

Advice for a New Monk

September 1, 2007

Close your eyes. Focus on your breath. Notice where you feel the breath. Whichever part of the body that's easiest to stay focused on and to know, now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out: Try to stay focused right there. If thoughts come into your head, remind yourself that they're not destroying your breath. The sensations of breathing are still there. Try to maintain your focus on those sensations and just let the thoughts pass through. Think of body is being like a big window screen. The breeze flows through the screen because the screen doesn't catch it. It goes right through. Thoughts can go right through. You don't have to catch them, you don't have to look at them, turn them over, decide whether they're good or bad. Just let them go.

You want to give the mind at least some time of freedom here where it doesn't have to think about its thoughts, doesn't have to deal with this issue or that responsibility or any of the issues that it normally has to carry around. Give it a few moments of freedom, just to be aware on its own and not carry a lot of needless burdens around.

This is a good skill to have, the ability just to drop all your concerns and let the mind be still for a while. It's a basic skill for maintaining your sanity, because otherwise the world can drive you crazy. You've got to do this, you've got to do that, and you need about 75 hours in a day to take care of all the responsibilities that would come your way. The mind never has any chance to simply rest and gain its bearings. It's always been pushed around by other things, spins around here, gets pushed up here, pushed down there. At the end of the day, all you can do is lie down and go to sleep because you're worn out.

The meditation allows you to take some time to rest without having to go to sleep. It's a much better kind of rest because you're awake, you're alert, you're aware. This kind of awareness, once it settles down and is very still, is a healing awareness for the mind.

So give the mind a chance to settle down and be by itself. You don't have to listen to the Dhamma talk. Just focus on the sensation of the breathing. Allow the breathing to be comfortable. Think of good breath energy filling every cell of your body as you breathe in, bad breath energy flowing out as you breathe out, so that the breath is nourishing and cleansing. This way both body and mind will benefit.

This is an activity can do in any place, but it's a lot easier when the environment is conducive. And the word *environment* here means two kinds of

things. One is finding the right physical environment, a quiet place like we have here. But that's not nearly as important as the general environment of your life. It's not so much a matter of *where* you're meditating as *what kind* of life you live. Otherwise the meditation is fighting against everything else you're doing in your life. You can't just take the meditation and stuff it into any old life. It's like trying to grow plants in a concrete sidewalk. The plants may grow in the cracks but that's it: just a few stunted little green things growing in the cracks. That's not what you want. You want a luxuriant garden, and that requires that you find a place with good soil, lots of sunshine, lots of water. In other words, you have to look at your life as a whole to see if it's conducive to the meditation.

The Buddha once set out five teachings for new monks to help them with their practice, to create the right environment for their practice. But the teachings don't apply only to new monks, they apply to everybody who's practicing, lay or ordained, new or old. So as you're trying to train the mind, it's good to keep these five principles in mind.

The first principle is virtue. In the case of monks, this is holding to the Patimokkha or the monastic code. For laypeople it means sticking to the five precepts. The precepts are promises you make to yourself that you're not going to harm anybody. You're not going to kill anything, anybody. You're not going to steal anything. You're not going to have any illicit sex. You're not going to tell lies. You're not going to take intoxicants. You know that these activities are harmful, you see other people doing them and you realize how horrible they are. If you want to be fair, you have to realize that if you do them, it's harmful as well.

So you make this promise to yourself that you're not going to overstep these precepts. And how is it helpful to your meditation? When you sit down and meditate, you don't have the harm you've done to yourself or to others filling up your mind. You don't have to be filled with regret. As Ajaan Fuang once said, it's much better to think about what you do *before* you do it, than to have to think about it afterwards. Because when you have to think about it afterwards, usually it's a matter of regret, remorse, wishing you hadn't done it, wishing you could go back and undo it, but you can't. That kind of thinking is really frustrating, really miserable. Thinking beforehand means, "Okay, I've got this opportunity to act. What's the best way to act? What's the least harmful way to act?" If the least harmful thing is something you don't like to do, how can you talk yourself into doing it? That kind of thinking is useful, productive, and actually leads to happiness rather to misery.

So think about what you're going to do before you do it, think about what you're going to say before you say it. Always keep in mind that you want to act and speak in a harmless way, so that your mind is not filled with regret.

Or with denial. That's often our response to ways we've been acting foolishly or carelessly, thoughtlessly. We deny that any wrong was done, or it doesn't really matter or if somebody was hurt, that person doesn't matter. There are lots of ways of rationalizing a wrongdoing. If your mind engages in that kind of rationalization, it's lying to itself. And a mind that lies to itself is not going to do well in the meditation. It's going to keep lying, or at least try to keep lots of things covered up, which makes it difficult for insight to arise. Even if there's concentration, it's going to be very partial concentration, with huge blind spots.

So for the sake of your own peace of mind, you want to make a resolve that you're not going to act in any harmful way at all. You're not going to speak in any harmful way at all. This is the first quality that creates a good environment for your meditation.

The second quality is restraint of the senses. This means that you're very careful to keep watch over how you look at things and *why* you look at things—or listen to things or smell things or taste things or touch things or think about things. Who's doing the looking? Is mindfulness doing the looking? Or is greed, or is anger, fear, lust? If you're looking at things for the sake of provoking lust, you're stirring up more trouble in the mind. If you're listening to things for the purpose of provoking your own anger, again, you're stirring up trouble. So in cases like that, you have to learn to look and listen in a different way. The Buddha isn't telling you to go out with blinders on your eyes or plugs in your ears all the time, simply that if you see something that's giving rise to lust in the mind, you try look at the other side of whatever it is.

