

# Five Things to Keep In Mind

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

*July, 2003*

Many times we like to think that simply by adding meditation to our lives, the effects of the meditation will permeate throughout our whole lives without our having to do much of anything else. Simply add the meditation to the mix of your life and it will change all the other ingredients: that's what we'd like to think, but it doesn't really work that way. You have to remake your life to make it a good place for the meditation to seep through, because there are some activities, there are some states of mind, that are really resistant to receiving any influence from the meditation.

This is why, when you're meditating, you also have to look at the way you live your life, your day-to-day activities. See if you're creating a conducive environment for the meditation to thrive and spread. Otherwise the meditation just gets squeezed into the cracks between the rocks here and there, and never gets to permeate much of anything at all.

There's a teaching in the Canon on five principles that a new monk should keep in mind. These principles apply not only to new monks, but to anyone who wants to live a life where the meditation can seep through and permeate everything.

The first principle is virtue. Make sure you stick to your precepts. In the case of monks, of course, this refers to the Patimokka. In the case of lay people, it refers to the five precepts and on occasion the eight. When you're holding to the precepts you're holding to firm principles in your life. The Buddha described observing the precepts as a gift: a gift both to yourself and to the people around you. You give protection to other people's lives, their property, their knowledge of the truth. You protect them from your being drunk; you protect them from your engaging in illicit sex. And when these principles become precepts—in other words a promise to yourself that you keep in all circumstances—the Buddha says that you're giving unlimited protection, unlimited safety to other beings, and you have a share in that safety, a share in that protection yourself.

So on the one hand, the precepts create an environment where there's more protection, and when there's more protection it is easier to meditate. On the

other hand, the precepts foster an attitude of giving. You realize that for the sake of your own happiness, you have to give. When you have that attitude it gets easier to meditate, because all too often people come to the meditation with a question of "What can I get out of this'?" But if you're used to giving and seeing the good results that come from giving, you're more likely to ask, "What can I give to the meditation? What needs to be given for the good results to come?" With that attitude you're more willing to give of your time, give of your energy, in ways that you might not have been willing to before.

The second principle for creating a good environment for meditation in your life is restraint of the senses. In other words, you're not only careful about what comes out of your mind, you're also careful about what comes in, in terms of the things you look at, the things you listen to, smell, taste, touch, and think about. Be careful not to focus on things that will give rise to greed, anger, or delusion. If you're careless in your looking, careless in your listening, it's very difficult to be careful about your thoughts, because thoughts are so much more subtle. This doesn't mean that you go around with blinders on your eyes or plugs in your ears, simply that you're skillful in how you look at things, skillful in how you listen. If you know that something tends to arouse lust or anger, learn to look at it in a way that doesn't arouse the lust, that counteracts the lust, that counteracts the anger. In other words, if something seems attractive, you look for its unattractive side. If something seems unattractive, you look for its attractive side. As Ajaan Lee says, be a person with two eyes, not just one.

This is why we chant that passage for the contemplation of the body. It doesn't tell us *not* to look at the body; it says to look more carefully at the body. Look at the parts that aren't attractive to balance out the one-sided view that simply focuses on a few attractive details here and there and tends to blot out everything else in order to give rise to lust. After all, it's not the body that's productive of lust. The mind produces lust. Many times the mind wants to feel lust and so it goes out looking for something to incite the lust, and grabs hold of whatever little details it can find, even when those details are surrounded by all sorts of unclean things.

So keep watch on what comes out of the mind and what comes in. For lay people, this means being careful about the friends you associate with, the magazines you read, the TV you watch, the music you listen to. Be very careful about how you look at these things, how you listen to these things. After a while you find that this is not a case of restricting yourself so much as it is learning to

see things more carefully, more fully, because you're seeing both sides of whatever it is that used to seem solely attractive or solely unattractive.

This takes some effort. You have to be more energetic in watching out for how you look and listen. But the benefit is that the mind is put in much better shape to meditate because you're not filling it up with all kinds of garbage, poison, or junk food that's going to harm it, weaken it, that's going to get in the way. So many times when you sit down to meditate, if you've been careless about what's been coming in and out of your mind, you find it's like cleaning out a shed after a year of neglect. There's just so much garbage in there that you spend almost the whole hour cleaning it out and then realize you have only five minutes for any real stillness at the end. So keep the mind clean from the beginning, all the time. Don't let any garbage in the door or in the windows. That way you find that you have a much nicer place to sit down and settle in when you create your meditation home.

