

The Power to Transcend Suffering

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The Buddha's teachings start with everybody's sore point: suffering. Whether it's blatant suffering or more subtle forms of stress, these are the sore points in our heart. And for many of us, we don't like to have them touched, we don't like to hear about them. We think that somehow if we ignore them or cover them up, they'll go away. But it just doesn't work. They tend to fester. And we find ourselves carrying this burden around with us all the time, thinking that it's a normal, necessary part of life. When the Buddha talks about suffering, we think he's being pessimistic. Actually, we're the ones who've been pessimistic, thinking that we've got to suffer. He says that the suffering in the heart is unnecessary, and that there's a way out.

So that's what we're working on here: the way out of suffering. But it requires getting acquainted with the suffering in the heart. That's what a lot of us are scared of, because we don't know how to handle it. But the Buddha does. He gives us the tools—starting with practicing generosity and virtue, as ways of creating a sense of well-being, a sense of esteem in ourselves. These things strengthen the mind in the face of suffering.

And then there's the practice of meditation. This strengthens the mind as well, but it also makes the mind a lot more sensitive, so that we can see exactly where the suffering is and then ferret out all of its tentacles, all the little roots that it's put down in the heart, so we can pull them all out. And one of the tools the Buddha gives us is breath meditation, what we're doing right now: focusing on the breath as it comes in, as it goes out. Sometimes you wonder, "What does this have to do with understanding suffering?" It has lots to do. One, it gets us more in touch with the present moment, which is where the suffering is. And two, it develops our sensitivity.

As you work with the breath, it's like a little kid being given a guitar. At first, the kid just kind of plunks around on the strings and it's kind of a curiosity, nothing especially deep or moving. But as you get more and more familiar with the strings, more and more sensitive to different ways of playing them, you find that you can end up playing some very moving music on the guitar as you become more and more sensitive in listening to what you're doing.

And it's the same with the breath. As you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you find that you develop the sensitivity you need to dig deeper into the heart. At the same time, it gives you a sense of exactly how much suffering you're unnecessarily causing yourself even just by the way you breathe, something we do every day: breathe in, breathe out. Again, it's just one of those things that's part of life, but if you turn your attention to the breath and really focus on it, you begin to realize that there are comfortable breaths and uncomfortable breaths. And why on earth would you want to breathe an uncomfortable breath? Nobody's forcing you. It's just something you take for granted. But once someone points out, "Hey, you can breathe in a

lot more comfortable ways,” you can start exploring that. And as you explore it, you become more sensitive to whole areas of your being in the present moment that you tended to cover up before, tended to ignore.

So this simple technique we have of just being with the breath, allowing the breath to be comfortable as you breathe in, as you breathe out; learning how to take advantage of that sense of comfort, allowing it to spread throughout the body: It’s an extremely important skill, both for bringing the mind to a stronger state of concentration in the present moment, a sense of a good, solid foundation, and for sensitizing yourself to what’s going on. You’re going to need that sensitivity because the movements of the mind are much more subtle than the movements of the breath. First you have to develop your sensitivity with the breath and then you move it into more subtle areas inside the mind itself. That’s where the meditation gets really moving.

So try to have an appreciation for what you’re doing and try to enjoy it as well. Ajaan Fuang would often use the word *play* with the breath. And it’s precisely what you want to do: You play around with it, the same way a little kid plays around with a guitar. Experiment to see what different ways of breathing are, what they do to the body. And different ways of conceiving the breath: When you think about the breath, what do you think is happening? There’s air coming in and out the nose. But why is it coming in and out of the nose? What’s happening in the body to pull the air in and then allow it to go out? What kind of energy flow is doing this? That also counts as breath. In fact, that’s the level of breath you really want to get in touch with. Where does that come in? Where does it come from? Where does it go?

You’ll find that you have all kinds of different ideas about this. Or maybe you just have one idea about it, but you’ve allowed it to take over. Learn to open your mind to other ways of conceiving and perceiving the breath. Ajaan Lee talks about the breath coming in and out of the back of the skull, in and out the middle of the chest, lots of different spots in the body. Allow yourself to conceive the breath in that way and see what happens to your experience of breathing as you do that. Then you find that it expands your sense of the energy in the body and your repertoire of what you can do with the energy—because you find, when there are aches and pains in the body, that conceiving of the breath in a particular way will help. Sometimes you can think of the breath coming in and out of the body right there at the ache and the pain, so that you don’t have to create extra tensions trying to pull it in or push it out. It’s right there readily available, anywhere you want it.

