

Battling Negativity

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The work of looking into the mind, ferreting out the causes of suffering and figuring out how to put an end to them, is very delicate work, very precise work. Which is why you have to get the mind very still in order to do it.

It's like threading a needle. You hold your breath, get the rest of the body still, and then you can very carefully stick the end of the thread into the eye of the needle.

But working with the mind requires more than just stillness. There has to be a sense of well-being as well, because in the course of looking into the causes of suffering you're going to start seeing some things you don't like to see. Different parts of the mind are working at cross-purposes. One desire for happiness may run up against another desire for happiness—which may not be especially open and aboveboard.

When you look at the mind, you see that there are many different selves in the mind, many different ideas of who-you-are, what-you-want, clamoring for your attention at any one time. And they can pull you in all sorts of different directions. With some desires, you act on them but you don't feel very good about acting on them and so you tend to hide them. And these are often the ones that cause suffering.

But some causes of suffering go deeper than that. After all, the Buddha said, suffering comes from the clinging-aggregates. And the clinging-aggregates are also what we create our sense of who-we-are out of. Our sense of "I am this" or "I am that" can be centered on form, feeling, perception, thought-constructs, or consciousness. And as soon as we slap the label of "I am this" or "I am that" onto something, we're going to cling to it. And there you are: suffering. Suffering is bound up in how we define ourselves.

So when we start trying to ferret out the causes of suffering, we're going to find part of ourselves being attacked. They're going to fight back. And so you've got to have a strategy.

Some of the forest ajaans talk about this as like going into a ring with a prizefighter. You've got an enemy you've got to figure out how to attack. Other ajaans, though, say that you'll actually have to learn how to win the enemy over. Use whatever strategies you can to take your defilements and make them work for you.

And both analogies are right. This is a fight. You can't let down your guard. You've got to be careful at all times. But at the same time, you'll find that the lines dividing you from your enemy shift around quite a lot.

As the Buddha said, if there weren't any pleasure in the five aggregates we wouldn't hold onto them. Sometimes you hear scholarly monks explaining things: "There are the five aggregates, and you hold onto them because you think they won't change, but really if you look at them carefully you'll see that they're not worth claiming as yourself. See, they change."

You can't hold onto your form, you can't hold onto feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, or consciousness. Understand? It's all very logical" —as if all you had to do was have it explained to you once and that would be enough for you to say, "Oh, I made a categorical mistake. Well, I won't make that again."

If your idea of self were totally suffering, you wouldn't hold onto it. The problem is that it also gives you a certain amount of pleasure. Part of this is because your sense of who-you-are is central to a lot of your strategies for happiness. You figure out what's under your control, what you can manipulate so that you can provide for your happiness.

Without that sense of control, you'd be totally lost. Which is one of the reasons why we don't give in so easily when someone says, "Well, obviously the five aggregates are not-self, so just stop calling them self and you'll be happy." The mind doesn't work that way. Part of it says, "I'm being deprived of my strategies for happiness. How can I let go?"

The Buddha's approach is to say, "I'll teach you new strategies, new ways of looking at things so that you don't need all those unskillful ideas of self."

Your sense of self is not an abstraction or a logical conclusion. It's a particular strategy. There are many different types of selves and you're going to have to ferret them out one by one. This, in some ways, is what makes the problem difficult. You can't just cut one sense of self and be done with it. But on the other hand, it means that there are individual senses of self—and they're not as big as you might have thought they were.

Each one is a particular strategy, and when you can see the strategy at work and see that it's not really worth that particular type of effort—in other words, the happiness it leads to is not worth all the effort involved—you learn how to drop that particular strategy.

So part of the solution is learning how to take this big problem, "Suffering" with a capital "S," "Self" with a capital "S," and break it down into little pieces that you can observe and you can learn how to understand. In each case, it involves seeing this particular pattern arise, watching it pass away, so that you see it as an individual pattern, an event that you can encompass in your awareness.

If the problem is too big—"Suffering" with a capital "S" or "Negativity" with a capital "N"—it seems so large that you can never get your mind around it. But when you see that it's made up of specific events, specific choices in the mind, you can watch the choices one by one and then watch to see where they lead.

So that's the first thing: to see them arise, see them pass away, so that you know that they come and they go. They're just individual events, not something large and monolithic.

The next thing to look for is their allure, and this is one of the harder parts because often the allure is something we don't like to admit to ourselves. For instance, if you have low self-esteem: On the surface it would seem, "Who would want to entertain thoughts of low self-esteem? They're so debilitating." But they have their upside. If other people seem to have a low opinion of you, that means not much is expected of you. You don't have to work too hard.

That's their upside, and part of us likes that.

