

You Can't Relax Your Way to Awakening

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There's a Pali phrase that the Thai ajaans repeat a lot, *viriyena dukkhamacceti*: It's through effort that we put an end to suffering. And as Ajaan Lee says, we hear it but we don't believe it. We're looking for the Pali phrase that would say, "It's through relaxing that we put an end to suffering." We go through the Canon trying to find the passages that indicate there's no need for an act of will, that as soon as you're developing admirable friendship then everything is just going to follow right in line. And we focus on other passages, where it seems to indicate that the path is one nice step after another nice step without much difficulty.

That's ignoring huge parts of the Canon. And even the passages that say you start with admirable friendship and then everything follows naturally will admit that admirable friendship is not easy. Finding a good person, someone you trust, and then emulating that person's qualities: That's where it gets difficult. And of course, there are so many passages in the Canon where the Buddha says that there's an aspect of developing skillful qualities that's going to be difficult, it's going to be hard. In fact, he says one of the advantages of getting the mind into concentration with a sense of well-being is that it helps get you past some of the hardships involved in developing skillful qualities. Unskillful qualities aren't the only ones that involve pain. Sometimes skillful qualities do—or the act of trying to develop them is going to be painful. You're unskillful qualities rarely abandon the field without a fight.

There's even a passage where the Buddha says that if you've come to a point in your practice where sticking with the practice makes tears come down your face, you'd still be wise to stick with it. Even though there may be pain in the short term, there's going to be well-being in the long term. There's also the passage where he says that if you could make a deal that someone would stab you with spears every day for a hundred years—a hundred spears in the morning, a hundred spears at noon, a hundred spears in the evening—but with a guarantee that you'd gain awakening at the end of those hundred years, it'd be a good deal. And when you finally gained awakening, you wouldn't feel that it was attained with pain. The pleasure—and this is not a pleasant feeling, but there's a pleasure of freedom that comes with that—is so overwhelming that it would blot out all of the difficulties.

So as you're sitting here looking for the path of relaxation, you're in the wrong place. There are going to be some difficulties and you have to make an effort. The persistence of right effort is not always just a matter of watching things. There *are*

some unskillful states of mind that are causing suffering which, when you watch them, just go away on their own. They kind of wither away in front of your awareness. The fact that they've been causing suffering in the mind is simply because you haven't been paying attention. When you pay them attention, you see, "I don't really want to go there. Why am I doing this?" And you stop. But there are other unskillful states that are not like that. They require what the Buddha calls exerting a fabrication, or fabricating exertion, where you have to put forth an effort. There are going to be pains as you sit. There'll be thoughts coming up in your mind that you would really like to think but you've got to say, "No, I can't go there." There's going to be discomfort of all kinds.

We had that question this afternoon about dealing with mosquitoes: What way of thinking about the mosquitoes would make them go away? It's good to think about some of the stories of the forest ajaans. There's the story about Ajaan Lee. He'd gone out to sit in an orchard one afternoon, put down a mat, and then discovered that, in putting down the mat, he'd disturbed a red ant nest. As the ants came swarming around, he said, "Okay, if I've ever done anything wrong to you, go ahead and bite me. But if I haven't done anything to wrong you in the past, please stay away. Let me practice and I'll dedicate the merit of my practice to you." In that case, the ants went away.

But notice: He didn't start out by saying, "Go away," or "I'm spreading goodwill in your direction so you'll go away." He said, "If I've wronged you in the past, okay, I'm willing to suffer the consequences." We have to have *that* attitude. Because after all, the simple fact that we're doing something nice here doesn't mean that everybody's going to treat us nicely.

One of the ajaans at Wat Asokaram was telling me that when he was a young monk and was sitting in the sala, in those days the sala didn't have any fans, so at night as they were sitting meditating, the mosquitoes were all over everybody. He'd somehow gotten the idea that if you breathed with your entire body so that the breath came in and out every pore, it would blow the mosquitoes away. But it wasn't happening for him. So he opened his eyes one night when Ajaan Lee was up on the Dhamma seat giving the Dhamma talk, to see if Ajaan Lee was blowing all the mosquitoes away with his breath. And he saw that Ajaan Lee, the breath expert, was covered with mosquitoes.

So it's not always the case that when you're sitting and meditating with lots of goodwill or lots of breath energy filling the body the mosquitoes will go away and leave you alone—to say nothing of the ants or the other animals or disturbing people. This is something even the ajaans going off into the forest found: There

were lots of disturbing people they had to deal with. If it wasn't a matter of disturbing people, it'd be a matter of disturbing spirits.

So when laypeople come here and say, "The monks here have it easy, they don't have to deal with a lot of people," it's not true. We have to deal with all kinds of people coming here. So when you go home it's not all that different. You may have less time to practice, but the fact that there are going to be disturbances, the fact that there are going to be difficulties, is nothing new. It's simply a matter of having the right attitude toward them.

Which is Ajaan Lee's attitude: "If these people have been wronged by me in the past, okay, I'm willing to put up with the difficulty. If I haven't wronged them, may we live in peace. Either way, I'll be willing to dedicate the merit of my practice to them." That attitude means that you're willing to take on whatever difficulties are involved.

