

# Skills to Take with You

*November 12, 1996 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

When we come out to the monastery like this, we come to a place cut off from human society — not totally cut off, because there are other human beings here, but it's a different kind of society: a society where the bottom line is the practice, the growth of the mind, the growth of the heart, the development of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. That's not the bottom line in the world at large, but it is the bottom line here, because the mind needs this kind of environment to develop its best qualities. When we live in the world we tend to pick up the values of the world — and what do those values say? They say it doesn't matter what you do as long as you succeed, as long as you get ahead, as long as you get money. That's the important thing. People try to dress these values up to sound a little better than that, but that's basically what they come down to. And when you live with people who hold to these values and you don't have a good solid basis within yourself to withstand that kind of thinking, you've got to give in. You tend to follow along with them whether you like it or not.

But the Buddha teaches us that true happiness isn't found that way. He says that true happiness comes from developing good qualities in the mind. It has nothing to do with money, nothing to do with status, nothing to do with the opinions of other people. It's something totally inner, and it has to come from inner goodness. This is revolutionary, because the world tells you if you want to get ahead you have to develop all sorts of qualities you can't really be proud of: the qualities you need to stab people in the back, make a quick buck, take advantage of other peoples' weaknesses. But the Buddha says that true happiness requires you to develop things like persistence, perseverance, endurance, integrity, mindfulness, kindness, reliability. These are things you can be proud to develop. There's a dignity to the practice that you don't find in the world outside. But if you're living in a worldly environment, what the Buddha says sounds like a dream, lots of nice ideas but not all that realistic. That's why you need places like this where the values that the Buddha teaches are realistic. It's what life here at the monastery is all about.

So being here gives the mind a chance to develop these qualities and to see that they really do lead to happiness. They really are important, much more

so than the things the world holds to be important. This is why physical seclusion is so essential. You get in touch with yourself out here. You get in touch with what's really important in your life. The issues of birth, aging, illness, and death become very large out here. In the world — the ordinary world — these issues get shunted aside. People don't have time for them, and so when aging, illness, and death *do* hit, it's like a big surprise. The mind isn't prepared. People get blown away even though everyone knows, deep down inside, that these things have to happen. Yet when you live in a society that doesn't give you time to look at these things, to reflect on them, and to prepare for them, you really get knocked to pieces when they come. So you need a chance to get out and look at what's really important in your life and how you're going to prepare for these things.

That's what the meditation is all about — developing a good solid basis in the mind that can withstand these things when they come. The image the Buddha gives for this basis is of a stone column, eight cubits long. Four cubits are buried down in the ground in a good solid mountain. Four cubits are above ground. When the wind comes, the column doesn't shake at all. It doesn't even shiver. No matter how strong the wind, no matter which direction it's coming from, the stone column stays put. That's the kind of mental state you need in order to withstand these things — and that's what you develop in the course of the meditation.

Then, as we all know, it's important that you don't cultivate this skill only while you're here, this place of physical solitude, but that you also take this skill back with you. Many times people come to the monastery and say that it's such a relief for the mind to be out here and they'd like to take that state of mind with them when they go back. Well, you can't take a state of mind like that with you. It's a result. What you can take back is the skill, the cause of that state of mind. It's not just the environment that allows it to develop. People can come out here and still have their minds a total mess. What makes the difference is that you learn how to make use of the environment to develop the skills you need to straighten out things inside. The skills are the things you *can* take back with you when you go home — the skillful attitudes, the skillful approaches to bringing the mind under control, giving it a sense of stability inside. These are the important parts of the practice that train the mind to stand on its own two feet.

When you ask yourself, "Where is the best place to meditate?" your answer should be, "Right here, wherever you are. That's the best place." That's the ideal. But as you're getting started, you're like a child learning to ride a bicycle

— you need training wheels, you need help. You can't just jump on the bicycle and ride off with a perfect sense of balance. You use the training wheels, you use the community, you use the peaceful environment to help get the mind in the proper attitude. Then you try to develop your own skills so that when the training wheels are taken away, you can ride with ease and won't fall over.

What are some of these skills? The most basic one is just learning to focus the mind on one thing and to withstand any temptation to let it go. This is an important skill you need whatever your work is. If you can concentrate on your work and don't let the distractions get in your way, work gets done and it gets done properly. It's a solid piece of work, and not just little bits and pieces that happen to be thrown together, because there's a continuity. And when you learn how to focus on one thing like this, when you focus in on the breath, it changes your attitude toward the other thoughts that come into the mind. If the mind doesn't have a particular focus, it can wander around from thought to thought, not really noticing what it's doing, and not having a sense of direction. It gets lost going in the wrong direction, because every direction is just the direction where it's flowing.