But then you have to ask yourself, "Is it really worth it?" Lowering your expectations means, of course, that the happiness you're going to gain will be lower as well. So even though it may mean less is expected of you—less effort is going to have to be put into doing anything well because, after all, nobody really expects you to do it well—you don't get the results of having done anything well, either.

This is a problem that many of us face as we get into the practice. We realize that this is going to be a demanding project. It's going to ask a lot of us. We tell ourselves, "I don't want to take on anything that large," and we go back to activities where not so much is asked of us. But you've got to remind yourself that you're turning your back on the possibility for a deathless happiness. Is it worth it? Can you live with yourself knowing that the possibility is there and you don't want to tackle it? You've lived a life of a human being and yet you didn't look for the highest happiness that a human being can find: How does that thought feel?

You've got to weigh these things in your mind. Look at the allure of that particular mind-state and then look at its drawbacks. And you'll see nine times out of ten that the drawbacks outweigh the allure. They're just not worth it.

What is worth it is the effort put into the path. This is why the Buddha was so precise and spent so much time talking about this particular noble truth. This is a path of effort that does yield good results, way in excess of the effort that goes into it.

So you want to be very clear about what you can do to build up the mind, to build up its strength, to build up its capabilities so that it can keep open that possibility of a deathless happiness.

This is the other side of the equation in this battle we have with negativity. Part of the issue is learning how to break the enemy down into little individual events. And the other part is learning that you've got lots of potential tools. You're not defenseless.

It starts with the breath. As the Buddha says, you learn how to breathe in different ways so that the breath becomes an ally in your battle with negative mind-states. You learn how to breathe aware of the whole body. You learn how to calm the sensations of breathing in the body so that there's a sense of ease and refreshment every time you breathe.

That right there gives you a big ally, so that when you feel tired and overwhelmed, you can rest and gain your strength. When pain comes into the body, you've got an ally in dealing with the pain. When negative thoughts come into the mind, you've got an ally in dealing with them, too.

In other words, you can take your stance here in the body. And even though angry thoughts may be roiling through the mind, they don't have to go roiling through your body. You can consciously keep that awareness of the breath, whole-body breathing, calm breathing, full, refreshed, easeful. In that way you've got your allies in the fight.

In this way, the parts that you've been identifying with, the negative thoughts, begin to lose

their appeal. You realize that you don't have to identify with them. And you don't really want to, either, once you take a really good look at them.

The other night I was reading a passage from Upasika Kee in Thai where she was saying that when real insight comes, it's not a matter of first the insight comes and then you decide to let go. The insight comes and there's a letting go right at the same moment. You fully understand that this habit you've had that you've identified as part of your arsenal, part of yourself, leads to bad results and you can develop other habits in its place. Once you really see that, you let go. Immediately.

It's like learning that if you stick your finger into a flame it's going to hurt. You don't have to wait to pull it out. You pull it out immediately, that's it. You never put your finger into a fire again.

So as negative thoughts come in and seem to take over the mind, keep reminding yourself: They are individual negative thoughts. And you can deal with them on that level, one by one by one. Be aware of the tendency to deal in large abstractions, because that's part of their guise, that's how they come in and push their way into the mind—by making themselves look big. They're like the lizards out on the patio of the sala: They try to make themselves look big by raising themselves up, as if they were doing push-ups. This may be impressive to other lizards, but when you're bigger than they are, it looks pathetic. Lizard push-ups.

So keep reminding yourself that you're bigger than your thoughts. They're just little individual events in the mind. And remind yourself that you've got the tools you need: in terms of the concentration, the ease, the well-being that comes from getting the mind to settle down with the breath and getting the breath to fill the body. That's only one of many allies that you can call on, one of many skills that you can master so that you can unlearn your old habits and replace them with skillful ones. In this way, your sense of well-being, your desire for happiness, isn't so divided and conflicted. It's all open and aboveboard and it's focused on one thing.

There was a famous thinker, Kierkegaard, who said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." And the principle in general applies to Buddhism as well: You will the end of suffering. You will the end of your attachment to ordinary happiness by looking for a higher happiness. You keep that aim in mind and you learn to identify any thought in the mind that goes against it as a traitor—not a traitor in the sense of being evil, but just in the sense that it's misguided.

You can reason out whatever train of thought led in that direction and you can point out to the mind that it's really is not in your own best interest. And you do this with each instance as it comes. Not in a general sense of, "Oh, if it's stressful it's not-self, and that's the end of the matter." That's not the end of the matter, because you have so many self-strategies and you've got to unlearn them all, starting with all the unskillful ones and then working on to the ones that are skillful.

So you take them on one at a time. And ultimately you find that they're not so many that they're beyond your powers of mastering them. You can master them all. But it requires a

willingness to keep taking them on one at a time. And to be very patient and persistent, drawing on the strength that comes from the concentration that you can do this.

That's how you come out winning in the end.