Toward the end of my stay in Thailand I had malaria. And one of the symptoms was that I found it harder and harder and harder to breathe. The malaria parasite was eating my red blood cells and the muscles I was using to breathe were just getting worn out and fatigued. Then I remembered Ajaan Lee’s comments on the different spots in the head where the breath can come in. So I just told myself, “Okay, just think of those spots opening up so that the breath can come in without your having to pull it in and push it out.” That made it lot easier to

breathe, and the pain and the fatigue of the illness were a lot easier to take. So this is a useful skill to have up your sleeve.

The same principle applies when dealing with the mind. Different ways of breathing will have different effects on the mind. So when you find yourself discouraged or depressed, change the way you breathe so that you feel more energized. Or if you're tense and irritable, change the way you breathe so that you're more soothed and relaxed. There's lots to play with here.

This comes under the first base of success. The Buddha said there are four bases of success or bases for accomplishment in concentrating the mind. And they all come down to the proper attitude for developing a skill. The first thing you need to do is to enjoy what you're doing, wanting to find different ways of getting yourself interested in the breath, exploring the possibilities. If you're sitting here in a bad mood while you're meditating, can you change the way you breathe to change the bad mood? It's possible. Explore. It's much better than going out and buying medicine or doing the other things that people tend to do to erase a bad mood. It doesn't cost anything. It's right here. You don't have to go all the way down to Valley Center to pick it up.

So learn how to experiment with what you've got right here, and you get a greater and greater sense of enjoyment in the meditation, seeing that the mind states you used to find overwhelming are not so overwhelming anymore. You've got a handle on them. Physical states that you used to find irritating are not so bad. You can find ways of breathing to work around them.

Once you find that you're beginning to enjoy this, then the next base for success comes in, which is persistence. You just stick with it. Start applying your skill to all different kinds of things, different kinds of situations. The more you stick with it, the more you begin to appreciate it and the greater sense of confidence you have that you can deal with any situation. Ajaan Lee gives an analogy, saying that you've got a friend with you all the time. Whenever any issue comes up, you've got a friend you can depend on. But it's important that you stick with your friend, that you're true to your friend. The more time you spend with it, the more you learn.

A couple of years back, *The New Yorker* had an article on people who developed physical skills. The author analyzed the skills of a skilled brain surgeon, athletes, musicians—people like Wayne Gretzky, Yo Yo Ma, Michael Jordan. He talked about the qualities these people all had in common. One was that they really enjoyed what they were doing, they found it fun. The article told the story of the surgeon who was having trouble operating on brain aneurysms. And so what he did was that he had took some mice in the laboratory and induced little brain aneurysms in all the little mice. Then in the evening, after his work was done, he'd go and he'd operate on the mice. And he found himself enjoying it, to the point where he got really good at dealing with aneurysms.

So skill is a combination of, one, of enjoying it, and two, just keeping at it day after day after day. The author talked about the difference between really good basketball players or hockey players or golfers, and the really excellent ones. And a lot of what separated the excellent ones from the good ones was the amount of the time they put in. You assume that everybody has a talent when they get to that level, and the big difference is just how much time you put into it, how much interest you show.

That's the next basis for success: the interest, the sensitivity you bring to it— exploring different ways that you can use this skill, the ones that aren't taught in the books, the ones that aren't taught by your teachers but you discover on your own. That sense of discovery that comes from your own interest helps to even further your sense of enjoyment in the skill, makes it easier to stick with it. And part of that interest is getting a sense of when things don't go well, what do you do?

I had a friend who studied pottery in Japan. Her teacher was a living national treasure. She'd put her pots in the kiln and some of them would come out okay and some of them would be totally ruined. Yet day after day, he put his pots in the kiln and they'd come out fine, fine, fine. She began to wonder, how did he get there? And what did this say about her prospects as a potter? Was it just total lack of talent on her part or what was the problem? Then one day she came in early and it turned out that a particular batch of pots he'd put in had all been ruined in the kiln. And so what did he do? He sat in the kiln and tried to figure out what was going on. In other words, he took advantage of his mistakes, saw them as an opportunity to learn. That's how he had become a living national treasure. If you take this attitude, this level of interest, okay, then you really will develop as a meditator. Maybe you won't be recognized as a living national treasure of a meditator, but at least you will learn to master the tools you need for dealing with the problems in your own heart.

