

## *Cleaning up Your Personal Environment*

*October 18, 2009*

Yesterday we were talking about becoming. It's a very deep and sometimes abstract process. But the implications are very immediate: You do play a role in shaping your own identity and you play a role also in shaping the world around you. There are some limitations based on your karma, but there are also possibilities—for greater freedom, for greater happiness—and those are the possibilities you want to make the most of.

This is especially relevant when you're leaving the monastery and going back home to meditate—hopefully to meditate, hopefully to practice. When you leave here, there can be a strong sense of how the world out there comes rushing at you. It doesn't seem to respond very much to what you'd like it to be. The trick here is to focus on areas where you *can* make a difference, where you can create a better environment for your meditation, a better environment for your practice. And the practice itself, if you really do it in all its dimensions, does create a different environment. In other words, you're not simply trying to squeeze your meditation time into the rest of your life, leaving the rest of your life as it was. The way you approach your life as a whole creates the environment in which you practice.

It's like grass growing up in the sidewalk. After a while, it begins to create a crack, like the grass we have in the asphalt roads here. It creates a crack, creates more and more space for itself. Even though it's surrounded by asphalt, it can live. When you read the book, *The World Without Us*, you realize how plants finally can come back, how the forest can take over, how the vegetable kingdom can take over in areas where there used to be just a lot of concrete and asphalt and nothing very promising. But by steady persistence and by doing what they do best, they create a space for themselves.

And so it should be with your practice. There's a set of instructions for new monks that helps new monks get started on their way as new monks, but it's also a useful list for lay people as they go about their practice outside of the monastery.

The first item on the list for the monks is being strict in terms of the Patimokkha. For the lay people, this translates into being strict in terms of your precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. Period.

As you really hold by the precepts, you realize they do shape your life around you, especially the precepts on speech. You can expand the precept against lying to also include not speaking in divisive ways, not speaking in a coarse way, and not

engaging in idle chatter. Idle chatter tends to the one where most of the energy of our practice gets frittered away.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students once complained to him. She had been sitting and meditating with him and a group of his students there in Bangkok, and her mind got nice and quiet. Then she left to go home and she started gossiping with one of her neighbors. All that nice peace and quiet in the mind just got frittered away. He responded, "What you did was to take the gold you had and you traded it for excrement." Idle chatter just eats away, eats away, eats away at your goodness. It not only takes up your time but also fills up your mind with all kinds of garbage that you have to clean out the next time you go to meditate.

As you work, there's a certain amount of chatter that does have to be used for social grease. But try to make it useful and also have a sense of how much grease is needed. Many people spend their whole day in just nothing but grease, grease, grease all over the place. If it were an engine, it would have all gummed up. The problem with social-grease speech, if you're really not paying attention to what you're saying, is that you end up falling into other forms of wrong speech. With idle chatter, by definition, you're not really paying much attention to your intention as to why you're speaking. But if the intention is to put the other person at ease, to create a better atmosphere in the work environment, and you keep that intention firm in your mind, then when you realize that you've said enough for that purpose, okay, then you can stop.

And if you're going to be talking about other people in the work place, make sure that it's useful speech, that there's something there to be gained from it. Even critical speech can be useful, if you do it rightly. Sometimes you need to warn the other workers about certain types of behavior you don't want them to adopt. But to create a sense of "us versus that person," or "us versus those people": That's divisive chatter, another form of wrong speech. You've got to be careful.

What you find is as you're more sparing with your words is that the words began to take on more value. And when you give more value to your words, other people will start giving more value to your words as well. That creates a better environment for the practice.

The next two items on the list are forms of restraint. One is restraint of the senses, which means that you're very careful about what you're looking for when you look, what you're listening for when you listen. There's a common misunderstanding that restraint of the senses means simply that you don't look, don't listen, don't smell, don't taste, don't touch anything, don't think about anything, but that's not restraint. That's imprisonment. You have eyes, you have ears, you've got to see, you've got to hear things. The question is: It's not just a

passive process. The active side is what *you're* doing. So why are you sending your attention out to look? Why are you sending it out to listen? Sometimes we're looking for something to excite our lust or greed or anger. You have to be very careful about that.

Again, think of your state of mind when you meditate. If you're cluttering it up with all these defilements in the course of the day, then how is it going to be easy for the mind to settle down at night or early in the morning or whenever you're taking your time to practice? Think of yourself practicing all day, keeping watch on what you're looking for as you engage with your senses. Are you looking for the purpose of greed, or are you looking for the purpose of discernment? Are you looking for the purpose of anger, or the purpose of discernment? Looking for the purpose of discernment means understanding what's going on in the mind, what sights, sounds, smells, tastes are useful or what ways of looking for these things are useful, to gain a sense of dispassion, to gain a sense of equanimity. That kind of looking is fine. You can look as much as you want. The same with listening.

You also might think of the reflections we have on the requisites. This, too, is a kind of restraint. When you're clothing yourself, what's the purpose of your clothing? What's the purpose of your eating? What's the purpose of the shelter you have? When you take medicine, what's your purpose in doing that? If you're very clear about the purpose—that you need these things in order to keep on practicing, you have a sense of enough, a sense of what's just right—then that's fine. You want to make sure you're not wasting your time and resources getting more clothing than you need, getting fancier food than you need, getting a fancier shelter than you need. That way, your money isn't wasted on excesses and can actually be turned to something more useful.