The third principle for creating a good environment for meditation in your life is restraint in your conversation. When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang he said that lesson number one in meditation is keeping control of your mouth. In other words, before you say anything, ask yourself: "Is this necessary? Is this beneficial? Is there a good reason to say this?" If there is, then go ahead and say it. If not, then just keep quiet. As he said, if you can't control your mouth there's no way that you're going to control your mind. And when you make a habit of asking yourself this question, you find that very little conversation really is necessary. If you're at work and you need to talk to your workers, okay, that counts as necessary. If you need to talk to your fellow workers in order to create a good atmosphere in the office, that also count as necessary speech. But so often social-grease speech goes beyond that. You start getting careless, running off with your mouth, and that turns into idle chatter, which is not only a waste of energy, but also a source of danger. Often the things people say that cause the most harm are when they're just allowing whatever comes in their mind to go right out their mouth without any restraint at all.

Now if observing this principle means that you gain a reputation for being a quiet person, well that's fine. You find that your words, if you're more careful about doling them out, start taking on more worth. And at the same time you're creating a better atmosphere for your mind. After all, if you're constantly chattering all day long, how are you going to stop the mental chatter when you sit down to meditate? But if you develop this habit of watching over your mouth,

the same habit then comes to apply to the meditation. All those mouths in your mind start going still.

The fourth principle for creating a good environment for meditation in your life is, for the monks, to frequent wilderness spots, to get out of society, to find a quiet place to be by yourself, so you can get a sense of perspective on your life, a sense of perspective on your mind, so that what's going on in your mind can stand out in bolder relief. This principle applies to lay people, too. Try to find as much solitude as you can. It's good for you. When people have trouble living in solitude it shows that there's lots of unfinished business inside.

So make a little wilderness place in your home. Turn off the TV, turn out the lights, allow yourself to be alone without a lot of distractions. Tell everyone you need to have a little time alone on a regular basis. When you do this, you find that things that use to be kept in the depths of your mind come up to the surface, and it's only when they come up to the surface that you can deal with them. When you're alone in this way without a lot of outside input, it's natural that the mind will tend to stay with the breath more easily. There may be a lot of mental chatter at first, but after a while you get fed up with it. You prefer just to be quiet. At the same time, you get away from the influence of everybody else's thoughts and everybody else's opinions. You have to ask yourself, "What do you really believe? What are your opinions? What's important to you when you're not swayed by the opinions of others?"

Which leads to the fifth principle, which is to develop right view. Right view has two levels. First, there's belief in the principle of karma, that what you do really does have results—and it really is you acting. It's not some outside force acting through you, not the stars or some god or whatever. *You're* making the decisions and you have the ability to make them skillful or not, depending on your intention. It's important to believe in this principle because this is what gives more power to your life. It's an empowering belief—but it also involves responsibilities. This is why you have to be so careful in what you do, why you can't be heedless. When you're careful about your actions, it's easier to be careful about your mind when the time comes to meditate.

As for the second level of right view, the transcendent level, that means seeing things in terms of the four noble truths: stress and suffering, the cause of stress and suffering, the cessation of stress and suffering, and the path of practice to that cessation. Just look at your experience, the whole range of your experience, and instead of dividing it up into its usual patterns of me and not me,

simply look to see: Where is there suffering? Where is there stress? What goes along with it, what are you doing that gives rise to that stress? Can you let go of that activity? And what qualities do you need to develop, what things do you need to let go of in order to let go of the craving, the ignorance underlying the stress? When you drop craving can you be aware of what's happening? All too often when we drop one craving we simply pick up another craving. Can you make yourself more and more aware of that space in between the cravings and expand that space? What's it like to have a mind without craving?

According to the Buddha it's important to see things in this way because if you identify everything in terms of yourself, how can you possibly understand anything for what it actually is? If you hold on to suffering as yourself, how can you understand suffering? If you look at it simply as suffering without putting this label of "self" on it, then you can start seeing it for what it is and then learn how to let it go. If it's yourself, if you hold to that belief that it's yourself, you can't let go of it. But looking at things in terms of the four noble truths allows you to solve the whole problem of suffering.

So start looking at your whole life in this light. Instead of blaming your sufferings on people outside, look at what you're doing to create that suffering, to contribute to that suffering, and focus on dealing with that first. When you develop this attitude in everyday life, it's a lot easier to apply it to the meditation. You create the environment where it makes more and more sense to stick to the noble path.

So these are the factors that create the environment for the meditation whether you're a new monk living here in the monastery or a lay person living outside the monastery: You want to stick to the precepts, keep restraint over the senses, practice restraint over your conversation, create quiet, secluded places for yourself, and develop right view. When you follow these principles, they create a more conducive environment for allowing concentration to happen, as well as a more receptive environment for allowing the results of concentration to permeate out in every direction. This way your practice, instead of being forced into the cracks of a hostile, alien environment, has room to grow and to transform everything around it.