

## *Dealing with Limitations*

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We live in a conditioned world, which means that we have to learn how to live with limitations. Some conditions open up possibilities; others close them off. And our range of limitations fluctuates all the time, as if we were living on a raft in the ocean with the waves rising and falling every which way. Sometimes they're small waves, sometimes big waves, sometimes huge waves that overwhelm us. Sometimes the currents in the ocean push us in the direction we want to go, sometimes in the opposite direction. When that's the case, we have to fight them. Sometimes we can win the fight, sometimes we can't. This is why people go crazy—because everything is so complex and uncertain.

They've done experiments where they put pigeons in boxes, each box with a green button and a red button. In some of the boxes, when the pigeon presses the green button it gets food; when it presses the red button it doesn't get anything. Those pigeons are very happy and well adjusted. In other boxes, though, the pigeon will sometimes get food when it pushes the green button and sometimes not; sometimes it'll get food when it pushes the red button and sometimes not. Those pigeons go crazy.

So we have to learn how to not go crazy with all these fluctuations. Look for patterns in your life because they are there—complex, but they're there. And learn how to push against your limitations. If you give up entirely, you live a totally passive life and simply become a victim of events. In other words, you say, "Well, my mind is the way it is. There's no way I can change it. Greed, anger, and delusion are natural; I just have to accept them if I want to be happy." That's totally giving in. Your raft on the ocean gets tossed wherever the currents and the waves may go, and you never get to shore. If, on the other hand, you simply go on the force of belief, believing that you have an unlimited power to go in whichever direction you want, you end up living in a total fantasy world. And then the clash of your fantasy world with the actual world can wipe you out as well.

So we have to learn how to read the currents, how to anticipate the waves, all of which requires being really observant. This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to develop our powers of observation so we can gain a sense of where our other powers lie, of what we can and cannot accomplish. This involves recognizing when we've run up against a wall, so that we can turn around and focus our energies in the directions that will get us to shore.

Our whole sense of who we are comes from the fact that as children we learned how to test the limitations we ran into: what things could we control, what things were beyond our control. This is why we started to identify with the body. The body wasn't just a mass of pleasures and pains. It also seemed to be at least somewhat under our control. We learned how to move our fingers, how to grasp things, how to stand up and walk. We kept pushing the limits. And for a while, the limits seemed to give way to our pushing. We had more and more things under control.

Then of course as you get older, things turn around in the other direction, and the limits start pushing back. In some cases you can develop a skill that you can keep working at throughout your life, but those are rare. With most skills, you get to the point where you peak and then find yourself less and less able to manage them. As the body gets older, it begins to get creaky here and painful there. Finally it gets to the point you can't control it at all. So you have to learn how to make the most of it while you've got whatever control you can manage.

What this means is that we identify with whatever we seem to have power over: Those things are "us," they're "ours." We do this in many different ways. Our sense of who we are is something we keep creating for each different situation, and it's good to learn how to be fluid in that skill of identifying yourself. If you come into a situation with fixed preconceived notions about who you are or what you are, that can become a major limitation. In other words, you turn yourself into a being. As the Buddha said, when you become a being, you identify with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, or consciousness of particular kinds. And whatever way you identify yourself, that's how you limit yourself. You gain certain powers by bringing those things under your control, but you also take on certain limitations. Those limitations may not be getting in the way of the particular task you want to do, but if you take one particular idea of who you are and try to apply it everywhere, you begin to see where the limitations are.

And of course one big limitation is always there. As the Buddha once said, "What is one? All beings subsist on food." Once you become a being, you've got to feed the things you identify with. That means you're tied not only to what you identify with, but also to your sources of food. You're tied to the process of feeding, and there's no way that feeding is not going to harm other beings somewhere, whether you're feeding off them physically or emotionally. That's a huge limitation right there. We'd like to think that we can be beings of infinite love and harmlessness, radiating beams of infinite compassion and empathetic joy in all directions. But if part of you is feeding, that places a limitation on how totally harmless you can be.

So the idea is to learn how to develop different ways of identifying your powers and using them so that ultimately you get to the point where you don't have to be a being anymore, where you don't have to identify yourself with anything and you don't have to feed. The important obstacle here is that you just can't will yourself into that position. You can get there only by learning to be skillful, which takes effort and time. But once you get there, there's total freedom from limitation. That's the one constant in all of the Buddha's discussions of nibbana, the most positive statement he makes about it: total freedom. Often he describes nibbana indirectly in terms of analogies and similes, but total freedom, total limitlessness, is his most direct description of the goal.

