

Your Quiet Corner

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Ajaan Suwat used to call our monastery our quiet corner here. The world, as he said, is always in a turmoil, one way or another, and to find our sanity, we need to find our quiet corner.

This, of course, is an analogy for the mind itself. As the Buddha once said, in his teaching the word “world” simply refers to the world of the senses. What is there in this world? There are the eyes and there are forms. There are the ears and there are sounds. Nose, aromas; tongue, flavors; body, tactile sensations; mind and ideas: That’s the world. In other words, the Buddha never deals with the question of whether there’s something behind our experience. Is there a real world out there that’s in contact with us? Is there no world out there? Are these experiences just things floating around? He doesn’t deal with that issue. He has us look directly at the world of our experience, and focuses on the big problem in that world of experience, which is the suffering that comes from the way we engage with that world.

Now, to deal with the suffering in this world we have here, we need to find a quiet corner. That’s what we try to create as we meditate: a spot in the mind where we’re just observing things. We try to make that spot as solid and imperturbable as possible, so that when things come up in the body, things come up in the world of the senses, we can simply watch. We don’t have to get carried along with the currents of the world.

It’s like standing on the bank of a river. The river may flow, but we don’t flow along with the river. We stay on the bank.

We need this outside place to have a quiet corner away from the general concerns of the world of human beings so that we can take a good look at our mind. See if you can find a quiet corner in there with the breath, so that you can deal with the world of what’s going on in the world of the body and of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—the whole shmeer. You want to be able to see things for what they are.

Find a spot in the body that’s comfortable, a spot where you can watch the breath clearly. Learn how to stay there in the midst of all the other things that are happening. We can’t wait for everything in the world to settle down and be good before *we* can settle down and be good. We’ve got to find a place to settle down for ourselves. We have to create this corner. And we have to learn how to protect it. Learn how to have a sense of its preciousness. Have respect for it.

So find a spot where you can be with the breath and just learn how to stay there. Nothing much may seem to be happening, but that’s fortunate. You can learn how to stay there in the midst of relative calm and then eventually work up. Learn how to walk

and maintain a sense of a still center. Learn how to talk and maintain a sense of the still center that's simply watching yourself talk, so that you can see the process clearly and do it more skillfully. That's the value of the center. Bit by bit, you can learn how to maintain this center in lots of other activities. Even in the midst of an argument with somebody else, even in the midst of difficult situations, if you can maintain the still center, you've got the advantage.

So now that things are relatively quiet around you, learn how to find a place where you can stay inside, create your own quiet corner, and then watch over it. This requires mindfulness, the ability keep remembering that this is something you want to work on; and alertness to watch to see what's actually happening, to notice when you're beginning to slip off and come right back. This is where you also bring in the quality of ardency, which means you really pay attention to this, you have a sense of the preciousness of this quiet corner. You respect it. You don't toss it away for whatever else comes up in the mind. No matter how compelling, no matter how important other things may seem, right now nothing else is more important than maintaining the sense of just being the observer, just watching the breath, having a sense of standing established in the breath.

Then, when you leave here the monastery, try to make an effort to maintain this center, so that you can have a quiet corner wherever you are. All the skills we learn in meditation are meant to be used in all situations. How to make the breath comfortable is a useful skill to have at all times. You find that when anger arises in the mind, it's going to have an effect on the breath. When fear arises, when lust arises, it's going to have an effect on the breath. If you know how to gain a sense of how to adjust your breathing, to breathe through whatever tension or tightness or constriction that comes up around these emotions, to breathe in a way that helps to weaken their hold, and at the same time, learning how to gain a sense of how the breath energy in the body can feel comfortable, how it can feel refreshing: That makes the mind less hungry for other kinds of pleasure.

This changes the balance of power on the mind. If you're feeling tired and frazzled, it's very easy to just jump at whatever sensual pleasure offers itself. But if you've got a sense of well-being and you know how to tap into it whenever you need it, then when other pleasures come along, it's a lot easier to say No, especially they involve unskillful attitudes in order to maintain them or to attain them. You realize: "I don't have to go there. It's not worth it." You've got something better.

So the skills you learn on the cushion—the skills you learn while you're sitting here with your legs crossed and your eyes closed—are not just for this position. They're not just for this place. They're meant to be taken with you wherever you go. It's like learning a musical instrument. You practice in a practice room where it's quiet, where you have a minimum of distractions, but that's not because you want to play the instrument only in

the practice room. You play in the practice room so that you can master your technique, so that you can focus your attention fully on what you're doing. Then the next step is learning how to develop the same techniques, use the same techniques, and have that same kind of focus in more and more difficult situations, where people are listening, people are watching, more and more people. Ultimately, you want to get to a point where you can play in any situation no matter how much pressure there may be, no matter how many people there are around you. You want to be able to maintain that same focus.

So while you're here in a quiet corner, learn how to appreciate the opportunity you've got to focus on this quiet corner inside. It's not the case, of course, that while you're here there are going to be no distractions at all. There'll be distractions in terms of thoughts of past and future, sometimes strange feelings coming up in the body, but try to have a sense of at least having one spot in your awareness where you can take a stance. That's your quiet corner. As for the rest of what's going on in the body and in the mind, there are times when you have to let things run their course and you just hang on right here. Other times, you can take the sense of ease, the sense of stillness, and begin to spread it out throughout the whole body, and the body responds. The mind responds.

But even in cases where you can't do that, always hang on to your quiet corner, your quiet spot. You find as you maintain it in different situations that it really can be your refuge. It gives you a good solid basis from which to decide what to do, what to say, what to think in any situation. And if you can't think of what to do, what to say, well, maybe it's just good to be quiet and keep watching, standing in a place to be quiet and keep watching.

So learn how to develop this place, make it strong, and then try to carry it into all of your other activities. That's when you see the difference between being in a world with a refuge and being in the world without a refuge. The Buddha once said that the self is its own refuge, but you have to develop good qualities inside yourself in order to be a refuge, and this quiet corner is one of the really important ones.