

A Matter of Life & Death

November 15, 2006

A place conducive to meditate is one of the requisites for our practice, a place that's quiet. When people talk, they talk about things that are necessary, things related to the Dhamma, so they don't disturb one another's concentration. It's a place far away from the hustle and bustle of the world, where you have the time and space to watch your mind. But a place conducive to meditation doesn't always mean it's comfortable. Sometimes it can be a difficult place, conducive in the sense that it's helping to test the meditation, helping to test your concentration, helping to test your insight.

The texts often talk about how important it is when your concentration is still weak that you find a good place to meditate that's very quiet, very conducive, very comfortable. But then when it's not so weak anymore, you need to test your practice, because after all, the big tests are going to come someday. Aging, illness, and death will take their gloves off. When they come at you, they don't come nicely. You've got to be prepared for them, which means that you have to test your practice to make sure that it's up for these things when they come, that your practice really is a refuge.

Many of these forest ajaans talk about how they never really got a strong sense of refuge until they went into the forest where things were difficult from all sides. There were diseases, there were dangerous animals, the forest was often a hiding place for criminals of various kinds. When they found themselves in difficult situations like this, the question was, what are you going to depend on?

There's a passage in the Canon where a monk is reflecting. He's out in a big grassy wilderness and he's sick. What is he going to do? Is he going to go back and try to find a doctor? He says, "No, I'm going to depend on the five strengths. I'm going to depend on the seven factors for awakening." In other words, he's going to learn how to take his practice as his refuge.

And that's a principle we should all think about. This is what we really have to depend on. So sometimes in order to test how much you can really depend on your practice, you've got to place some difficulties in your path. Sit longer than you might want to sit. Stick with a difficult situation longer than you might want to, just to see if you can maintain your concentration, and use your insight, use your discernment, to make sure that even though the situation outside is difficult, it doesn't cause suffering inside.

This is ultimately what refuge means: your ability to depend on your own mind, to depend on the qualities you're developing. We talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but ultimately this is what it means: taking their qualities and developing them in your mind so that you can depend on them, so that you can have them at hand wherever you go. When you feel that things are too difficult, you have to stop and consider: Are they really too difficult? Sometimes they are. Or is it simply a matter that you haven't learned how to depend on your own meditation enough? What can you do to be more dependable? What insights you gain into the way you're making yourself suffer? After all, this is what the teachings all come down to.

When the Buddha said he teaches suffering and the end of suffering, he focuses mainly on the suffering that we cause unnecessarily. The word suffering, *dukkha*, or stress, as he uses it, has two basic meanings. There's the stress of the three characteristics, which is everywhere in the conditioned realm. Then there's stress in the context of the four noble truths, stress that comes from craving and ignorance. When he talks about putting an end to stress, that's the one you put an end to, because once that's put an end to, then the mind doesn't suffer. It can live in a world of inconstancy, stress, not self, but it doesn't suffer. It's not stressed.

What you're looking at, what you focus on here, is the stress you're causing through your actions, through your ignorance, through your craving. So when any difficulty comes up related to pain in the meditation, ask yourself, "What am I doing that's taking this physical pain and turning it into mental pain?" When situations outside are difficult, ask yourself, "What am I doing that's taking that tangle outside and using it to tangle up my own mind?" It's your perceptions, your thought constructs: These are the things that create a bridge from outside to inside, so you've got to scrutinize them.

This is why your focus has to be very close. It's so easy to focus on the problems outside, but then focusing on the problems outside is one the reasons why you're suffering. So you learn to look at what you're doing. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us focus on the breath, to be sensitive about the breath. Even in dependent co-arising, right after ignorance comes fabrication, and bodily fabrication, i.e., the in-and-out breath, is right there first in the list.

If you can bring some awareness and alertness to the process of your breathing, you're helping to cut away ignorance at a very basic level. And as you get on familiar terms with the breath, as you become friends with the breath, you find it easier to carry this perspective, this focus, into all your activities. So even as you go through daily life outside the monastery or outside your regular place of practice, you've got an inward awareness that you can begin to depend on more and more.

Now, it's going to take a while to develop it, but as with any skill, the more you stick with it, the better it gets. You can't expect to get really talented at it right way. So you have to learn how to take pleasure in incremental steps, noticing that the little things that used to knock you over don't knock you over anymore. It may not seem like a big deal, but it is a big deal: the fact that you're learning a new way of relating to the difficulties in your life.

Over time, these qualities develop, they grow, so that when bigger issues come, you find that you've got at least the raw materials or an inkling of what skills to bring to bear. When aging hits, when illness hits, when separation hits, when death hits, you're going to have the qualities you can really depend on.

So when things are difficult, look at them as an opportunity to develop the skills you're really going to need, and to find that sense of refuge inside.

There's a chant the monks are often encouraged to memorize before they go out into the forest. It comes from a sutta in which the Buddha tells of how, back in the time when the devas were fighting the asuras, Sakka, the king of the devas, would set up a standard and say to his troops, "If in the battle you get discouraged, look for my standard. As long as my standard is flying high, we're doing well. Take heart." It was in that way that he was able to encourage his troops to fight to victory. Then the Buddha adds, of course, that Sakka himself is subject to greed, anger, and delusion, so his standard was not all that reliable. For a meditator going out to the forest, it's better to take the Triple Gem as your standard. That's a much more reliable standard, because the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha are not subject to greed, anger, or delusion. Their qualities don't fade in the face of aging, illness, and death.

So keep them in mind to remind yourself: How did they overcome suffering? How did the Buddha, how did the members of the noble Sangha overcome suffering? It was through developing these qualities that you're working on right now.

So whatever the danger, whatever the difficulty, look to these qualities as your way out. Sometimes when things are difficult, we learn to depend on our physical comforts. We learn to depend on other things aside from the Triple Gem, aside from these qualities, so that these qualities don't get exercised enough. So sometimes you have to put yourself in difficult situations to force yourself to learn to develop these qualities. The more you realize you have to depend on them, the more they tend to grow.

I've noticed of Ajaan Fuang's lay students in Thailand that the ones who are still really devoted to the practice are the ones who have major difficulties in their lives—illness, family problems—because they realize that holding on to the

practice is a matter of life and death. The ones that don't have that sense of urgency tend to have drifted off into other things.

So try to maintain that sense of urgency in your practice. Be willing to test it, put yourself in a situation where you have to depend on your concentration or on your discernment to get through, because it really is a matter of life and death: the life of the mind's goodness, the life of the mind's happiness. Qualities of the practice are what will keep it going, no matter what else happens in the world around you.