knives, to keep your other tools clean and in good order, is all time well spent. Even though you may not be working on your job at that point, still this is an important preparation so that you can do your job well.

So remember, the mind always has to take top priority. This means that you have to have the right attitude and the right place to keep the mind, so it really does get some strength here in the present moment. If you simply force it to be here, it's going to start rebelling. And it's not going to get the nourishment it could get.

One of the sad things in the way Dhamma is often taught—and this is not just here in America, sometimes you see it in Asia as well—is the downgrading of concentration, saying that concentration is a side path, a distraction, that it takes too long and is too hard for people who live busy lives. That wasn't how the Buddha taught at all. If you lead a busy life, you need to develop concentration as the primary element of the path, because it's nourishment for the mind, food for the mind. It's what enables all the other factors to become right. You need other factors to make your concentration right, too, but the concentration was the first element in the path that the Buddha himself discovered. And the well-being, the sense of rapture and fullness that feed the mind as you get it to settle down and give it a really good place to settle: These are the qualities

that enable you to stay on the path. Ajaan Fuang compared the sense of ease and fullness of the breath, the ease and fullness of the rapture, to the lubricant for your meditation. Without it, he said, the motor of your practice is going to seize up.

So you have to work with the breath, play with the breath, experiment. This gives you nourishment and keeps you interested in the present moment as well. Otherwise, the present becomes a very dull place to be, and when it's dull, the mind is not going to stay. It's going to look for its opportunity to slip back to other things that seem more pressing or at least more interesting. But here, you're working with the breath energy, which is directly related to the health of your body. And the sense of ease and well-being that you can create are directly related to the health of the mind. That should be enough to make it interesting.

So you've got to learn how to develop your sense of priorities, with this the number one priority. You can't wait for everything else to get settled down before you work on this. This has to come first. If there are other issues you have to think about, remind yourself that the mind, when it's been well fed and well rested, is in a much better position to deal with those things than if you just take everything on all at once. So if you've got something that really is important, that you've got to deal with, remind yourself at the end of the meditation you can give yourself five minutes, 10 minutes, whatever, and that's when you'll think about the issue. You might pose the issue at the beginning of the meditation, remind yourself that this is something important you'll have to think about, but now, for the rest of the hour, you're not going to think about it at all, until the time comes at the end of the meditation. Then you give yourself some time to let those thoughts come up and see what the mind has to say when it's in a better state to look at those issues.

At the same time, you have to learn how to take at least some fragment of the nourishment of the breath with you as you go through the day. We were talking about this earlier. Try to notice where in the body tension tends to tighten up first. It might be in your chest, in your stomach, in the middle of the head, your neck, your shoulders. Then, when you know your spot, try to keep in touch with it as you go through the day. Just monitor the quality of energy there, and when you sense it tightening up, take a few seconds to allow it to relax. Learn how to develop that release response, the relaxation response, and how to be quick at it. Give yourself little meditation breaks as you go through the day. After all, you take snacks for the body. This is a snack for the mind, time to stop and just be by yourself. Drop all your other responsibilities.

After all, you can't take the whole world on your shoulders. Of course, we may not be taking the whole world but we tend to take a healthy chunk. Sometimes it's a good exercise in humility to realize that there's only so much you can do, and only so much you know. One of the first steps in wisdom is realizing there's a lot you don't know. As

the Buddha said, when you recognize you're foolish about things, you're at least to that extent wise. We're here to overcome ignorance. If we don't admit that we have ignorance, we're not going to be able to overcome it. Ignorance isn't just not-knowing. It's thinking you know things when you don't.

Another part of developing wisdom is realizing that you can only take on so many responsibilities. You've got to realize: What is really my responsibility? And if you're taking on other things that are not really your responsibility, learn how to let them go.

This is an issue that applies to daily life and goes deeper and deeper into the practice: the whole issue of which kind of suffering you can actually cure, which kind of suffering you can actually gain release from, and which kinds you can't. There's the suffering and stress from the three characteristics, just the fact that things change: You can't stop that. But then there's the suffering that comes from your craving and clinging, and that's something you are responsible for—and something you can do something about.

These basic principles about everyday wisdom get applied deeper and deeper into the practice, so don't overlook them. As you learn how to get a sense of what you're responsible for and what you can handle in day to day life, you also get some very important lessons that go deeper into releasing the mind from even the subtler levels of stress and suffering it can create.

So the meditation here is your ivory intersection. Things are going to come around and come through. Little kids are going to come crying in because their older brothers have bullied them, or they've fallen down and hurt themselves. You take care of it and then you get back to your breath. Because it's only in the midst of things that you can actually work on the mind. If you wait until everything is settled, you're going to be dead. Because that's what life is: in the midst of things. So try to find a place, your own island in the midst of the flood, keeping track of the breath in and of itself, the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's the traditional formula. The world is still there, it's just that you're learning how to put aside your greed and distress around the issues of the world. That's what keeps you on your island. And it's an island you can take with you when you go.