

## *Protecting Your Space*

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Think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Try to get a rhythm of breath that feels really good. You can experiment with longer breathing. In fact, it's good to start out with a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. And if that feels good, you keep it up. If not, you can change. Shorter, deeper, shallower, heavier, lighter, faster, slower: There are lots of different ways of breathing. Sometimes you need to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. Other times you need to breathe in a way that allows you to relax.

When you've got a rhythm that feels good, start exploring how the process of breathing feels in different parts of the body, because the energy in your nerves is very closely related to the energy of the in-and-out breath. The energy in your bloodstream, all those little muscles that lie in your blood vessels, the flow of energy through them, is related to your breath. So you want to focus in, using your magnifying glass to clearly see the different parts of the body to see how the breath feels.

See if there are any locations where you tend to tense things up or tighten up, where the energy doesn't flow very well, and learn how to breathe in a way that allows them to stay relaxed and open, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Because eventually you're going to be going back to the larger perspective again: having the whole body as your frame of reference. But you still want to be able to stay centered in one spot and think of your awareness spreading out from there. Which means that before you focus down on that one spot, you want to clean up things in the different parts of the body so that you don't have to keep running back and forth.

You're creating your own space. You're filling your own space. This is important. If you can't feel at ease in your own body, there's no place in the world you're going to feel at home. This is your territory. This is your position of strength. Nobody else has the right to be here as much as you do.

We see this in the animal world sometimes. A larger dog is chasing a smaller dog, and suddenly the smaller dog gets into its territory; it can turn around and chase the bigger dog away. It knows its territory, and the other dog knows its territory. And when you're in your territory, you're safe.

The Buddha gives this as an analogy: the quail who leaves its field. Quails are safe in a newly plowed field because there are lots of stones they can hide behind.

There was once a quail who left its field, and a hawk swooped down and got it. As it's carrying the quail off, the quail laments, "Ah, just my bad luck and lack of merit. If I'd stayed in my territory today, this hawk would have been no match for me." The hawk gets a little peeved and says, "Okay, I'll let you go. Go to the field. But even if you go there, you won't escape me." So the quail goes down to the field, stands on a stone, and taunts the hawk. The hawk comes diving down. But as soon as the quail sees that the hawk is coming full speed, it hides behind the stone, and the hawk shatters its breast right there on the stone.

So if you're in your territory, no matter how small you may be in comparison to the rest of the world, you've got your space. This is your place, your safe place. As the texts say—to say nothing about the rest of the world—even Mara can't get you there if you're staying in your safe place.

So learn how to inhabit this. Don't let anybody else in. Because we do have a tendency to pick up other people's energy and let it invade our territory. Sometimes you talk with another person whose energy is frenetic, and not only while you're there with the person do you feel that frenetic energy, but even after the person's gone you're still carrying some of it around. You don't want that. You need to create your own space, not only filling your own inner space like this, but also creating your environment around you.

This goes beyond just the technique of filling the body with your awareness to looking at the other ways in which you create your environment as you go through the day.

The Buddha lists five things that create a good environment for a meditator. They're in a sutta where he's talking about five qualities that a young monk should develop, but they apply to laypeople as well. Anybody who's meditating needs to keep these things in mind. As to what kind of environment you're creating, we tend to think of the environment outside as pushing in on us, forcing things on us, as something we can't change. But you've got to have the conviction that your actions are creating the majority of the things you sense in your environment. So you've got to look at your actions. What kind of environment are you creating for yourself as a meditator?

The first step in creating a good environment is following the precepts. For the monks, of course, this means following all the precepts the Buddha laid out for them. For laypeople, it means the five and the eight precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants. Those are the five. For the eight, you change precept number three from no illicit sex, to no sex, period; and then you add no eating after noon or before dawn, no ornamenting the body or going

to shows or listening to music, and, finally, no sleeping on luxurious beds or sitting on luxurious seats.

