

The Challenge

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They say that when the Buddha gazed the world after his awakening, he saw all beings as on fire—on fire with the fires of passion, aversion, delusion, aging, illness, and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. That's what the world looks like to an awakened person, someone who has found true peace, true happiness. The nature of fire is that it's hot and that it consumes. It has to feed on things. Then you look at the nature of life. As the Buddha once said, all beings subsist on food. He didn't mean just physical food. We feed on emotional food as well, and there's suffering in both processes.

This is why we have that chant on the four requisites, to make us reflect on the human condition. You're born into the world with a huge lack. You need food constantly. You need clothing, shelter, and medicine, just to keep this body going. There's a lot of suffering in that process, both in your own search for the food and suffering for other beings who have to be food, or work to produce food, clothing, shelter, or medicine. On top of that, there's the suffering of the mind. Even when you get food today, there's always the question: Where is tomorrow's food going to come from? You realize how precarious the whole process is. And all for what? All the suffering, all the burning, all the feeding? What's left there to show for it?

As a young prince, the Buddha had seen that life was meaningless unless there was a way to find a happiness that didn't depend on feeding, didn't depend on consuming, that wasn't on fire. He staked his life on that. He left the comfort of his home, left his good name in the eyes of most people, and staked his life on his quest to see if there was a true happiness. After six years, he came back and said, Yes, there is. And that teaching has been standing there as a challenge ever since.

When you look at your own life, what do you have to show for all the eating you've been doing in the past, all the fires that have been burning in your mind? Do you want to keep on that path, or do you want to try the Buddha's path? That's a choice we all have to make. It requires sacrifices. We all want to have our cake and eat it, too—and not have to wash the dishes afterwards. But it doesn't work that way. There are a lot of forms of happiness that get in the way of the true happiness. It's not simply a matter of choosing pleasure over pain. There are many gradations of pleasure, many types of pleasure, and many things we are really attached to that we have to learn how to give up.

The unfortunate thing is we don't have the same certainty as someone who's already gained awakening. Those who have actually gotten on the noble path see

that, Yes, what the Buddha said is true. As for people standing on the edge, well, part of it's a question of who you trust, part of the question is just looking at your life: What do you want to show for your life? That's a question that each of us has to answer for him or herself. Nobody else can answer it for us. The extent to which we want to make those sacrifices, or how many sacrifices we're willing to make, is purely an internal matter.

But the Buddha doesn't say that you have to accept everything he says before you can practice. In fact, putting the teachings into practice is your way of proving them, testing them, at the same time that you're testing yourself. So you give it a try.

Ajaan Suwat once noticed when he was teaching a meditation retreat that one of the reasons why everyone was so grim about their meditation was that they didn't have any more basic experience of the Buddha's teachings, experience with generosity, experience with virtue, or at least the particular way the Buddha taught generosity and virtue. He noted that if you had that kind of experience, you'd come to the meditation with a lot more confidence, both in the Buddha and in yourself. You had tested his teachings. You had tested yourself, and you found the tests were true, even though many of the teachings are counterintuitive. You give things away, but you get happiness in return. It's a particular type of happiness. Once you learn to appreciate it, once you learn to be sensitive to it, you find it really is much more satisfying than the pleasure of holding on and consuming.

The same with the precepts: Often it's difficult to hold on to them. It requires sacrifice. But as you get skilled in the precepts, you find that the return really is worth much more than what you give up.

When you come to meditation with that experience behind you, it's a lot easier to give up a lot of the things that are really closest to the heart, things inside the mind: your sense of who you are, your narratives of who you are, where you are going, all the attachments of the mind. You'd think that because these things are just thoughts, they would be easy to give up, but they're not. They're old habits. They're the ways we justify our actions to ourselves, the way we make sense out of things. And the Buddha said in some cases that they are useful constructs, but in other cases they're not. How do you know which is which? You have to put them to the test. And he gives you techniques, he gives you trainings for how to put them to the test.