But when you give it something to hold onto, you have a sense of direction. Then you can see how some things pull you away and some things pull you back. It's like the difference of being on the earth and being out in outer space. When you're on the earth, there's a definite sense of orientation — there's north, south, east, and west. You've got the earth as your reference point. But if you're out in outer space, you don't know which way is up, which way is down, north, south, east, west — they have no meaning out there. And the mind is just adrift in the stellar currents. But when you're on the earth, when you've got a good basis, then you have a sense that, "This way is north, this way is south." You have a sense of the direction you want to go, and you know when you're heading in that direction and when you're not.

That's why it's crucial to have a center for the mind. But to maintain that center, you have to enjoy it. If you don't, it simply becomes one more burden to carry in addition to your other burdens, and the mind will keep dropping it when your other burdens get heavy. This is why we spend so much time working on the skill of playing with the breath, making it comfortable, making it gratifying, making it fill your body with a sense of ease. When you have that kind of inner nourishment to feed on, you're less hungry for things outside. You don't need to feed on the words and actions of other people. You don't have to look for your happiness there. When you can develop a sense of inner fullness simply by the way you breathe, the mind can stay nourished no matter what

the situation. You can sit in a boring meeting and yet be blissing out — and nobody else has to know. You can watch all the good and bad events around you with a sense of detachment because you have no need to feed on them. It's not that you're indifferent or apathetic, simply that your happiness doesn't have to go up and down with the ups and downs of your life. You're not in a position where people can manipulate you, for you're not trying to feed on what they have to offer you. You've got your own source of food inside.

At the same time, when you have an inner center like this to hold onto, you develop a sense of dissociation from the thoughts that arise within the mind. You realize — when you're focused on the breath and a thought comes into the mind — it's not necessarily *you* thinking or *your* thought, and you're not necessarily responsible for it. You don't have to follow it and check it out or straighten it out. If it comes in half-formed, just let it go away half-formed. You don't have to be responsible for it.

This is another important skill, because if you can learn to step back from the thoughts and emotions that come into the mind and not say that this is *my* thought or this is *my* emotion, then you can really choose which ones are worth holding onto, which ones should be explored, and which ones should be let go, that you don't have to deal with at all. Some people may say that that's irresponsible, that you've got to check everything out. "Well, that's just what they say. What do they know?": That's the kind of attitude you have to develop.

As the Buddha said, his own practice really got started in the right direction when he divided his thoughts into two types: skillful and unskillful. What this means is having the ability to step back from your thoughts and look at them not in terms of their content, but in terms of where they take you. If you have thoughts motivated by greed, anger, delusion, passion, aversion, confusion, boredom — where do they take you? Well, they don't take you to nibbana, that's for sure. They don't take you where you want to go, so you decide to dissociate from them. You don't deny that they exist, for that would just drive them underground. You admit their existence but you realize that you don't have to follow them. You can let them go, and they pass away from the mind. Meanwhile, you latch onto more skillful thinking — either that, or you learn how to let go of thoughts and just keep the mind still where it doesn't have to think. This is where you gain a sense that you're more in control of your mind, that you're not subject to everything that comes passing through.

Most people's minds are like bus stations. Everyone who wants to go through the bus station has the right to do so. And they can do all kinds of weird things while they're there in the bus station: mugging people, having sex

in the restroom stalls, shooting up heroin back in the dark corners. That's what most peoples' minds are like. You've got to make up your mind to turn your mind into a home, a place where you have the right to let thoughts in or not let them in, as you like — or let them just go passing on. You can close the windows and doors and let in only your friends. You're more in control. And when you have a home like that, you can settle down and be at ease and at peace at home, at ease and at peace with your own mind. So this is an important skill to take with you wherever you go. It's not a skill that you use only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed.