The five precepts are especially important in creating your environment. Just take the precept on lying, which the Buddha seems to treat it as the most important of the five: If you're very casual about how true your statements might be, you're basically selling yourself short, and you tend to attract to yourself people who are also careless about that kind of thing, too. If your words don't have much value, people won't give them much value, and you generally create a bad environment for yourself. And if you're used to lying, saying, "Well, this lie doesn't matter, that lie doesn't matter," how is your mind going to tell itself the truth? It's going to start getting casual about what it says to itself, about what's going on, overestimating your attainments or the obstacles facing you. You get so that you can't really trust your own powers of observation. Because lying involves hiding, and it's not just a matter of hiding things from other people: You end up hiding things from yourself. That creates a bad environment to meditate in. You've got to look to your precepts, make sure you keep your precepts clean. And you find that that really does improve the environment in which you're meditating. It improves the environment in which you're practicing as a whole.

The second factor is restraint of the senses. Notice why you're looking at things, why you're listening to things. What's your motivation? Sometimes we think of restraint of the senses as meaning that you just don't look, or you don't listen at all, but that's not the case. It's just a matter of noticing, when you notice if you focus on certain things, that it gives more energy to your greed or more energy to your anger, that you learn not to focus on those things. You focus on other things. Or you look at the same thing in a different way. Say there's a picture that gives rise to lust, well, you think about the actual body that's giving rise to your lust, and there are parts of the body that you wouldn't like to look at, wouldn't even want to be near, and they're all part and parcel of the body. Everybody's bodies are equal this way.

So restraint is a matter of knowing what to look for and *how* to look for it.

It also means looking at your own motivation. Because often it's not the case that your mind is perfectly innocent and suddenly you run across something that gives rise to lust or to anger. You're actually out looking for it. This is why they have talk radio. People want to get worked up, so they tune into whatever. People switch on the Internet to feed their defilements. Their defilements are already hungry, looking for something to latch onto. You've got to watch for that tendency, because if you give into it, it really plays havoc with your meditation.

So be careful about what you're looking at, what you're listening to, why you're looking, why you're listening, all the way down through the senses. The less you clutter up your mind in this way, the less you give rein to your defilements in this way, then the easier it's going to be to get the mind to settle down. Because a large part of getting the mind to settle down is exercising some restraint over it. But if you loosen all restraint during the day, then it's hard to clamp down again when you meditate.

This is also where it's important to have the breath as your foundation. The Buddha talks about having mindfulness immersed in the body, when it fills the body, as a basis for sense restraint. He compares it to a post. Suppose you had six animals, with each one on the leash, and you tied the leashes all together into one knot. Now, if the leashes weren't tied to a post, then the animals would pull one another in all different directions. If there were a crocodile, it would go down into the river; a monkey would want to go up into a tree; a hyena would want to go into the charnel ground to feed on some corpses. In other words, all the different animals would be pulling in different directions. And it would depend on which animal happened to be strongest at any one time, and that's where they'd all go, they'd all get dragged along. If the crocodile is stronger, then the monkey and the hyena and everybody else get dragged down into the river and often drown.

However, if you have a post and tie all the leashes to a post, and if the post is a really firm, then no matter how hard the animals pull, they've got to stay right there next to the post.

That's the image for filling your body with mindfulness, filling your body with your awareness, and keeping it there, making that your foundation from which you look or listen or taste or whatever you're doing. You want to have this sense of the energy in the body as your post. That way, you've got some continuity between your formal meditations; you've got the body you right here, you're centered right here, so when the time comes to sit down the next time, you're already right here. It doesn't involve a lot of pulling and pushing, untangling leashes that have gotten caught up, or pulling dead animals out of the river. Everything is all right here.

The third factor in creating your environment is knowing moderation in speaking. It's good to be a person of few words—if they're well-chosen. At the very least, be careful: Every time you open up your mouth, ask yourself—Why am I speaking? Like that sign we have in the guesthouse: W A I T, Why Am I Talking? You always want to know what your intention is, because talking that has no specific intention counts as idle chatter. If you fill your days up with idle chatter, then your mind is going to be filled with idle chatter. It's going to be hard

to get it to settle down, to focus on something really useful, like staying with the breath.

So be very clear that you don't want to misrepresent the truth; you don't want to speak in a way that divides people, just for the satisfaction of seeing them break apart; you don't want to speak in a way that's meant mainly to hurt other people's feelings; you always want to know what your intention is. Because the way you speak is probably the major factor that influences your environment. It creates the environment for the mind.

So be very careful about what comes out of your mouth. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, if you can't control your mouth, then there's no way you're going to be able to control your mind. So start here, make sure that your words are precise, accurate, to the point, helpful to other people, helpful to yourself. Those three tests that the Buddha has: Is it truthful? Is it beneficial? Is this the right time and place? You want your speech to pass all three of those tests.

