

## A Victory that Matters

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“Better than victory over a thousand is victory over one person—yourself.”

This is a verse in the *Dhammapada* that points to some very important questions: What exactly do you want to win in this lifetime? What do you want to gain? What battles are worth fighting? The primary talent of a good warrior is knowing which battles are worth fighting, which ones are not, and knowing when it's time to accept defeat for the strategic purpose of coming out ahead somewhere else that matters a lot more. There are things we may want out of other people that they don't want to give, like respect, acknowledgment of our existence, or acknowledgment of our worth as a person. Then you have to ask yourself, “Is it really worth fighting for? What does the fighting accomplish? Is it going to gain any respect? And even if it does, how much is that respect worth?”

There are so many battles in the world that just lead to bad kamma even when you win, sometimes especially when you win. Look at the history of the world when nations that won battles ended up being transformed into the enemy, taking on the enemy's characteristics. Is this what you want? At the same time, when you win a battle, you gain the animosity of those who lost.

This is why the Buddha said that it's better to focus on the battles inside, battles over your own defilements, greed, aversion, and delusion. Those are the battles that can be won, and when you win, you don't create any bad kamma. As for whether the people outside will acknowledge your victory, that doesn't really matter. In fact, as Ajaan Lee once said, “Things that other people know about aren't safe. You know for yourself; nobody else has to know.”

Look at the history of Buddhism. Where is the history of those who truly gained awakening? Although some people reportedly have gained awakening, either through their own report or through the belief of their followers, who really knows? It's something purely internal; that's where it matters most.

There's another thing that's purely internal as well. That's your experience of suffering. We each suffer; however, we can't feel another person's suffering. We can sometimes sense that they're suffering, although we can't actually feel their pain. We only can feel ours. It's *the* subjective experience. The Buddha points out that the suffering that really weighs down on the mind is not the suffering that comes from other people. It's the suffering you cause yourself. So, if you can win that battle, you've won the one that really matters.

Look at the ways you're causing yourself to suffer. This, according to the Buddha, is the issue to which we should give primary importance, and yet for the most part we're ignorant of it—and that ignorance is a prime part of the problem. He defines ignorance not so much as ignorance of his teachings as a whole, but more ignorance of the four noble truths and the tasks appropriate to them: comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation. Just knowing those things doesn't end the problem. You have to actually look at things in terms of the noble truths and treat them in line with the tasks appropriate to those truths until you can master those tasks to the point of completion. That's when your ignorance is ended.

How are you going to comprehend suffering? How are you going to let go of its cause and realize its cessation? By developing the path. What in the mind fights that by saying that other things you'd rather do are more important? The part of the mind that tosses up all kinds of obstacles. You could go along with the obstacles and block your path, or you can take the Buddha's approach by looking at how suffering feels from the inside and how all the processes that lead to suffering feel from the inside.

One of the processes you have to watch from the inside is the process of rebirth.

An issue that comes up often with people who object to the idea of rebirth is that they want a clear explanation from the Buddha on the mechanics of rebirth, on what it would look like to an outside observer. How could it work, especially given our modern scientific view on how things work? It doesn't make any sense, they say. So they cling to a materialistic view, as if holding everything to the test of a materialistic view would prove or disprove it. But has the materialistic view made us happy? It's provided us with some conveniences. It's solved any number of material problems. But it has never made people happy deep down inside. It certainly hasn't made them better people than they were before. The human race is just as savage as it was before the scientific revolution.

That should indicate that the materialistic view doesn't have the final word on things. It's like the MBA approach to business, where only profit matters. When everything else has to be sacrificed for profit, see what happens. Everything does get sacrificed. Societies break down. The social fabric gets torn apart. This is what happens when a narrow view becomes ascendant and demands to be ascendant in every area.

It's not just now that people are challenging the Buddha about the metaphysics of rebirth. Back in his time it was a controversial issue, too.

One of the major fallacies that you hear repeatedly is that the Buddha just picked up the idea of rebirth from his culture because that's what everybody believed, and nobody thought to question it. People were questioning it. "Is the life force the same thing as the body or is it something else, separate from the body, something different from the body?" That question was a hot issue at the time, and it was directly related to the question of rebirth. If the life force was something different from the body, then you had a metaphysical explanation for how rebirth could happen. If it was the same thing as the body, then rebirth would be impossible. But the Buddha refused to take a position on the question. It's one of those ten questions he set aside. The battle of metaphysics is not worth winning. You say, "What is it that takes rebirth, where is it, can you see it?" But the question takes you nowhere.

