

## *Question Your Defilements*

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There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the reasons people give themselves for being lazy and the reasons they give themselves for putting more effort into the practice. And it turns out that they're the same reasons. That's actually one of the more humorous passages in the Canon. There's the case a person says, "I've been sick, I just recovered from my illness, so I think I should rest to recuperate." So he doesn't practice. There's another person who says, "I've just been sick. I'm just recovering from illness. This illness could get worse. I'd better practice now while I've got the chance." The lazy person going on a trip: "Tomorrow I'm going on a trip, so I'd better rest up for tonight." The diligent person going on a trip says, "Tomorrow I'm going on a trip. While I'm on the trip, it's going to be hard for me to practice. I'd better practice while I've got the chance." And so on down the line.

In other words, the effort you put into the practice is something that has to be generated from within. We can give ourselves all kinds of excuses about external situations, internal issues, for not putting an effort into the practice, saying, "Well, I'll put in some effort maybe. But I don't want to go overboard." But exactly where is overboard? You don't really know until you've pushed yourself more than you ordinarily might. Our idea of where the middle is in this middle way has to depend on having explored the two extremes. You may not have to go to the same extremes that the Buddha went to—i.e., starving himself to the point where he fainted every time he went to defecate—but it's a good principle to try to push yourself harder than you might want to, just to explore exactly how hard is too hard. Once you've met up with too hard—you know you're strung out, not sleeping enough, you can't really concentrate—then you back off. But if you haven't reached that point, you don't really know the middle of the middle way.

Ajaan Maha Boowa has a nice passage where he talks about how, for most of us, the middle of the middle way is right in the middle of the pillow—not the middle of the cushion that we're sitting on, the middle of the mat where we sleep. When the time comes to practice, we tell ourselves not to push too hard. After all, we've got to keep the middleness of the middle way. But when we're not practicing, when we're doing other things, the idea of middleness seems to get tossed aside. Someone else once asked Ajaan Maha Boowa an easy way to become more diligent in the practice. He said, "That's a lazy person trying to find a lazy way to become energetic. It just doesn't work that way."

You've got to have the attitude that Ajaan Fuang had when he was very young. He came from a poor family. His parents died when he was very young. He was orphaned, he had no connections, no special talents, didn't do well in school. As he became a teenager, he began to look at his life: "Where is this life going? It's not going in any particular good direction. I've got to do something about that." So he was convinced that the practice would be good way to, at least, build up some of the merit he was lacking, build up some of the good karma he was lacking. So he said, "Okay wherever the practice takes me, I want to go. Whatever it demands, I want to try to meet those demands."

As you do that, that's when you start knowing your defilements—i.e., you have to push against them. There's that old principle of not knowing how strong the current of a river is until you try to put a dam across the river. That's when you find out what those deep currents along the bottom of the river are like, the ones that you don't see on the surface. It's only then that you realize, "Oh, this has been ruling my life all along. I had assumed that it's just the way I am." You let all these unknown forces in your mind take control of your life and you take them for granted. An important part of the practice is not taking things for granted—questioning them, putting up some resistance.

It's only when you put up some resistance that they'll start articulating themselves. You say, "Let's sit for another hour tonight." "No, I can't do that." "Why not?" If it doesn't look like you're really going to sit for an hour, then the mind would just stay quiet. You just accept, "Well, I guess I can't do that." Instead, you should say, "Okay, if I don't get a good reason for not sitting up for an extra hour tonight, I'll sit up for an extra hour." Then you start hearing the mind screeching and yelling, and you can listen to what it has to say and to how it says it. Then you can ask yourself, "Do I really want to identify with that voice? Or is it something I'd rather learn how to shed?"

This principle applies in all areas of the practice, but particularly in the meditation. After all, if you don't push against your defilements, they'll just push you around all the time. They sneak in, and you assume they're you, that this is the way you are. You just take it for granted and you end up selling yourself short. Nobody else has to stop you from practice. You're the one who stops yourself from practicing. And what do you end up with? You end up with the same old stuff day after day after day, and you don't get to see what a mind with different habits might be like, a life with different habits. You don't get the sense of ease and refreshment and spaciousness that comes when the mind is not pushed around in those ways, when it can see what's actually going on inside.

This is one of the trickier parts of the hindrances: When they arise in the mind, we tend to side with them without even thinking. Lust arises: “Yeah, that object I’m lusting for, that person I’m lusting for is really attractive. Anybody would be attracted by that.” Or there’s somebody you’re really angry at: “Of course, that person has done something that anybody in his or her right mind would be angry about.” When you feel sleepy, “Oh, it’s a sign the body really needs to rest.” When you’re anxious, the things you’re worried about really are worrisome. The things you doubt really are doubtful. In other words, you go along with the hindrance without even thinking. You take it for granted that that’s the way things are.

So you’ve got to learn how to question these things. When you look at the story of the Buddha’s life, the main turning points in his life were the points when he finally came up with a question. He had been enjoying sensual pleasures for years, but gradually the question began to take shape in his mind, until finally it was formulated: “Why is it that here I am, subject to aging, illness, and death, and I’m looking for my happiness in things that are also subject to aging, illness, and death. Where does that take me?” He opened his mind to the possibility that there might be a deathless happiness. It might be worth looking into.