The fourth factor in shaping your environment is finding seclusion. It's good to have a place where you stop every day and have quiet time for yourself. I don't know how many people, both here and in Thailand, who say, "Well, all I have to do is just be very mindful of what I'm doing throughout the day, and that's what the practice is really all about." Your mind needs to have time to itself, where it's not taking on other outside activities, other outside responsibilities. Otherwise, all it knows is the mind in the reaction to things outside. What you really want is to have time every day to get in touch with how the mind is reacting to itself. What conversations are going on in the mind?

So look for some physical seclusion, along with what the Buddha calls mental seclusion—dropping your thoughts of the future, dropping your thoughts of the past, and just staying right here, with a minimum amount of internal chatter, just enough to get the mind to settle down.

The sense of seclusion is also important in the way you go through the day, as you interact with other people. As we were saying today, it's often good to be able to step back just a little bit, so that you're not totally sucked into the society around you. Have the attitude of being an anthropologist, studying, "Oh, this is the way human beings are this time in history, at this spot, in this society." And be aware of the times when their values begin to creep into you. Because it is subtle, the influence that people have on one another: the values you pick up, your idea of what's important, and what's not important.

You can see this in the media. The kinds of questions that get raised are generally not the really important questions. They're diversionary. The big question in life, which never gets addressed in the media, is: Why is it that

everyone wants happiness, but people are doing so many things that create suffering? And particularly, why are *you* doing things that create suffering? That's the question you always want to keep foremost, and that's usually a question that most people don't ask. You require some space around your mind, so that you can keep that question uppermost in your mind.

This relates to the fifth factor that influences your environment, which is making sure that your views are right. In other words, you do have conviction that your actions matter, that they do make a difference. Your experience of the present moment is something that's shaped by things you've done in the past, but also things you're doing right now. And you do have freedom of choice.

The Buddha never tried to prove that freedom, but he did say that if you don't believe that, there's no reason to practice. If you can't take that as a working hypothesis, you'll get nowhere. The bewilderment that comes from pain and suffering just stays bewildered. And he says if you don't believe you have the power to make these decisions, you're left without protection. Because this is your protection right now: the fact that you can change the way you focus on things, you can change the way you interpret things, you can change the questions that you regard as important. There are potentials for pain, there are potentials for pleasure right now, and you have the freedom to choose which ones you're going to cultivate and amplify. You want to make the most of that opportunity.

I remember a meditator who was following a meditation method in which he was advised not to do anything at all—just know what was there and just be with whatever came up. He had been a meditator for several years, and nothing bad had ever really come up. But then suddenly, on a very long retreat, some really scary stuff started coming up in his mind. He had been indoctrinated enough to believe that he should just be with whatever came up, but it was making him paranoid. And no matter how much the teachers told him to step back, relax, don't push things so hard, he felt that they were now lying to him. He had been taught that you just have to be with whatever comes up, and not do anything, and that, somehow, is going to give rise to insight.

Well, that's not the case at all. That's leaving you unprotected. Your basic assumption has to be that you *are* shaping your experience out of the raw materials from your past actions, and you can learn how to do that skillfully. That's the beginning of right view: that you can do that, that you can develop those skills.

And it's that belief in karma that grows into an understanding of the four noble truths: There is suffering, and it's clinging. There is a cause, and the cause is there in the mind, something the mind is doing, and something you can do

something about. There are factors in the mind that you can convert into the path; you want to develop those so that you can realize the end of suffering. This is possible. The real work is in here. The environment nowadays tells us that anything of interest is out there, something someone else is doing some other place. That's a value you have to resist. In other words, keep very careful watch on what you're doing, because it really is important.

These are the ways in which we create our environment. So don't let yourself be a passive victim of unhealthy influences from outside. You want to create your own space here, both inhabiting the body and having a very clear sense of what you want to protect in the mind. And just like an electric current that creates a magnetic field around it, by focusing on your actions in this way, you create a sort of protective cocoon around yourself that shelters your practice, protects your practice, gives it an environment in which it can grow.

So try to keep these five points in mind: observing the precepts, restraint for the senses, moderation in talking, finding seclusion, both physical and mental, and making sure that your views are right. Because these are the factors that shape your environment more than anything else.