

Creating Your Environment

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Having a conducive place to stay is an important part of training the mind. Having conducive people to practice with is also important. It creates a good environment, an energy that helps to carry us along, especially during the times when, if we were on our own, we'd start flagging. Our energy would start having gaps.

It would be nice if we could all have a conducive place to practice all the time, with conducive people as our companions all the time, but it very rarely works out that way. That's why we have to learn how to create our own environment.

Ajaan Fuang once noted that even though the place where he taught in Bangkok was not especially conducive—it was fairly noisy, it was right down in the middle of the city—the fact that he was there made it a lot easier for people to practice.

But even then, the people whose practice developed momentum were the ones who didn't depend on him totally. They were able to carry the momentum into their lives and start rearranging their lives to the extent that they could to make them a better place to practice, a better environment to practice.

A good guideline in this area is the Buddha's recommendation for new monks: how a new monk should comport himself to create a good environment to practice, a good environment both internally and externally. These instructions are useful not only for monks but also for laypeople.

The first principle is restraint of the senses, watching yourself as you look, as you listen, as you taste food, as you smell aromas, as you touch things. You want to see: Why are you doing this? Which part of the mind are you trying to satisfy?

As the Buddha said, when you notice that you're looking at certain details that tend to provoke lust or anger, or you're listening to certain details that provoke lust or anger, you've got to learn how to look and listen in other ways.

In other words, the problem is not so much the things out there, it's with how you relate to them, what you're going to look for. Of course, nowadays we have all sorts of media: There's the TV, there are magazines, newspapers, there's the Internet, the Internet, the Internet. You have to turn these things on. You have to pick them up and look at them. So you have to ask yourself every time you do that, "Why? What are you looking for?" Because the people behind the media are the people you're hanging around with. You're picking up their attitudes, you're picking up their priorities. Why?

This is a huge part of creating your environment right there.

There's that old campaign that said to kill your TV, as if the TV was an organism. The TV's just a series of electrodes and whatever electronic equipment they have nowadays—they probably don't even have electrodes anymore—but it's the messages that are transmitted over them: Those are the things you have to watch out for. You have to watch out for your reasons for wanting to turn these things on and take them in. Because if you're going to be practicing for putting an end to greed, aversion, and delusion, and yet you're going out there and exciting your greed, aversion, and delusion, it's like knowing you've got to clean up your house and first you go through and trash it. Then you clean it up and then you trash it again and then you clean it up again. This is a huge waste of time.

You have to realize that every mess you make you're going to have to clean up, so you learn to make fewer messes. It's a basic lesson we had to learn when we grew up. We've got to learn how to apply it to our minds.

The second principle is knowing moderation in speaking. Watch what you say, because what you say creates a huge environment around you. The people around you pick up on it and will start responding to what you say.

So try to create a good environment with your words. Try not to say anything that, again, is going to make a mess in your mind. Speak words that are true and beneficial and timely.

Act as if you had a checklist that you held up to every word that was going to come out of your mouth: Does this sentence fit with these requirements:

Is it true?

Okay, then it goes to the next checkpoint: Is it beneficial?

Okay, then it goes to the next checkpoint: Is this the right time and place?

Only if it passes all three checkpoints do you let it out of your mouth.

Most of us aren't like that. We say things and then we realize what we've said after we've said them—as if we weren't really *there* when the decisions were being made. And for most of us, we're not. We're at best half there. So you really want to be grounded in your body.

The Buddha said, with relationship to the practice of restraint over the senses, that you want to develop mindfulness immersed in the body to have a good foundation post so that you don't go streaming out after every desire for sights and sounds and other things. The same principle applies with your speech. Try to stay grounded in your body. You're right here, listening to the people talking to you, responding to what they have to say in a way that's appropriate. You give all your attention to being right here, being present to what you're saying. That way, your speech becomes a part of your practice, a part of your training of the mind.

Sticking with the precepts is another basic principle that creates a good environment. This moves out from speech to the other aspects of your actions. Make sure you're not harming anybody.

Not only are you not lying but you're also not speaking divisively, you're not speaking harshly, you're not engaging in idle chatter—all the aspects of what are called the guidelines for skillful action: No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lies, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter; trying to overcome greed, overcome ill will, trying to get your views straightened out.

All of these things are important for creating the environment in which you live.

All too often, we're aware of when we're on the passive or receiving end of the impact of our environment. We keep forgetting that we create a lot of our environment, too. The energy we bring into a room, the energy we bring into a relationship, the energy we bring to our job: That has an enormous impact on the environment and then, of course, it gets reflected back to us.

So try to be very careful in your actions because they create your world.

The fourth principle is trying to find some seclusion. Take time out from your ordinary activities. And "seclusion" here means not only physical seclusion, finding a spot where you can be by yourself, but also mental seclusion, learning how to put down the affairs of the day. If you carry your work around with you all the time, the mind never gets a chance to rest.

It's like those laborers you see in Bangkok, the people who carry huge bags of rice up and down the gangplanks for ships, bent over all the time—to the point where even when they aren't carrying these big bags, it's hard for them to walk straight.

That's the way most of us are. If we could take pictures of our minds, we'd see that we're all bent over, carrying this load, carrying that load. The mind very rarely has a chance to just stand up straight and be by itself.