To get there, you've got to explore your powers, what you can and can't do within the realm of conditioned reality. There's a useful story to reflect on in connection with this. It's a little fable in the novel, *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White. I don't know if you know the book. It's a retelling of the Arthurian legend.

The first book in the novel, *The Sword in the Stone*—Walt Disney made a movie of it—tells the story of young Wart's childhood up to the point where he pulls the sword out of the stone and so becomes Arthur, King of England. As

part of Wart's training leading up to that event, Merlin the magician turns him into different kinds of animals so that he can learn lessons from animals such as ants, geese, and fish. In one of the last transformations, Wart is turned into a badger and sent down to meet an older badger in his burrow. It turns out that the old badger is like an Oxford don with his den full of papers. He's written a thesis on why human beings are better off than animals: his telling of the creation myth.

On day number five, according to the badger, God created all the animals but didn't create them in their final form. He created them as embryos. Then he lined up all the little embryos and said, "All right, you little embryos, I'm going to give you a boon. You can exchange any of your body parts for tools. If you want, you can exchange your mouths for scissors, or your feet for hoes, or your arms for wings: any kind of tool you think is going to be useful for surviving in the world. But remember, once you've made your choice, you'll have to live with it. You can't change back."

So the animals thought for two days about what tools they might want, and then one by one asked for their boons. The badgers, for instance, asked to turn their skin into shields and their forearms into garden forks. And so on down the line. Some of the embryos wanted wings, some wanted tails. Whatever tools they asked for, God equipped their bodies permanently with the tools, until the only embryo remaining was man. So finally God said, "Well, our little man, you've thought long and hard about your choice. What tools do you want?" And the little man-embryo said, "I think I'd rather use tools than be a tool. I'd rather learn how to make them, learn how to master all kinds of different tools, rather than just limiting myself permanently to one or two built-in tools."

"Ah," God said, "you've guessed our riddle. Because you have the intelligence to want to use tools rather than be a tool, you get to have dominion over the other animals."

That was the badger's creation myth. And when you strip it of its theistic trappings, it makes a good point: If you identify yourself with a particular tool all the time, you get limited to that tool. One of the animals in the badger's myth was a toad in the Antipodes who traded its whole body for blotting paper. It could soak up water when there was rain and just hold it throughout the dry season. That would help it survive in a place where there's infrequent rain, but that's pretty much the limit of its abilities. Human beings, on the other hand, can make tools. They can use different tools for different situations, and as a result can go many places and accomplish many, many things.

That's a lesson we have to learn as meditators, that "who-you-are" is a tool. It's something you've fabricated for a particular set of circumstances, and it may work perfectly well for those circumstances. But if you hold onto that tool all the time, it's like turning yourself into a hammer and then limiting yourself to the habit of hammering away at everything you meet. But there are bound to be times when what you really need is a saw or a chisel or a wrench. When it finally dawns on you that being a hammer leaves you pretty miserable, you may decide that you don't want to be anything at all. So you throw away your hammer. But that doesn't work either, because there are times when you'll need a hammer.

The trick is learning to come to a particular situation without a preconceived notion of who you are, of who you want to be, and then trying to squeeze that into the situation or squeeze a situation to fit your idea of who you are. Instead,

you've got to learn how to look at the situation for what it is, what its potentials are, and then decide what to do to maximize those potentials in the most skillful way right then and there. You then look at what powers you have, and turn them into the tools you're going to need for that particular action.

Even your sense of self can be a tool, and you have many different senses of self. If you learn how to pick them up, put them down, and have them at hand when you need them, then you have a whole chest of tools. At the same time, you're not weighed down by your tools. It's like having a tool chest floating behind you within reach wherever you go. In this way you can deal a lot more effectively with the many limitations we face as human beings in trying to find happiness.

The Buddha talks about three basic ways of finding happiness: generosity, virtue, and meditation. These are all tools, but they each have their different limitations. Generosity is sometimes limited by how much time you have, how much energy, and of course the material resources you can draw on. You have to learn to be very judicious in how you apply your resources. You can't pour them all into one basket, because then you'll have nothing left when you need them for other purposes. So even though we're taught to have limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy for all beings, there's only so much we can actually give to any particular being in any particular situation. That creates a distance between an attitude you can develop and your ability to act on that attitude.

This is where equanimity comes in: when you realize that there are certain areas where you simply can't make a difference or areas where you *can* make a difference but they're going to require time. You have to learn how to husband your resources so you can devote yourself to that task for whatever amount of time it's going to require.