One of the better Zen teachings is the statement that "The Great Way is not difficult for those with no preferences." Now, this doesn't mean that you don't prefer to put an end to suffering rather than suffer. You *do* prefer that. What it means is that whatever the path the end of suffering entails, you're up for it. Whatever the difficulties, you're ready for them. Because you've seen that otherwise the mind is going to create a *lot* of suffering for itself. And the sufferings that come from people outside or situations outside are nothing compared to the suffering that the mind can create for itself—and that's what you've got to work on. That's the real difficulty and that's where the real effort is going to be.

Notice that when the Buddha defines right effort he focuses on the effort to get rid of unskillful mental qualities and to develop skillful ones in their place. In other words, the effort has to do with the mind. It's not simply a matter of sitting long hours. It's a matter of being consistently on top of your mind to deal with the problems coming up there. That's where the focus should be. Allow the difficulties outside to fall into the background. Accept them as a good sport.

This is where the teaching on karma is helpful. It reminds you that, okay, there are things you've done in the past, some of which you have no idea what they were because they were done in another lifetime. And even though you've been good this lifetime doesn't mean you've always been good. The fact that you're born as a human being means that you have some bad karma. Because the human realm is a place where people with mixed karma go, we're bound to meet up with difficulties. So see them as training. The pain of having mosquitoes bite you is nothing compared to the pain that's going to happen as you approach death. If you can't put up with little pains now, what are you going to do with the major pains that come then? Or the pain of having a relationship end is nothing

compared to the pain that comes when you're going to have to give up *all* your relationships to *all* things in the human realm. So on the one hand, look at difficulties as the price that comes from having been born as a human being. On the other hand, remember that sometimes bad things happening to you in the world outside can actually lead to good results.

Both Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat told me that some of the really important insights they gained in meditation came when they were ill. In Ajaan Fuang's case it was a persistent migraine that went on and on and on for months. In Ajaan Suwat's case, it was a bout of malaria. As Ajaan Fuang explained, he began to realize that he'd gotten so obsessed with putting an end to the headache that he'd forgotten: What's the duty with regard to pain? It's not to make it go away. It's to locate where the real pain is and to comprehend it: that it's the pain in the clinging, not the pain in the head. It's the pain in the clinging, an activity you're doing. You're not just on the receiving end, you're actually *paining*. Think of it as an active verb, and that's how you begin to comprehend it.

So the pains and the difficulties of the practice are an important part of it. You learn some very important lessons. After all, the first noble truth is the truth of suffering. You're going to have to watch it and understand it before you get past it. That's going to require effort. The idea that you can simply relax and the unconditioned will come through your relaxation has *nothing* to do with the path. It's based on a wrong idea about the relationship between the fabricated and the unfabricated. The Canon and the ajaans never used analogies of relaxation to explain the path to awakening. Instead, they use analogies of warriors, people with skills: in other words, people who overcome difficulties through using their own powers of analysis together with their persistence.

There's an idea that made its way into Buddhist circles that, after all, because fabrications just create more fabrications, then you can't do anything that would lead to the goal, so you have to just go around doing nothing, not fabricating, and that's how the unfabricated will appear. That's a very simplistic notion of causality. The Buddha's notion of causality is a lot more complex. It's like the complexity of non-linear systems, in which simply relaxing into the system doesn't ever get you out of the system. It's by pushing the different elements in the system that you can actually, by following the internal laws of the system, make it *break down*, and that's how you get out. So where is the pushing right now? It's in dealing with suffering, dealing with pain. We develop rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity so that the mind will have an alternative place of well-being to stay to give itself a good foundation, so that it can deal with pain and not feel threatened by it. But it doesn't mean the pain's going to go away.

If you could just go into jhana and then wipe out all pain and not have to deal with it again, the Buddha wouldn't have taught discernment the way he did: Use right concentration to comprehend pain, comprehend suffering, realizing where the real pain is. It's not in the physical pain, it's not even in the anguish. It's in the clinging. When the mind is well-settled, it can develop a dispassion for that clinging and then dispassion for the cause.

This is how the path to awakening attacks the problem. Remember, the four noble truths are set out as cause and effect: unskillful causes, bad effect; skillful causes, good effect. But those skillful causes don't *create* the deathless. What they do is to develop dispassion. As you get the mind to settle down, you begin to see, "Oh, this is how I've been creating suffering. This is stupid!" and you let go what you've been doing. Then, when you're done with all your other cravings, you realize that the only thing still weighing down the mind is the path, so you let that go, too. But you don't let it go until you've developed it. If you let it go before you develop it, it's like that image of the relay chariots that are supposed to go all the way to Savatthi: If you get off the first chariot saying, "Okay, I'm just going to rest here," you never get there.

Or like the image of the cow: You want milk out of the cow and you've been squeezing the horn and you find you're getting nothing from your efforts. You stop squeezing the horn and you say, "This is much nicer than squeezing the horn. It's nicer for me, nicer for the cow." But the problem is that you still don't get any milk. You've got to develop the path. In this case, you find out which is the right part of the cow to squeeze, then you work at it and you get the results.

So even though we'd like to relax our way to awakening, it's not going to happen. It's only through effort that suffering is overcome, that suffering is ended. Once we're willing to admit that, then we can get to work.