

Life in the Context of the Practice

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People often ask about how to fit the practice into their lives, and it's a valid question. You want to find ways to bring the peace and calm of a centered mind into your work and into your family life. But the problem with that question is that sometimes the peace and calm are made to serve the purposes of your work and your family life, and the context then gets very small and confined: trying to keep the mind still so you can get the job done better or so that you can survive the ravages of the modern corporate world, modern school world, the ravages of modern family life. The meditation just becomes one more technique to serve those ends.

It's good to think about the issue the other way around: How do you take the practice as your context and how do you fit your life into that? You want to remember that your life doesn't have to be defined by your work or your family or even your culture. It can be, and often people make us want to think that that's how we have to fashion our lives. They tell us that because we come from a particular culture, we have to think in certain ways, claiming that because we're living now in a postmodern world we have to accept postmodern values, or that we have to fit into the digital world with digital values.

But the Dhamma reminds you that you have a choice. You can step out of those worlds. After all, each of them is a form of becoming, and every form of becoming involves suffering. If you want to be defined by your culture, that means you want to be defined by your suffering. And you can ask yourself, do you really want that? How about creating a larger context? That larger context is made up of the values of the Dhamma, which are often very simple, but they're defined in ways that we tend to overlook.

As you may know, monks chant the Patimokkha once every two weeks. They meet together and one of the monks chants the Patimokkha for the rest to listen to. And much of the Patimokkha is concerned with very technical, minor rules. Some of the rules are major of course. No killing, no stealing, no sex, no lying about your attainments: Those are the big rules. But then there are a lot of little rules even down to how you eat your food, how you behave in public: Don't swing your arms, that kind of thing. You may wonder, why this concern for the little details? And the answer is that the rules by which we live are the things that indicate our values. We try to reaffirm our values every two weeks. Our values create our culture.

Buddhism has always been countercultural. Even in India it was countercultural. And when you have a countercultural practice like this, you need to band together and remind one another of what your values are. This is one of the reasons why when the lay people come on Sundays, we chant the precepts, to remind ourselves that these are our values. This is what holds us together and these are values that we hold in opposition to the world. The world prizes, in some ways, things that are hard to understand. They say we need to kill, we need to steal, we need to lie, illicit sex is ok in certain circumstances, drinking is fine in certain circumstances. That's what defines a lot of our culture.

When we take the precepts we're saying No, we're going to stand apart. This is standing apart not only here in America in the 21st century, but it was standing apart back in India at the time of Buddha, standing apart in Thailand. To practice the Dhamma is to step outside your culture, and it's an act of freedom, an assertion of freedom. But you have to reaffirm those values every day. This is why it might be good at the end of each morning meditation session to remind yourself of the five precepts.

This is also why we have the contemplation of the four brahmaviharas. It opens our minds to all beings. You want to have goodwill for all beings, and that means if you see someone who's suffering, no matter who they are, you want to have compassion for them. If somebody's already happy, you want to have empathetic joy. But then you remind yourself that what we experience all depends on our actions. You can't control other people's actions—which is why when we say, "May all beings be happy," it's not that we necessarily think that we can make them happy, but we will make sure that, in terms of our intentions, we're not going to do anything that's going to harm the true happiness of others—in other words, something that's going to make them break the precepts.

And we have to look after our actions. Other people may tell you to do x but you have to ask yourself, “This is going to be my action when I do it. Do I want that kind of kamma? Should I give in to that pressure?”

This relates to the other chant that we do every night, which is the chant about the requisites. A lot of the pressure we get in our lives, especially when working for a corporation or any kind of organization, is to make more money so that we can have more things. The reflection on the requisites is to remind us that, one, we don't really need that much in terms of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine; and, two, the more we get of those things, the more we're placing a burden on the rest of the world. So even though our culture may really prize having lots of toys, when you think of the karmic consequence of having lots of toys they get a lot less attractive. When the toys don't attract you, the culture has a lot less power over you. So this, too, is a liberating contemplation.

Similarly with the contemplations of the five reflections: We're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. The only thing we have to depend on is our kamma: “Whatever we do for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir.” That's true for us; it's true for everybody.

It's good to think about these things every day, every day. They're simple contemplations and they're true for everybody. They're true here in America and they're true in Thailand, true in India, true everywhere, regardless of where you are on the social spectrum. And they help you step outside the world—the world of your work, the world of your family—so that you can remind yourself what your values are, and that you want your values to be shaped in line with the larger picture.

So remind yourself of that larger picture every day. Particularly with the brahmaviharas: It's good to think of all beings before you meditate and when you come out. You do it before you meditate to remind yourself of the larger picture, just like the Buddha on the night of his awakening. We think *we* have narratives that we bring into the meditation: He had thousands and thousands of them that he could remember. But instead of going straight to the present moment from that knowledge, he went into the knowledge of the larger picture, because only when he saw the larger picture that he realized the principle of karma: that this process of rebirth happens because of our actions, our intentions, which are shaped by our views.