This is what we're doing as we're meditating. If you really want to see how an action gives good or bad results, you have to get the mind to be very mindful, very alert, consistently. That's why you have to train it in mindfulness and alertness

and the consistency that leads to good concentration. You focus on the breath because that helps you step out of your usual dialogue inside the mind—although “dialogue” is too small a concept. There’s a big discussion going on in there, and we go around taking on one voice and then taking on another voice. That’s been the pattern of our minds for who knows how long.

So you settle on the breath as a way of stepping back. As the Buddha himself said, he got on the path of the practice, after many false starts, by taking stock of the thoughts of his mind as events, seeing which kinds of thoughts lead to harm, which kind of thinking didn’t lead to harm. This practice requires that you step back from your thoughts, not hum along with them or sing along with them the way you normally do. Step away a bit, and look at them to see where they lead. Look at them in terms of a process of cause and effect. And then sort them out.

Any thoughts that you find lead you astray, that cause you harm, you’ve got to learn how to hold them in check. This has to be done skillfully, because we know that often we’ve tried to squash our thoughts and they come back. It’s like *The Thing* in the movie: tentacles all over the place. You cut it here, and it goes running underground and springs up someplace else. You may think that the more you suppress a particular kind of thought, the more power you give it, but that’s because you don’t do it skillfully. There’s a skill to dealing with thoughts of the mind. It may seem like a *Catch-22* that you have to be able to step back from them to be able to deal with them most skillfully, but again it’s not an either/or issue. You take it in stages, using whatever concentration you can develop.

It’s not that we don’t have any concentration before we start. There is such a thing as momentary concentration, the kind of concentration that allows you to listen to this talk and make sense of it, allows you to read a book, follow a thread of argument, follow the thread of a talk. It may not seem like much, but that’s the concentration you start out with. And you’ve got to start out where you are. It’s simply a question of learning to maintain that concentration longer and longer, and as you maintain it, it goes deeper.

Part of it is a matter having good strategies in giving yourself a comfortable breath to stay with, so that it’s easier to stay long periods of time. Sometimes there needs to be an element of will, and patience is necessary as well. Restraint: A thought comes in, and the mind so easily jumps on it and runs with it, but you restrain yourself. You say, No. The reason it seems like a fight is because it’s an old habit. But you remind yourself: Let’s try something new this time. Let’s try a new path. Staying with the breath, watching the thought go—if it’s going to go anyplace—but you stay right here. If it’s a choice between staying here and

watching the thought go, focus on staying here. Let the thought dissolve. The basic stance you take is being able to stay right here no matter what.

The deeper the concentration becomes, then the easier it is to withstand the thoughts, and the more clearly you can see the process of how a thought lures you in, or how you lure yourself into jumping on a thought. You get more skillful in evading unskillful thoughts. Either you see their drawbacks or you simply don't follow them. You learn how to relax any tension that builds up around them. That way, the mind gets in a better and better position so that it can see where the thoughts lead, in particular where they lead in terms of creating harm or not creating harm, creating stress or creating ease.

It's in testing of the Buddha's teachings that you also learn how to test yourself. You begin to reap the results of the path. That way, you build up your confidence both in yourself and in the Dhamma. It's a gradual path. There are sudden insights that can come, but a lot of the path is just sticking with it, sticking with it, developing your patience. The stronger your patience, the better your concentration is going to be. The more experience you have with the path, the easier it is to stay with it, to make the sacrifices that need to be made.

To some extent, the energy you need on the path comes from your experience with the path. Prior to that, it comes from simply looking at your life and seeing that life as it's normally lead is pretty pointless—not only pointless, but also a source of a lot of suffering. But as the Buddha said, there's a way out—a way to gain a happiness that doesn't require feeding, doesn't require burning. That's a challenge, but only if you're up for the challenge will you be able to know whether it's true or false.