The Buddha entirely avoided the question of whether there was or was not a "what" behind the process, but he did explain *how* the process happens, and how it's experienced from the inside. You wouldn't be responsible for the "what" anyhow, but you *are* responsible for the "how." It's part of the suffering—birth, aging, illness, and death—that comes from your craving. Because birth comes under the category of suffering, it's something you have to comprehend. You don't comprehend it in terms of somebody's theory about how the world works, but in terms of how you direct and experience the processes of the mind. This is where the battle is really important, because it's through craving that rebirth happens.

Think of the four Dhamma summaries: the world is insufficient; there's no one in charge; it has nothing of its own; it's a slave to craving. Even though it's filled with things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self—aging, illness, and death—craving keeps us coming back for all that unsatisfactory stuff. If you can't win out over that craving, you really haven't won anything worthwhile. The whole point of the four noble truths is that you're responsible for this craving and you can put an end to it. And it's nothing far away. It's something you directly experience right here and now.

This is why the Buddha's approach is what you might call phenomenology: how phenomena are directly experienced, without any reference to what there is behind that experience—and without trying to impose your ideas of what's behind experience on somebody else or letting them impose theirs on you. You're meditating to look at exactly what your mind is doing right now to create the phenomenon of suffering. When you can see craving and ignorance in action, you've got the focal point for the really important battle—the battle that, when you win it, you've won something really worthwhile.

The big issue in life is that we don't want suffering, but we keep creating it. Ajaan Suwat would often say, "It's through our own stupidity." He often translated ignorance as "stupidity." It's happening right before our very eyes, right here in the mind. It's not some mysterious process off someplace else. It's causing suffering right before our eyes. The suffering is not off someplace else either. *We're* the ones who keep looking off someplace else while ignoring what's right here now.

The meditation gives us tools to overcome that ignorance and craving. That's what we're basically getting victory over. We do this by seeing through these things and understanding why we're doing them. We think we can get some pleasure out of them, but we have to look very carefully at that pleasure, to see why we're so attached to it. Here again, the problem isn't metaphysical. Our attachment doesn't come because we have some metaphysical belief about whether things have an essence or don't have an essence. That's pretty irrelevant. We cling to actions that we keep doing over and over because we're addicted to them, and we're addicted to them because we believe that the pleasure they give outweighs the pain they cause. We see it that way because we're not looking carefully. We're ignorant of our own actions.

To overcome that ignorance, you need a good point of comparison against which you can measure that pleasure and pain. This is why you're practicing concentration. You try to develop a state of good solid concentration in the mind with a sense of ease and wellbeing that can come simply from being with the breath, being absorbed in the breath, filling the breath energy throughout the body with a sense of healthy energy. This puts you in a good position to compare things. You can look at the other pleasures you followed in life and ask, "Are they anything like this breath? Are they as steady, reliable, and harmless as this kind of pleasure?" You're training yourself to be a connoisseur of pleasure, so that you can really understand where the pleasure lies, where the pain lies, and how things stack up. Which pleasure is greater? How about the pain of going back to your old ways of looking for pleasure? You see these things a lot more easily when you're coming from a vantage point of stable wellbeing.

Even though concentration isn't the ultimate, it does give you a higher standard for understanding what true pleasure can be. It doesn't automatically wean you off of your old ways of thinking, but it gives you a basis for actually doing the work of contemplation, especially when you realize that following your daily pleasures gets in the way of this pleasure of concentration. You've got to make a choice. Once you admit that you've got to make the choice, then it's easier to sort through your other pleasures and start seeing which habits you're willing to sacrifice. When you can drop them, you've won a victory over the clinging, craving, and ignorance that kept you bound to those habits.

This is where the victory really matters. As for what the people in the outside world might think: Why do you want to gain victory over their hearts or their opinions? What does it accomplish? Especially if they're resistant. You just develop bad habits of pride and the desire to control others. You lose out to your own defilements, the kind of defeat that can really be harmful.

Learn to see that defeat as a warning that you're focusing on the wrong battles. Then use that realization to set your heart on gaining a victory over your greed, aversion, and delusion; your craving, ignorance, and clinging—so that this very personal suffering that you're causing yourself can finally stop. Nobody else needs to praise you for this. Nobody else needs to know. When you reach this deathless element inside, it is its own reward, worth much more than the opinions of other people. Give it a chance. See if what the Buddha said was really right, that this is where true happiness lies, and that there's no other happiness that can compare. As he said, the flavor of the Dhamma beats all other flavors.

So see if you can come to taste that flavor and decide whether he's right.