One of the essential techniques you need in this skill is the ability to breathe through your thoughts, because when thoughts come heavy — when they come really strong — they don't just affect the mind. They affect the body as well. That's why when anger comes you have a strong sense that you have to get it out of your system because it's gotten into the body, into the way you breathe, into the patterns of tension in the body. It builds up and gets hard to bear, so you feel you've got to get it out. Most people think that the way to get it out is to say something or do something under the power of the anger, but that doesn't solve anything at all. When we're with our breathing practice, we learn how breathe through that pattern of tension in the chest or the belly and let it disperse throughout the body. Once it's dispersed it loses its power. You feel less oppressed by it. Then you can look at the situation from a calm vantage point and decide what should be done. Do you have to say something? Is this the best time to say it, or is it best left unsaid? How will people react if you talk now? Should you wait till a later time? You can gauge these things clearly, which you can't do when you've got a sense of weightiness or oppression from the anger inside the body. So you breathe through the patterns of tension in the body. It's an important skill you use not only while you're here, but also while you're out working, while you're dealing with your family, whatever you're doing in the world at large.

It's important to realize that the skills of meditation are for use not only while you're on the cushion or sitting with your legs crossed and your eyes closed. They're basic skills for governing your own mind, looking after your own mind, administering the ways your mind works, whether you're sitting with your eyes closed or open, whether you're alone or dealing with people, because it's the same mind. The defilements that arise in the course of your practice and the defilements that arise in the course of daily life are basically the same defilements. Sometimes in society the defilements appear more unexpectedly, with more force and a greater sense of urgency, but they come down to the

same thing — if an unskillful state arises in the mind and you treat it unskillfully, then you just go wherever it leads you. But if you learn how to deal skillfully even with the unskillful things that come — to deal skillfully with feelings of passion, feelings of anger, your own misunderstandings — you can take the raw material of life and turn it into something fine.

As Ajaan Lee once said, "A person with intelligence takes whatever gets sent his or her way and makes something good out of it." This is the attitude you've got to adopt because we live a life full of the power of kamma — old kamma and new. You can't do anything about old kamma. You have to accept it like a good sport. That's why you practice equanimity. But as for the new kamma you're creating right now, you can't practice equanimity with that. You have to be very concerned about what you're putting into the system because you realize that this is the only chance you get to make the choice. Once the choice is made and it gets put into the system, then whatever the energy — positive or negative — that's the sort of energy you're going to have to experience.

So pay attention: What are you putting into the system right now? This is the important thing to focus on. Whatever other people do to you, whatever arises in your body in terms of pains, illnesses, aging, death, or whatever: That's old kamma that you simply have to learn to take with good humor, with a sense of equanimity. As for what you're putting into the system right now, that's serious business. That's where your attention and efforts should be focused.

So the skills you pick up from the Buddha's teachings are not just techniques for silent meditation. They're skillful attitudes, skillful approaches you develop to what's important in life. You want to approach life as a skill, to realize that there is always the possibility of doing things skillfully. You may not have perfected it, but you don't beat yourself for not having the perfect response to every situation. You realize that there's always the opportunity to learn. You make mistakes, you learn from them. This is a normal part of life, and a wise way of living is to learn from your mistakes and resolve not to repeat them. Learn from what you've done. Notice when you do things correctly, notice when you make mistakes, and take that information to adjust your patterns of behavior.

Some people come to the practice and say, "Well, this is the kind of person I am. I've just got to be this way." That attitude closes the door on the practice entirely. You start from where you are, but you have to be willing to change. If people couldn't change, if they had to stay the way they are, the Buddha's teaching would be in vain. There would be no reason to have the teachings

because they're all about transformation. They're all about learning, developing, changing the way you approach life. From the Buddhist point of view, "accepting yourself" means not only admitting where you are, but also accepting that you have the potential to change. As your approach becomes more and more skillful, you're doing less and less harm to yourself, less harm to others, less harm to both. You find that you live in a way that brings more benefits for yourself, more benefits for others, more benefits for both. It may take more energy, more attention, but it's a much more worthwhile way of living.

It's like being an expert carpenter. You've got various ways of approaching the problems that arise in the mind. You realize that there are all kinds of problems and there are many ways of dealing with them. If you try just one approach, it's like having a tool box full of nothing but saws. You can't build anything with that. You can't be called a decent carpenter at all. But when you realize that there are ways of dealing with different situations that arise, and, through your own powers of observation, you discover which ways work for you, which ways get the right results for you: That's called having a full tool box, with a wide range of tools. And when you have those tools at hand, you can stay anywhere. You can stay in a monastery, you can stay in a hospital, you can stay at work, at home, in this country, in another country, this world, the next world, this life, the next. The tools stay with you once you've developed them.

So focus on the practice as a way of collecting tools, developing skills, both in terms of techniques in the meditation and whole attitudes toward your life. That's the most worthwhile use of your time. Those are the best things to take with you when you go.