Once he saw the pattern, then he could focus in on the present moment to see the same pattern there. Focusing on the larger pattern took a lot of the personal sting out of the particular problem or issue in the present moment.

The same applies to you. After thinking about the happiness of all beings, and how the principle of kamma applies to all beings, you can view your problems in terms of the larger picture. That enables you to step back from your problems so that you can settle down and meditate properly, realizing that whatever your issues are, the suffering that you feel from them comes from your own craving, comes from your own clinging. And whatever issues will come up in the course of the day, you don't know what they'll be, but you do know that you're going to need a lot of mindfulness, you're going to need a lot of alertness, so you want to work ardently on developing those qualities.

So that reflection helps get you into the meditation.

When you leave the meditation, the reflection on the brahmaviharas reminds you of what values you want to carry into the world. And then you can think about: What do you want to get out of the world?

The Buddha talks about seven treasures which are all treasures of the mind. There's conviction, i.e., conviction in the Buddha's awakening, which translates into conviction in the principle of action, that your actions really do matter. Based on that there's virtue, and then a sense of shame and a sense of compunction.

Virtue is the desire not to harm. It's making up your mind not to harm. We have to consciously take this on as our value because there are so many arguments and so many voices saying that there are times when you do have to kill, for instance, to protect yourself or protect others. But we say we don't want to harm anybody, we certainly don't want to kill anybody or steal. This is what the precepts are all about. You can strike back in self defense when you're threatened, but you can't do it with the intention of killing.

The precepts set certain boundaries on your behavior. In other words, you're not going to scramble to get things in a way that's going to be really bad for other people and bad for yourself in the long run. Remember the Buddha's vision of the world: fish fighting over a little bit of water in a puddle that's drying up. If one of the fish kills another fish, for what—for one little more gulp of water, then it dies: What's accomplished by that?

Your virtue is also protected by your sense of shame and compunction. Shame here is not the unhealthy kind of shame that psychologists are talking about all the time, it's the healthy sense of shame that comes with a sense of honor. In other words, you realize that certain actions are beneath you, and you would be ashamed to do them—which protects you from doing them.

Compunction is fear of the consequences that are going to come if you do something really unskillful. That protects you as well. There are some cases where it may look like you're going to lose in terms of the world by sticking with the precepts, but you don't have to look good in the eyes of the world, you want to look good in the eyes of the Buddha, you want to look good in the eyes of the noble ones. This is why they call these precepts the precepts that are dear to the noble ones, the precepts that are admired by the noble ones. You want to keep their perspective in mind.

The other treasures are learning, generosity, and discernment. Learning means knowing the Dhamma. We fill our heads with so much garbage, so it's good to clear some of that garbage out and fill it with Dhamma instead. That way, when difficult situations come up, you've got something you can fall back on. You can remember, "The Buddha says this about this kind of situation." For instance, he talks about true victory being victory over yourself rather than victory over others. Remembering that can prevent you from making all kinds of mistakes in trying to beat somebody else out at work or from playing the game of gain and blame that often goes on in couples. You have to remember: What is a genuine victory? What is a victory in the eyes of the Buddha? You've got that knowledge you can fall back on.

Generosity is what opens the heart, makes you realize that you have a lot that you can share with others and that once you've shared something it really becomes yours. As the Buddha said, if beings of the world knew the rewards of generosity the way he did, they wouldn't eat without sharing, even if it were their last meal. As long as there was somebody there to share it with, they would share. And you don't have to think about the rewards in another lifetime. You can think of the rewards right now: the quality of heart that goes with the fact that "I can give this to somebody, I don't need to hoard it all for myself." The hoarder's mind is very narrow and what happens as a result of hoarding, as the Buddha said, is the very thing that hoarders are afraid of: poverty. This is what hoarding leads to.

And finally there's discernment. Ajaan Lee has a nice comment about this. He says that if you've got discernment, then all you need is a machete and you can set yourself up in life. In other words, discernment is what teaches you to make the most of what little you've got and to appreciate what you've got, to make it something that's really good for the mind.

So these are some of the forms of wealth you want to gain in life. Not wealth in material things: You want wealth in qualities of the mind. And it's good to remind yourself of these things every day, every day, so that they form the context for your life. We live in a world where things are very pressing all the time, and the fact that something is pressing often makes us mistake it for something important. There's actually a huge difference. Just because someone's pushing, pushing something on you doesn't mean it's really important. It means that simply they want it. To withstand that kind of push, you need a fund of inner wealth, this inner space, inner sense of values, clear values where you can step back from being pressed like that and gauge for yourself: "Is this something I really want to give in to, or is a some case where I really need to draw the line?"

And it's in being able to draw the line for yourself that you find the freedom that allows you not to be totally shaped by your culture, totally shaped by your job or your family. That freedom to draw the line wisely comes from having this larger sense of what things are all about: putting your life into the context of the practice rather than putting the practice into the context of your life.

So remember these values. They're simple, they're basic, but they can make all the difference in the world and in your mind.