For instance, the body: You can look at the body, any human body that's attractive, but there are lots of ways you can look at it that are unattractive. So when you look at the attractive side for the purpose of giving rise to lust, you're looking at only part of the truth, part of the reality. If you want to be fair and also to keep your mind from getting run ragged by lust, take a look at the other side as well: all the parts inside the body that you don't like to think about. If they're useful for getting rid of lust, you've got to think about them.

In other words, you have principles in your looking and your listening. Look at things that help keep the mind calm. This doesn't mean that you don't deal with the problems that come up in life, simply that you learn how to deal with them in a way that's motivated by mindfulness, alertness, wisdom, compassion, and discernment, rather than simply using them as chess pieces in the game of trying

to get whatever pleasure you can get out of life, whether the pleasure you find in lust or the pleasure you find in anger or whatever. You learn to make every time you look and listen part of your meditation practice. That way you find that when the time comes to sit down and close your eyes, you don't have a lot of garbage in the mind. You've kept things simple, kept them in line with the practice, so that your meditation and the rest of your life are pulling together and not in opposite directions.

Similarly with the third principle, moderation in your conversation: Not only do you resolve that you're not going to engage in false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, or idle chatter, but you also try to keep your conversation to a minimum. Ajaan Fuang used to say that a good lesson for any beginning meditator is to watch what you have to say. If what you're planning to say is not really necessary, don't say it. You find that it cuts through an awful lot if you ask this question every time you're about to open your mouth: Is this really necessary? It's like what they did in World War II. They put up posters to say, "Is this trip necessary?" as a way of conserving energy. Well, in the same way, you conserve the energy of the mind when you keep your conversation to a minimum, because it's so easy for one sentence to turn into two, then four, sixteen, and 256. When there are lots of sentences, the opportunity for misunderstandings and hurt feelings rises as well. The opportunity for useful entanglements rises as well. And again, it makes it harder to meditate.

If you're thinking about a lot of things to talk about, it makes it very difficult to keep the mind still when you come to meditate. But if you keep things pared down, then when the time does come to meditate, there's not a lot of clutter in the mind. When you've opened yourself up easily to the possibilities of some idle chatter to slip out, or some slight exaggerations, or any other forms of wrong speech that may not be quite as blatant as the ones that you're more commonly aware of but they are there, they can eat away at your meditation if you're not careful.

So keep your words to a minimum and you'll find that not only is it good for your meditation, but if you're really careful about your speech in this way, people will listen more carefully to what you have to say. A person a few words tends to say words that are more worth listening to.

The fourth quality for the monks is to look for wilderness places, in other words, try to find some seclusion and opportunity to be off by yourself, where you really can look at yourself and not have your mind cluttered with all the responsibilities that you pick up from other people, the news you've picked up from other people. Try to find a space in your life where you can go off and be

alone. This may simply be a corner of your home or a small time set aside every day, but the mind really does thrive when it has an opportunity to find some time off alone, so you can really get in touch with yourself to see what's skillful inside, what's unskillful inside. You get to know yourself a lot better when you spend time alone. So try to find as much seclusion as you can.

The fifth principle is right view, trying to see where there's suffering and stress in your life, and learning to look at the right place to do away with that suffering and stress. In other words, you have to look inside. You realize even though people outside maybe doing harmful things, the real reason you're suffering doesn't have anything to do with them. It has everything to do with what you identify with, what you claim as you and yours. So you look at your clingings, and as you dig a little deeper, you try to find the craving that underlies the clinging, because that, the Buddha said, is the true source of suffering. And to get very clear about how you're going to get to that source, you've got to develop virtue, concentration, and discernment—all these factors in the path.

Once your understanding of suffering falls in line with the right general principles, you're a lot more likely to see the genuine cause and then dig it up, really understand the suffering enough so that you can put an end to it. Most of us know that we suffer, but we don't really understand our suffering, so we keep pushing and pulling at the wrong places. We'll never get to the real root cause. But if you understand that the root cause is craving and ignorance, you'll see, as that chant just now says, that we're a slave to craving.

Now, this doesn't mean that we're not allowed to want happiness. After all, that other chant we had starts out, "May I be happy." The Buddha encourages that attitude, encourages you to look for true happiness, and to direct your desire for true happiness in a skillful way. There's right effort on the path, and right effort starts with generating the desire to let go of unskillful qualities, generating the desire to develop skillful ones in their place: That kind of desire is the path. But the craving to have the sensual pleasures that you like, or the craving to be in a certain sort of way, or once you've got something around which you've developed an identity you don't like, the craving to destroy that: Those things cause suffering. If you dig down into whatever suffering there may be in the mind, you'll find that ultimately you can trace back to these three sorts of craving: sensual craving, the craving to be become this or that, or the craving to destroy what you've become.

That's where you look to put an end to suffering. You look using the leverage of the concentration and the discernment you've developed here as a meditator. Once you understand that, it's much more likely that your meditation will get

results, because you look in the right places, and you look for the right purposes. It's not the case that simply having a still mind or just letting go, letting go, letting go without understanding why you let go will bring any awakening or automatically give rise to discernment. The concentration, the stillness has to be primed in the right direction by having a good sense of where to look, how to look, what to do.

So those are the five qualities that create the right life environment for your meditation, whether you're a monk or a lay person. You hold by the precepts, exercise restraint over the senses, restraint over your conversation, try to find seclusion, and develop right view. When your life is shaped by these factors, you're creating in the right environment for your practice to progress, to prosper, whether you're in a quiet place like this or a place with a lot more activity.

Remember, the really important elements of the meditation are not what's happening outside, but the decisions you're making, the things you do and say and think, how you look at things, how you listen to things, how you talk about things inside. This is what creates the really important environment that makes all the difference in the practice.