You've got to do that every now and then. Remember that it's not an act of irresponsibility to put your concerns about your work aside. It's actually a wise way of husbanding your resources, so that when the time comes that you really do have to pick up those responsibilities, you can pick them up with strength because you've rested. You've taken care of the mind.

So try to get the mind to a place where it can just drop all thoughts about past, all thoughts about future, and be right here, right here, right here. It's not talking to itself about the past, it's not talking to itself about the future. That's a kind of seclusion.

It's the beginning of the seclusion they talk about in the descriptions of the

jhanas: secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental qualities. In other words, you bring the mind right here. You're alert, mindful, ardent in trying to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. That creates a kind of seclusion in and of itself—which also carries a kind of protective energy around you. It creates an envelope, in the same way that the good karma of your actions creates an envelope around you. A protective cordon.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that if your hand doesn't have a wound, you can carry poison and you don't get poisoned by it. If there's a wound, though, the poison can seep into the hand and you can die.

It's the same way with your actions, your state of mind. If you have a big gap of bad karma that lets everything in, you're going to get poisoned by the world. But if your actions are skillful, if your attitudes are skillful, you can walk through the world with a sense of being protected by your practice.

You create the environment in which you live. Even though all sorts of things may be happening around you that you can't control, there's an area right around you where you *do* have control—or you can have control if you make the effort to exercise it.

The fifth quality is right view, which means not only appreciating the importance of your actions—and understanding what the Buddha had to say about why there's stress and what can be done about it—but also realizing that this is the most important issue you have to deal with.

After all, the Buddha spent 45 years talking about these topics—stress and the end of stress—because they're so important. And you have to keep reminding yourself that they are important. Otherwise, it's very easy for the mind to pick up other people's priorities: what they say you should be doing with your time or what they say you should be thinking about.

You have to realize that the influence of the world is extremely fickle. You do right, and they say you're wrong. Or you do something wrong, and they say you're right. Or what they said was wrong yesterday is right today. There's so much of that out there, which means you can't take the opinions of the world as your guideline. You've got to develop right view about what's important and what needs to be done.

In addition to these five qualities, it's also good to develop the attitudes of heedfulness, *samvega*, and confidence.

Heedfulness is realizing that there are dangers out there, and there are dangers inside, too. The dangers outside are nothing compared to the dangers inside your own mind. Can you trust yourself to do the skillful thing even in difficult circumstances? If you can't answer that question with confidence—saying, Yes,

you can trust yourself—okay, you’ve got work to do.

One of the scariest things in life is realizing that you can’t trust yourself. There might be a set of circumstances where you start thinking in very unskillful ways and then start doing unskillful things. You’ve got to develop the strength of mind that gives you the confidence that No, you’re not going to give in to unskillful impulses, regardless.

And you need to have the heedfulness to try to notice where in the mind are there any openings where unskillful attitudes could sneak in. You’ve got to work on those.

In this case, it’s helpful to develop the attitude of *samvega*. Have a sense of urgency about this, because otherwise you just keep coming back, coming back, coming back, and suffering again and again and again, and *causing* suffering again and again. How much longer do you want to do that?

Now, these thoughts can get pretty depressing unless you also have a sense of confidence that there is a way out.

The Buddha showed that human beings are capable of straightening themselves out. We have the choice.

I was reading recently someone denying that the Buddha taught that we have choices. I can’t imagine why anyone would choose to say that. How could you practice if you had no choice? We’ve got the choice. Our problem is that we don’t exercise our power of choice in the most skillful way. But it is a skill that we can master.

The qualities that will allow for us to develop more mindfulness, more alertness, more discernment so that we can actually bring to mind to a state of release: These qualities are there for us to develop. It can be done. It’s not impossible.

All too often, we place limitations on ourselves. Even though other people place some limitations, the really dangerous ones are the ones we place on ourselves. We just can’t imagine ourselves going all the way, so we cut ourselves short.

So an important attitude you need to develop is confidence that, Yes, this can be done. Your life hasn’t been totally bound up and tied off by other people’s decisions or by some of your own old decisions. There’s still wiggle room for freedom in there.

Those are the attitudes you want to have: on the one hand, heedfulness and *samvega* to remind yourself that you don’t have much time and there’s some real work that has to be done in the mind; and then, on the other hand, the confidence that it can be done.

Underlying all this, of course, is mindfulness, the ability to keep this in mind. It's so easy to forget the lessons of skillfulness because other people are impinging on you, and your old habits are impinging on you. So you've got to keep reminding yourself every day that this is a day when you really want to be as skillful as possible.

You want to create the environment you need. If you don't create it, nobody else is going to create it for you. Or if they do, it's only in isolated places like this that you can tap into from time to time. But you want to be able to carry a good environment with you all the time. That means you have to learn how to create it and generate it yourself—and keep it going.

When you do, you find that there actually is more space out there for you to practice than you might have imagined. There's more space in your mind for you to practice, too.

So remember, it's up to you. The Buddha gives advice so that you're not totally left to your own devices. And you can remember that there are other people who've done this and other people who are doing this, so you're not alone. But you do have to draw on your own resources.

Just keep reminding yourself of how important that is.