

Taking Risks

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We all start out from ignorance. The Buddha himself started out from ignorance.

But we have this ability to learn. And this ability to learn, this willingness to learn, is what can take us to awakening.

The first thing we know when we're born is that there's suffering, there's pain. The little baby comes out of the womb and cries. It's hungry and it cries. The body does all kinds of weird things that the baby doesn't understand and so it cries.

And the poor parents are trying to figure out what's wrong: Sometimes it's easy enough to figure out, but sometimes it's not.

As the Buddha once said, our reaction to pain, our reaction to suffering is twofold. First, there's bewilderment: "Why is this happening? What's happening?" And then secondly, a search: "Is there someone who can help me get past this pain?" Bewilderment and search.

The search is what can get us out, but the problem is that often the search is directed by bewilderment, too. So sometimes we hit it right and sometimes we hit it wrong. And it's enough to drive you crazy.

I once read about an experiment where they put pigeon in boxes. And they had a control. With the control, when a red light goes on, there's going to be no food. When the green light comes on, the pigeon pecks at the little button and food will come out. And that pigeon is contented.

The other pigeon has a red light and a green light, too. But sometimes when the red light is on the food will come out and sometimes it won't. Sometimes it comes out when the green light is on and sometimes it doesn't. That pigeon goes crazy.

And you look at all the things that cause us suffering in life and they really are bewildering. It's enough to drive you crazy.

Fortunately, we have people who've been through this before us, and they can not only help to relieve some of our sufferings but can also explain why they're caused so we can begin to explore on our own, understand on our own.

This is the pattern of the Buddha's teachings. He was willing to risk everything in his life on this one question: Is there a way out of suffering that's total, that gives total freedom from suffering?

And he put his life on the line. He went out into the forest, abandoned his family, abandoned his wealth. Abandoning not only the comforts of home but also the self-respect that comes from being a responsible parent, a responsible son. Because this other problem burned inside.

And he had to experiment, he had to try all kinds of different things. Studying with

different teachers. Trying extreme austerities for many years. And none of that worked.

Then he tried something else. How about getting the mind in a good state of concentration? And from that point he was able to find the way out of suffering.

It was all very paradoxical. He wanted to get past desire but he couldn't just snuff out desire by exposing himself to all kinds of pain. He had to use his desire for mental comfort as a path.

You look at the way he experimented, and you see a lot of the same sort of thing nowadays, too. Kids who have been totally indulging themselves in all kinds of drugs and intoxicants, when they begin to straighten themselves out, go to the other extreme: starve themselves, impose all kinds of harsh regimens on themselves. And neither extreme works.

The Buddha found that you have to use a certain kind of desire to go beyond desire. To get beyond the processes of becoming you have to learn how to do the processes of becoming very skillfully. There's a paradoxical aspect to the path he found.

Which is one of the reasons why, after finding the end of suffering, he despaired of teaching that path to anybody else. But then he was convinced that there would be at least *some* people who'd understand, so he went ahead and started teaching.

You notice all the risks that he took. As I said, like us he started out with ignorance, and so the whole process was a gamble, one long series of taking risks.

So as we follow him on the path, we have to take some risks too.

His teaching on kamma, his teaching on rebirth, his teaching on the nature of how our sense of self is made: Some people find them immediately appealing, some people find them off-putting. And the Buddha himself could offer no empirical proof that these teachings were true.

He said that if you put them into practice you will ultimately prove these things for yourself. But you have to be willing to take them as working hypotheses to begin with.

What he offered was a pragmatic proof: that if you accept the idea that your actions really make a difference in your life, you'll tend to act in ways that are less harmful. You'll take more responsibility for your actions.

If you accept the idea that your life is shaped by your past actions and your present actions, then there's a way out. If you believe that everything is shaped by the past, there's no way out at all. Or if you believe that your actions have no real impact on anything, that closes off the way as well.

There's no way of proving these things beforehand, so we can't wait to have everything proven to us before we attempt the path.

The thing that does push us onto the path is the fact that we suffer. When we've had enough of the suffering, we've got to find the way out. So we take a chance, we take the risk. And this is an important element in the path all the time. You have to experiment if you want to know.

If you're afraid of making a mistake and you keep holding back, holding back, holding

back, you never learn.