Then there's virtue. It, too, has its limitations. As I've already noted, once you're a being you have to feed. So it's impossible for any of us to be totally harmless. But we can focus on the areas where it's really important to develop harmless. This is what the precepts are for. As the Buddha said, when you make your precepts limitless—in other words, you decide that you're not going to kill under any circumstances, you're not going to steal under any circumstances from anyone at all, no illicit sex, no intoxicants ever at all, period—that's a universal gift. You give limitless protection to all beings, and you gain a share in that limitless protection as well. So that's one area where you can push the limits pretty far. You can start embracing the concept of all living beings, resolving that you're not going to harm any of them in any of these five ways. It's not total harmless, but it's a major step in the right direction.

Then there's meditation, which—as one of the forms of making merit—starts out with meditation on goodwill. Here again you run into limitations. On the one hand, you're supposed to develop limitless goodwill for all beings. The "limitless" here means that it's for all beings in all situations no matter what they do. You don't question whether they deserve your goodwill, or if you deserve goodwill. You simply focus on the idea that it'd be good for all beings that all beings find true happiness. The world would be a much better place for everyone. So you want everyone to find true happiness. You make that one of your basic motivations.

On the other hand, though, you encounter situations where you can't make everybody happy. After all, the quest for true happiness is something each person has to do for him or herself. It's a question of skill. You can't just push a skill on anybody. People have to see the need to develop the skill. They have to be willing to put in the time and the energy to do that. And they have to be in a position where they can. Sometimes people are too old or too sick to make much progress in that direction.

This is where you need equanimity again. Your equanimity has to be limitless as well. In other words, you have to be able to call on it whenever it's needed. There are bound to be certain situations that are beyond your control in terms of what you can give, in terms of your time and energy. And there are limitations on what you can do for other people given the limitations of their kamma as well. So you have to be able to call on this attitude of limitless equanimity whenever needed.

To develop these four brahma-viharas in a limitless way, you need to fight off the limiting attitudes in your mind. The various forms of aversion—ill will, resentment, cruelty—are the main limitations on the first three brahma-viharas. The limitation on equanimity is affection. The people you really love, to whom you'd like to give all you can, but who you can't help as much as you'd like: They're the ones for whom it's hard to feel equanimity, but they're also the ones who require your equanimity the most. That's why you have to realize that even affection can be a limitation and that there are times when you need to put it aside. It's not that you don't love those people or don't wish them well. You simply realize that nothing is accomplished by the sort of affection that wants to deny the limits of kamma, that's got you beating your head against a wall when you could be going through a door in the wall not too far away—in other words, being of help in areas where you *can* be of help.

So a lot of our practice is learning how to deal with limitations, how to find where your powers are, how far you can push them in a skillful direction. When you meet up with a limitation, learn to recognize whether it's permanent or temporary. Then you apply whatever tools you can find to developing your powers in as compassionate and wise a way as possible to work around those limitations.

For this you need to develop a full set of tools and to keep them in good shape. Many of us have a tendency to throw away our tools. You learn a new approach, a new tactic in your meditation, and it works for a little while. Then it doesn't work. So what do you do? You throw it away, cast around for something else. But there may be nothing wrong with the tactic aside from the fact that it works only for certain things and not for others. So don't throw these things away. Keep them in mind as possible approaches that may come in useful again.

The same holds for the whole idea of your self. Some people think that the Buddha tells us that we shouldn't have any self at all. But if you can't identify where your powers are, what are you going to work with? What are you going to depend on? What will you use to overcome your limitations? As I said earlier, think of your sense of self as a tool. You need different tools for different situations. Instead of bringing one preconceived notion of self into a situation, look at the situation in terms of the action it calls for: What's the skillful thing to do here? What tools do you have to do that skillful thing? Put them to use. That way you're no longer a toad made of blotting paper. You become the little

human being in the badger's myth: You use whatever tools you can devise, and that way you're in charge.

The more tools you can develop, the better. They help you explore where the limitations are, as well as where there are openings in the limitations that can lead ultimately to an area totally free from limitation, totally unconditioned. At that point, you can put all your tools down. As long as you're alive, you can still use them. But when the time comes to go, you don't need to carry them. Like the raft that takes you across the river: Once it's done its job, you just leave it there. You may feel some appreciation for the help it's given you, and pull it up on the bank in case anyone else wants to come along and use it as well, but otherwise you're done with it. In the meantime though, as long as you're crossing the river, hold on tight to the raft, whichever raft is going to get you past the deadly currents. Don't be too quick to throw it away.