So he questioned what he’d been doing, questioned his attitudes, and opened his mind to new possibilities. This questioning attitude was what led him ultimately to the path to awakening. He made some false starts. He went down some wrong paths. He said something like, “How about trying to go without food, see what that does?” Or: “What if I went without breathing?” And he tried these things for a long time before he realized that they go nowhere. So gradually he was able to hone his doubts down to questions that were really helpful, i.e., “What’s skillful? What’s not skillful? How do I look at my thinking, not in terms of what I believe or don’t believe, but in terms of what actually happens as a result of following a particular thought, following a particular idea?”

That question led him to the four noble truths, led him to see things in terms of dependent co-arising—in other words, processes just arising and passing in the mind without thinking about “This is me, this is the way I do things,” but more: “This is why things happen. This is the way suffering comes about. This is the way stress comes about. What happens if you change the causes?”

He wasn’t thinking about the kind of person he’d been before, or whether it was possible for him to change his ways. It was just: “Let’s look at things simply in terms of processes.” He got the “me” out of there—not saying that there is no me, but just that he didn’t look in those terms. He simply saw: “How does stress arise and how does it pass away? What causes it to arise, what causes it to pass away?”

What can be done to stop it?” He was able to hone his questions down so that they really were useful, until finally he could come to the end of suffering.

Think about that. If the Buddha hadn't been asking those questions, we would have forgotten about him a long time ago: just one of those many, many princes who became kings and who reigned for a while and then died and was forgotten. Or as in that poem: Shelley's Ozymandias had a big memorial to himself. "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair." Well, you look at his works, and all that's left are just a couple of old legs, standing in the vast, empty desert. That kind of memorial: We have too many of those throughout the world. But the Buddha has a different kind of memorial: the questions he asked. His willingness to try something new, to imagine something different.

Many of us are stuck at our ways because of a lack of imagination. We can't imagine ourselves doing anything different. He was able to imagine the possibility of a deathless happiness, to imagine that he could find it, or at least that he could give himself over to that quest, give it a try. He made a lot of false starts but he didn't let that discourage him. He said, "Let's try this. Let's try that. Suppose I were to do this? Suppose I were to do that? If it doesn't work out, might there be another way?"

So it was a combination of imagination, determination, and a willingness to put his old habits aside, try something new: That's what was really amazing about his life. Those questions seemed to wake him up a little bit and then, when he finally got the answer that really was an awakening, that's the tradition that has been passed down to us.

It's important we don't think of that as something happened a long time ago and that's it, lost in the mists of myths and fairytale. When the Buddha talks about the path, when he talks about the causes of suffering and stress, they're all things that are very present in our minds right now. They're all possibilities we can develop: either the possibility for more stress and suffering, or the possibility for less.

So try to expand your imagination and start questioning the things coming up in the mind that say, "Of course, it's going to be this way. This is just the way I am." You can't take these things for granted. It's the things we take for granted that get in our way. Nobody else stops us from meditating. We're the ones to stop ourselves from meditating. Nobody else puts obstacles in our path. We're the ones that put up obstacles in our path. But we don't have to. There's a part of the mind that says, "Oh, that's such a huge task. I'm not up for it." Yet, as with any large task, you try to break it down into small bits. One breath right here, right here, right here, right now. A thought arising, right now. Try to figure out whatever it is

that's arising, whether you like it or not. Is it skillful? Is it not? If it's not skillful, what are you going to do with it? You might watch it for a while to see what's going on. Poke at it. Question it for a little bit: "Do I really have to believe this?" See if you can get past it.

You might think of all the unskillful thoughts in your mind as being like the bark of a tree. There are just little bits and pieces of the bark, and if you can get one little piece off, you've done something. Then it's followed by another little piece. Some new pieces grow back on, but bit by bit by bit after a while you get so that you can strip all the bark off the tree. And even if you don't get all the bark off the tree in this lifetime, the fact that you've seen at least one unskillful habit go means that you're no longer a slave to that particular subterranean force—because it's no longer subterranean. You've brought it up into the light of awareness. You see, "Oh, I've been pushed around by this particular attitude for how many years? Something I don't really seriously believe but I've allowed it to lurk in the corner of my mind and push things here, push things there behind the scenes." That's an accomplishment.

And the practice largely made of these little accomplishments. You chip here, you chip there, and finally you hit an important spot where you do a little chip and something bigger falls off, something bigger than you could imagined. That can happen, too.

But at the very least allow yourself to imagine: Yes, I can do this practice. Yes, I can put more effort into it. Instead of having doubts about the practice, you might turn around and have doubts about your defilements. That kind of doubt is encouraged—to recognize, Yes, there are defilements in the mind. There things that darken the mind that obscure it. You may not like the word "defilement," but think of the fact that your mind is obscured. You don't want it to be obscured. You'd like it to be clear, open, bright, full of awareness. It can happen.

Ajaan Fuang had a number of lay students who didn't come to meditation before quite late in life. It may have been the fact that they knew that death was imminent that they really gave themselves to the practice, and they really did make big changes in their lives, discovered areas in the mind they had never imagined before. But it's best if you don't wait that long. You've got the opportunity now, so take advantage of it while you have it.