

Skillful Shelter

Creating the conditions for true happiness

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

summer 2013 page 34 to 37

The values of human society, for the most part, fly right in the face of a meditative life. Either they make fun of the idea of a true, unchanging happiness, or they avoid the topic entirely, or else they say that you can't reach an unchanging happiness through your own efforts. This is true even in societies that have traditionally been Buddhist, and it's especially so in modern society, where the media exert pressure to look for happiness in things that will change.

The practice of meditation for the sake of an unconditioned happiness is always counter-cultural. No one else is going to protect your belief in the possibility of true happiness. You have to protect it yourself. So learn how to skillfully shelter your practice from the conflicting values of society at large. There are three basic ways in which you can do this: choosing admirable friends, learning to live frugally, and finding seclusion as much as you can.

Choosing Admirable Friends When you associate with a person, you unconsciously pick up that person's habits and views. This is why the most important principle in shaping the environment around your daily meditation is to associate with admirable people.

Admirable people have four qualities: They're virtuous, generous, wise, and believe in the principle that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful qualities abandoned. If you can find people like this, try to associate with them. Notice their good qualities, try to emulate them, and ask them how you might develop more virtue, generosity, wisdom, and conviction yourself.

So look around you. If you don't see any people like this, search them out.

The problem is what to do with the people around you who aren't admirable but with whom you have to spend time at home, at work, or on social occasions. This issue is especially difficult if they're people for whom you're responsible, or to whom you owe debts of gratitude, such as your parents. You have to spend time with these people; you have to help them. So learn what it means to spend time with people without associating with them—i.e., without picking up their habits and values. The primary principle is that you don't go to them for advice on moral or spiritual issues.

Also, try to excuse yourself every time they try to pull you into activities that go against your precepts or principles. If the activities are unavoidable—as when there's a party at work—take the attitude of being an anthropologist from outer space, observing the strange habits of earthlings in this society at this point in time.

If there are people or situations that tend to bring out the worst in you, and you can't avoid them, sit down and devote a meditation session to planning how you can survive the encounter without getting your buttons pushed and with a minimum of unnecessary conflict. Learning how to prevent unskillful qualities from arising in the mind is an important part of the path, but all too often it's overlooked. Not every meditation has to focus on the present. Just make sure that planning doesn't take over your meditation and go beyond the bounds of what's really helpful.

In some cases, if a friendship is centered on unskillful activities, you might consider putting it on hold. Even though the other person's feelings might be hurt, you have to ask yourself which is more precious: that person's feelings or the state of your mind. (And remember: Simply hurting another person's feelings is not the same thing as causing that person harm.) You'll eventually have more to offer that person—if you practice seriously, you can become that person's admirable friend—so don't think of your pulling away as an unkind act. If your friends are concerned that you're becoming less social, talk the issue over with someone you trust.

The principle of being selective with your friends applies not only to people in the flesh but also to the media: newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and the Internet. Here it's easier to turn things off

without compunction. If you do feel the need to spend time with the media, ask yourself each time: Why am I doing this? What kind of people will I be associating with when I do? When they say something, why do they want me to believe it? Can I trust them? Who are their sponsors? Even reading or watching the news has its dangers for someone training the mind. There's nothing wrong with trying to stay informed of current events, but you have to be sensitive to the effect that too much attention to the news can have on your mind. The basic message of the news is that your time is unimportant, that the important things in the world are what other people are doing in other places. This is the opposite of the message of meditation: that the most important thing happening in your world is what you're doing right here, right now. So exercise moderation even in the amount of news you watch. Instead, watch the news being made right at your breath. And when you have news of this sort to report, report it only to people who have earned your trust.

Living Frugally Buddhist monks are encouraged every day to reflect on why they use the four requisites of life: food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. The purpose of this reflection is to see if they've been using these things to excess or in ways that will develop unskillful states of mind. They're also advised to reflect on the fact that each of the requisites has come about through the sacrifices of many, many people and other living beings. This reflection encourages the monks to live simply and to aim ultimately at a truly noble form of happiness that places no burdens on anyone at all.

Lay meditators benefit from reflecting daily in this way as well, to counteract the way society at large encourages you to focus your attention on consumption and acquisition with no thought for the consequences. So stop to think, for example, when you eat: Is it just to keep yourself strong enough to fulfill your duties? Or are you, in the words of the Buddhist text, searching out the tip-top tastes with the tip of your tongue? Are you bulking up just to look good? If so, you're fostering unskillful states of mind. Are you too picky about what kinds of food you will and won't eat? If so, you're spending too much time and money on your eating—time and money that could be used to develop generosity or other skillful mental states.

You have to realize that in eating—even if it's vegetarian food—you're placing a burden on the world around you, so you want to give some thought to the purposes served by the strength you gain from your food. Don't eat just for the fun of it, because the beings—human and animal—who provided the food didn't provide it in fun. Make sure the energy gets put to good use.

This doesn't mean, however, that you should starve yourself. Starving yourself to look good is also unskillful, in that it drains away the energy you need to practice and keeps you inordinately fastened on the appearance of the body. The traditional term for wise eating is moderation in eating: having a sense of just right, of exactly how much is needed to keep you healthy and strong enough to stick with the training of the mind.

The same principle holds true for the other requisites. You don't want to be a miser, but at the same time you don't want to waste the resources that you or someone you depend on worked so hard to acquire. Don't be a slave to style. Don't take more from the world than you're willing to give back. And learn to undo the perceptions—so heavily promoted by the media—that shopping is a form of therapy and that a purchase is nothing but a victory or a gain. Every purchase also entails loss. To begin with, there's the loss of money that could be used to develop skillful qualities of mind—such as generosity—rather than unskillful qualities, like greed. Then there's a loss of freedom. All too often, the things you own begin to own you. The more things you own, the more you have to fear in the dangers that can come to things, such as theft, fire, and flood. So learn to restrict your purchases to things that really are useful, and use the money you save to help advance the higher qualities of life, both for yourself and for those around you. Think of frugality as a gift to both yourself and the world.