You look at the Buddha's instructions to his son on how to look at his actions and how to learn from his actions. He starts out by saying, "Try to avoid acting on unskillful intentions." How do you know if an intention is skillful? If there's obviously any greed or anger or delusion in there, you don't act on it. If you expect that it will cause harm, you don't act on it. But many times you don't see. Especially if it's delusion, you don't see it.

But if you do see anything unskillful in your intentions, don't. If everything looks okay, go ahead. If, while you're doing something, you see that actual harm is being caused, then you stop. But if you don't see any harm, keep at it. And then after the action is done you look back, to see what the long-term results are. And if it turns out that you made a mistake, you resolve not to repeat it and you go talk it over with somebody you respect. If you don't see that you caused any harm, okay, take joy in the fact that you're training, you're learning. And keep on trying to learn.

In other words, the Buddha didn't say, "Don't make mistakes." He said, essentially, "This is how you do your best to avoid them, and this is how you learn from them when you find that you do." There's an element of risk in every action.

So realize that as you practice. You can't be timid.

Now, this doesn't mean that you're brazen in making mistakes, simply that you do your best to avoid them. But when you get into areas where you're really not sure, as long as your intention looks good, go ahead. Then you can learn from it.

Those kinds of mistakes are a lot easier to take than the ones where you knew ahead of time that it was going to be bad and you went ahead and did it anyhow. Those are the mistakes you try to hide from yourself: You pretend that they weren't mistakes or that you didn't know. And that creates more ignorance and more delusion, which you don't want.

Even this method of meditation that we're following here: It was a result of somebody's experimenting. Ajaan Lee walked into the forest one summer for the rains retreat. He walked three days into a little hilltribe village way up in the mountains.

Soon after he arrived there, he had a heart attack. No doctor, no medicine. And he knew he was going to have to walk back out at the end of the three months.

So he started using the breath to heal himself. He didn't give up. He tried different methods, tried different ways of working with the breath energy, and he found what worked. At the end of the three months, he was able to walk back out. He came back, wrote down the method. And as you read his Dhamma talks for the remainder of his life—he lived for another eight or nine years—you see that he was continually experimenting with different ways of working with the breath energy, different ways of conceiving the breath, trying different things out.

That's the attitude you have to develop as a meditator: Keep trying things out.

Because no matter what you read of other people's practice, what you read of the insights

that gave them awakening, there's no guarantee that your path is going to follow theirs.

There *are* some general maps that are out there. And they're useful. But you have to learn how to use the maps. And not anticipate too much. Use the maps after you've had some experience meditating and you look at the different results you've been getting, and you begin to see a pattern.

So you write the pattern down on a mental post-it note and keep that in mind as you meditate further. Then, after a while, as you get to know the territory a little bit better, you find that it's not quite what it looked like on the map. So you take down the post-it note, put up another one with a slightly different map.

The point where you really know is when you finally come across the deathless, something that has no conditioning of space and time. Even then, though, you put *that* on a post-it note, too—just to check, just to be sure.

In other words, you're always experimenting, always taking risks. But this is how you learn. And it makes the practice an adventure. You're learning something new. You're not just regurgitating what somebody else said or forcing the mind into a mold. It's not the case that you can simply program yourself or clone awakening.

What the Buddha does is that he gives you some pointers. He said there's something really valuable here in this field. This is how you go about looking for it and when you find something, this is how you test it.

Say that he says that there's gold in the field. He gives you instructions on how to look for the gold and instructions on how to test whatever shiny things you find in the field to make sure they really are gold and not something else. Then he sets you loose in the field.

So there are bound to be mistakes on the path, but you can always learn from them. As you learn how to monitor your actions and make adjustments, you gain more and more confidence in what you're doing: that you can handle any situation that comes up in the course of the search.

And the point when you really know is when you finally do get to that point where there's no more suffering, there's no more stress in the mind.

There will still be pains in the body, but the mind itself has no pain, no suffering. There's nothing that weighs on the mind at all. There's nothing inconstant, nothing stressful.

That's the point of real knowledge. Up to that point you're still groping.

Your first taste of awakening confirms to you that, Yes, the Buddha did really know what he was talking about. But the point of full knowledge is when there's no more suffering left at all.

That's why the Buddha said even to the stream-enterers who were present at his passing away: "Don't be complacent. Be heedful." There's more to learn, there's still some risk in the practice. As long as you're comfortable and confident in the fact that you can learn, and there's no reason to be timid. And every reason to keep on exploring.