The other kind of restraint has to do with restraint with your mouth. This gets back to the precept on speech. It's not just that you hold by right speech, but you also try to speak as little as possible. Ajaan Fuang's basic meditation instruction was that before you even think about training your mind, you've got to train your mouth. And the first way to train that is to ask yourself, when you open your mouth: Is this necessary? What are the consequences of this speech going to be? There's that famous *Peanuts* cartoon where Lucy complains that if you go around watching everything you say, you never get much said, but that's probably a good idea for most of us. A lot of the stuff we say is verbal pollution. And the verbal pollution in this country right now is a lot worse than the carbon or other chemicals in the air. Verbal pollution can destroy a civil society. It can destroy a family. It can destroy a workplace.

And try to be very sparing with your words. The more value you give to your words, the more value they'll have for other people.

The fourth principle on the list is to find as much seclusion as you can. Have a quiet spot in your house where you do nothing but meditate. Try to find some time to be by yourself, and let the other members of the family know that you need some down time. This is a basic principle of any healthy relationship: to have some time outside of the relationship where you can be by yourself, have a clear sense of where you are, what you really need.

One of the sad things in our society is that we don't have any rites of passage for going from childhood into adulthood, where you can go out and be by yourself for a while and think about what's really important to you, what you really want to do with your life. After all the instructions you've received all along through childhood, there's got to be a time when you sit down and sort it all through. But even though we don't have that kind of rite of passage here, you can use the meditation, you can use your seclusion time to sort things through, to sort out the stuff you've picked up in the course the day, and beyond that, things you've picked up from the past that have been sloshing around in your mind.

The influences of the narratives that you've been bringing to your life: You can stop and look through those and clean those out, realizing that your past is now just a thought in your mind. Its influence in your mind is made up of the thoughts that are still there in the mind, but you're in a position now where you can sort through them and decide which influences from the past will continue to have an important role in shaping your life and which ones you want to put aside.

We talked about this a while back, that how you live the present moment is also reshaping your past. In other words, the choices you make now reflect either good influences or else bad influences that have come from the past, and you're basically choosing which influences you want to have continue playing a role in your life. If somebody down the line decides to write your life story, they can say, "Well, this person had some really bad problems in his or her childhood, but was able to overcome them," rather than the more deterministic kind of story line, which is, "Well, this person started out really bad and just kept on going downhill from there. There was no hope for this person from the very beginning." The choices you make now determine which of those two narrative lines will be the one that applies to you.

The final principle for shaping your environment is right view, straightening out your views about where true happiness lies, where true suffering comes from. Living in this world is bound to have lots of suffering, but there are different levels of suffering, and different types. The type that comes from influences from your

past karma, the type that comes from other people's actions: That's suffering outside of you. But there's also the suffering that you're creating by pulling these things in through your craving, through your ignorance. Ignorance is the source of the suffering that really does weigh down the mind. You want to make sure you straighten out your views, because the ignorance here is ignorance as to what is suffering and what is the cause of suffering. The real suffering is the fact that you're holding on not only to your body, but also to your feelings and your perceptions, your thought constructs, even to your active consciousness. All those are things: If you hold on to them, if you cling to them, you're going to suffer.

Now, the word *holding on* doesn't mean your mind has a hand that grasps them. It means that these are activities you get engaged in over and over again. You identify with them, you feed off them as you do them. But once you can develop a sense of the observer that peels these things away, you can just watch them as events: "Oh, there's that event; there's this event." When you put yourself in a position where you can choose which of these events are actually useful for the path and which ones are not, you get closer and closer to finding what is of core value, what the Buddha calls the heartwood of the practice, which is release. We call it release because, on attaining it, you find yourself liberated from all the things that have worn you down, all things you've been clinging to and, as you cling to them, you get stuck to them.

There is something, a dimension where there's freedom from these things. That's what we're peeling away to look for.

When you realize that your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with anyone else's true happiness, that thought in and of itself makes a lot easier to develop the right view that goes along with thoughts of universal goodwill, universal compassion, universal empathetic joy, universal equanimity. There's no reason to wish anybody ill. If you see anyone you're able to help, you're happy to help them. If you see people who are already happy, you're happy for them—because you realize that your happiness and their happiness, on the ultimate level don't have to conflict.

This, too, is an important element in creating the right environment. When you try to maintain your precepts and all the other aspects of the practice as you deal with other people, the nourishment for that determination to act skillfully is greatly strengthened by developing the brahmaviharas. So try to make them part of your daily practice as well. Every morning when you wake up: thoughts of goodwill for everyone, without exception. Every night before you go to sleep: thoughts of goodwill for everyone, without exception. And throughout the day, when you find yourself getting flustered by your dealings with other people, stop

for a minute and say to yourself, “I really would like these people to understand what true happiness is and how it’s found. It’d be for their own good. I wish everyone could do that.” That takes the issues of your daily life and puts them in an entirely different perspective.

So try to take advantage of the fact that you can shape your environment. The practice of meditation makes it easier to have the determination to do that and, of course, your determination to do that creates an environment in which it’s easier to meditate.

Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was leading the retreat at IMS, the question came up: How do we bring the practice into daily life? He responded by talking about the five precepts. Some of the people got upset, thinking, “He’s looking down on us laypeople, thinking that all we can do is the five precepts.” But that wasn’t the case at all. He was pointing out how important it is, as you’re meditating, to create the environment for your meditation through the five precepts and through these other elements of the list I mentioned just now. It’s all of a piece.

This gets back to the teaching on becoming: that your sense of who you are is very much connected to your sense of the world in which you live. So your identity as a meditator can be improved greatly by acting in skillful ways that create a better world for yourself. It’s one of the good features of the practice that you create a better world for yourself through meditating, and you’re also creating a better world for the people around you.

So try to keep these principles in mind: observing the precepts, restraint of the senses, restraint in your speech, finding time for seclusion, and straightening out your views. Those are the principals that get rid of the pollution in your environment and make it a much better place to live and practice.