Finding Seclusion Seclusion enables you to look directly at the issues created by your own mind without the distraction of issues created by other people. It's a chance to get in touch with yourself and to reaffirm your true values. This is why the Buddha advised monks to go into the wilderness, and to create a wilderness state of mind even when living in society.

There are several ways you can create that state of mind in your life. One way is through chanting. To foster a sense of seclusion around your daily meditation session, you might find it helpful to chant before you meditate. This is especially helpful if you notice that your mind is carrying a lot of issues from the day. The sound of the chanting is calming, and the words of the chanting help to put you in a new frame of mind. There are many chanting texts available online, and many sound files showing how to pronounce the words. It's possible to chant in any of the Asian Buddhist languages, in your own language, or a combination of both. Experiment to see which style of chanting is most effective for putting you in the best frame of mind to meditate.

Another way to create the wilderness state of mind is through retreats. In addition to your daily meditation session, it's helpful, at regular intervals, to set aside longer periods of time for meditation practice. This allows you to go deeper into your mind and to recharge your practice in general. There are two ways you can do this, and it's useful to try both. The first is to find time every week or two to devote a larger part of the day than you normally do, to the practice. The second is to go on an extended retreat once or twice a year.

Traditionally, Buddhists set aside four days of the month—the full-moon day, the new-moon day, and the two half-moon days—for more earnest practice. This is called observing the *uposatha* (oo-PO-sa-ta). The most common way of observing the uposatha involves taking the eight precepts, listening to the dhamma (the Buddha's teachings), and meditating.

The eight precepts build on the five precepts—the basic training rules observed by practicing lay Buddhists: I undertake the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures; I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given; I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct; I undertake the precept to refrain from incorrect speech; I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness. In the eight precepts, the third precept is changed from no sexual misconduct to no sex at all. In the additional three precepts you promise yourself that for the duration of the day you'll refrain from the following: The sixth precept: Eating food during the period from noon until the following dawn The seventh precept: Watching shows, listening to music, using jewelry, cosmetics, and scents The eighth precept: Sitting on high, luxurious seats or lying on high, luxurious beds These precepts essentially add the principle of restraint of the senses to the five precepts. Because they place limits on the pleasure you try to take from each of the five physical senses, they encourage you to examine your attachment to the body and to sensual pleasures, and to look for pleasure in training your mind instead.

Of course, you can adjust these observances to fit your schedule. For instance, you can vary the number of times you attempt them in one month. You can schedule them for days you're normally off work. If you can't eat before noon, you can simply promise yourself that you won't eat food after the midday meal.

If you have friends who are meditators, you might try scheduling an *uposatha* day together to see if the energy of the group helps or hinders your practice. Although it may seem strange to seek seclusion in the company of others, you may find that it makes the practice feel less lonely, for you can see that you're not the only person bucking the values of society at large. To help foster an atmosphere of seclusion in the group, agree on the amount of conversation you want to engage in. Avoid discussions of politics. Generally, the more silence, the better. You're not meeting to teach one another through words. You're meeting to teach and support one another through example.

As for extended retreats, there are many meditation centers offering retreats throughout the year. The advantage of centers like these is that they tend to enforce a set group schedule, which helps to structure your day. This can be important if you're just getting started with meditation and have trouble

being a self starter. Also, the work schedule tends to be minimal. Your food will be cooked for you, so you'll have more time for formal meditation.

However, you have to be careful in choosing a good center. Many are run as businesses with sizable staffs. This drives the fees up and drives the dhamma away from what the Buddha taught and in the direction of what pleases a large clientele. Some centers will apply subtle pressure at the end of the retreat for you to give a donation to the center or the teacher(s) of the retreat, claiming that this is an ancient Buddhist custom. The tradition of giving donations is a Buddhist custom; the tradition of applying pressure for donations is not.

If the dhamma taught on the retreat goes against what you know is true, avoid the dhamma talks and meditate someplace else in the center. If you're not sure, meditate during the dhamma talks, giving all your attention to your meditation theme. If anything in the talk is relevant or helpful to what you're doing, it will come right to your attention. As for everything else, you can let it pass.

Even the centers run on a donation basis can teach very strange versions of the dhamma. If you sense anything of a cultish atmosphere at a center, leave immediately. If they refuse to let you leave, make a scene. Remember, you have to protect your mind.

Meditation monasteries are another alternative. They charge no fees, as everything is run on a donation basis. But because you will be expected to help with the daily chores you may have less time for formal meditation. Also meditation monasteries often don't have set group schedules, so you'll have to be more of a self-starter. And even here, you have to be discriminating in how you listen to the dhamma. Choosing admirable friends, living frugally, and finding seclusion require a fair amount of renunciation, and renunciation is easiest when you regard it not as deprivation, but as a trade. In trading the pleasures of an ordinary life for a meditative life, you're trading candy for gold. Or you may think of yourself as an athlete in training. The game of outwitting your unskillful habits is far more worthwhile than any sport. Just as athletes are willing to live under certain restrictions for the sake of their performance, you should be willing to live under certain restrictions for the sake of true happiness. And just as an athlete restricted to a healthy diet comes to prefer healthy food to junk food, you often find that the restrictions you place on the way you interact with your surroundings actually become your preferred mode of being.