In that same article, the author talked about people applying to a medical school, wanting to be brain surgeons. And of course, anybody who's going to apply to a school like that is very smart, with excellent grades. But the question is, how do you pick among the smart people to find those who really show promise as surgeons? And they found one very useful question was, "Can you tell us about a mistake you made recently?" If the candidate said, "Well, I can't think of any mistakes I made recently," the candidate was out. The ones who said, "Oh, yeah. I made a mistake yesterday," were given the next question, "What did you do about it? What lessons did you learn from it?" If the candidates hadn't learned a lesson, they were out. If they talked about how they tried to work around the mistake, they were admitted to the school and turned out to be the best surgeons.

So your willingness to notice when you've made a mistake, to learn from it: that level of interest makes all the difference in the world—which means that you shouldn't get discouraged when things go wrong. Look at it as a challenge, as an opportunity to learn. It's the difference between people who come in with a lot of self-confidence but no real powers of

observation—that doesn't last long, nothing develops—and the people who were really willing to see: "This isn't quite right, something's got to be done here, what can I do?"

That's where the fourth quality comes in, your ingenuity, figuring out ways to get around problems. Sometimes I'd go to Ajaan Fuang with a problem in my meditation and he'd say, "Yeah, that is a problem isn't it?" Then he sent me back up the hill. Sometimes he would answer my question, but other times he'd just send me back up the hill, "Yeah, that is a problem, look into it." And it's important that you learn how to look into your own problems. Because that's where all of these qualities come together: the willingness, the kind of the energy you can put into it, the confidence that, "Yeah, there's something can be done here. And if I stick with it long enough and I pay careful enough attention, I'll be able to figure it out."

What's remarkable about the Buddha's skill is that he applies this attitude to, as I said, the sore spots in the heart, the things we tend to carry around as if they were some sort of cross that we have to bear during our lives. We don't have to, he said, there's something that can be done about them. And you've got the potential: you've got the potential to develop the powers of observation, the ingenuity, the interest that really can make a difference, that can begin to open these problems up and to deal with them in a way that finally puts an end to them.

That's why it's so ironic that Buddhism is called pessimistic. Actually, it's probably the most optimistic teaching there could be. Human beings have the ability to totally transcend suffering, that's what the Buddha says. He not only says it, he also gives us a path to follow. He gives us the techniques and he also tells us, "You've got to develop these qualities of mind: an enjoyment in the path, persistence in the path, showing interest and sensitivity in what you're doing, and using your own ingenuity. Make use of them."

When I first went over to Thailand, I was stuck on the word *pañña*—the Thai term, which is taken straight from the Pali term, and which the books define as wisdom. I'd come up against a problem in my meditation, and Ajaan Fuang would say, "Well, use your *pañña*." And I'd say, "What *pañña*? I don't have any *pañña*." And he replied, "Of course you have some *pañña*; everybody has some *pañña*. So I began to realize that maybe the translation was wrong. I finally realized that *pañña* actually meant discernment. Everybody's got some discernment, the ability to make distinctions and weigh them. The Buddha doesn't ask you to use anything you don't have. It's all right here. It's just learning how to make the best use of what you've got.

In the beginning, you're sort of fiddling around with the breath, again, like a little kid fiddling around with a guitar. But if you pay careful enough attention and start exploring the possibilities of what this skill can do for you, as the Buddha said, it can take you all the way beyond suffering, all the way to the deathless. After all, it was right here that the Buddha found awakening, right at his breath. What's the difference between his breath and our breath? The breath is the same thing. The qualities of mind that he brought to the breath were what made all the difference. And again, they were things he developed. It wasn't that he was born with these qualities that we don't have. We've got the same potentials he had. The difference lies in

learning how to develop those potentials: taking the time, showing the interest, realizing that this is really a very worthwhile path.

At first when you hear it, it's just words, games you can play with the mind. But when you start getting more and more sensitive to it, and as you get more sensitive to the breath, you find yourself opening up inside in ways that you didn't expect. It's just like plunking on those guitars strings and then someday, hey, it sounds really nice, really special. And from that point, the meditation takes off.