

## *Escape Routes in the Present*

*October 29, 2007*

Tradition tells us the Buddha gave a Dhamma talk one time during his first year of teaching. One thousand two hundred and fifty arahants all met spontaneously on the afternoon of the full moon in February. We don't have any record of the talk but we do have a record of the verses that summarized it at the end.

The very first line in the verse is that “the highest austerity is patient endurance.”

And it's important that we understand where patience and endurance are appropriate, and where the effort to change things is appropriate. Because sometimes we get the idea that the Dhamma is basically teaching us to be passive. Whatever comes up, you endure. Whatever comes up, you're patient. And equanimity means just putting up with whatever comes past—which is not the case.

The things the Buddha has us endure are, on the one hand, difficult things outside that lie beyond our control. And the other hand, he has us learn how to endure pain, discomfort.

And so to endure these things, the trick is not simply sitting there and enduring but learning how to find another spot where you can place your mind so it doesn't feel oppressed by these things. This is why we practice meditation: to give the mind some alternatives. Because as the Buddha said, if your only alternative to pain is sensual pleasure, you're going to go for the sensual pleasure. When you're stuck in a place where there's pain or discomfort, that's all you're going to be able to think about: how you're going to find some pleasure in terms of things outside.

So you've got to learn how to find pleasure inside. And this is why we meditate—so that can cultivate our inner resources. Simply being with the breath can be a pleasurable experience. You've got this whole field to play with: the breath energy in the body. You want to be able to tap into that whenever you need to, so that things that are difficult outside don't weigh so heavily on you.

As for the things we don't endure, they come in two types. One, there are the things that the Buddha says not to tolerate at all. When thoughts of sensual desire arise in the mind, he says not to tolerate them. Do what you can to wipe them out.

Again, this requires a certain amount of skill. Because for most people, the only alternative to indulgence is repression, to deny that they're there. And denying that they're there doesn't help at all. You have to admit that these thoughts are a problem. Only when you admit that they're problems can you deal with them.

Thoughts of ill will, thoughts of doing violence: These are the things the Buddha says not to tolerate at all. When you find them arising in the mind, do what you can to get rid of them.

One way of getting rid of them is to focus back on your meditation. This is your refuge.

The more you work with the breath, the more familiar you are with the breathing, then the more alternatives you'll have for whatever comes up in the mind that's unskillful: wrong resolve, wrong thinking.

So you do what you can to put these things out. It's like a fire. As soon as a fire like that gets started, you try to put it out. If you don't, well, you've seen what can happen if a fire doesn't get put out right away. The destruction we've seen around us the last couple of days is nothing compared to the destruction that these unskillful thoughts can do in your mind.

So that's something you're not supposed to tolerate. You don't just sit there and say, "Oh, here comes a thought of ill will. Well, let's just watch the thought of ill will and see where it's going to go." You need to have an alternative place to put the mind before you can actually watch these things.

Your first line of defense is not simply to watch them but to try to figure out what you can do to put them out—or at least give the mind another place where it can stand, so that when it watches them, it watches them from a slight distance. If you find yourself getting pulled into the thought, you have your ways of pulling yourself out.

The other things the Buddha says not to endure are things he says to avoid. You read the list and it sounds pretty commonsensical. He says the monk knows how to avoid a wild dog, a wild elephant (in other words, wild animals,) a bramble patch, stumps, a cliff, a chasm, open cesspools, open sewers—i.e., you use your common sense.

If there's something you can avoid, if there's a danger you can avoid, you avoid it. Equanimity doesn't mean to say, "Well, here comes a fire; it's going to burn us. Okay, let's just sit here and watch it burn us." If you can get away, you get away.

There's a really obnoxious story told by one of Ajaan Chah's Western students who's now a lay teacher. One time he and Ajaan Chah were taking a really rough ride in part of the back country there in Ubon. The driver was pretty careless and he was rushing down this road, which was really bumpy.

And Ajaan Chah was holding on tight—to the point where his knuckles were white. And the Western student saw this and said to himself, "Ah, Ajaan Chah has fear." He thought he'd caught Ajaan Chah in a defilement, that he wasn't perfectly equanimous.

Well, Ajaan Chah had the good sense to hold on tight. You ride a rough ride like that, you've got to hold on. I mean, it's stupid to die or let yourself get injured when it's avoidable.

So if there are dangers you can avoid, you avoid them. The Buddha's not telling us to abandon common sense. Equanimity, endurance have their proper sphere, but you have to know the proper sphere in order to function properly in line with the teaching.

If fire's not enough, there's an earthquake for you. Suppose that that earthquake just now—it was a tiny tremor—had been really large. You'd do what you could to get out of the building if it were falling down. Only when you find yourself in a situation where you can't do anything at all: That's when you develop equanimity and patience.

These things can range anything from really severe physical pain to ordinary difficulties—as when you find yourself in places that are less than ideal to practice. Or like during the fire: We found ourselves squeezed into some houses that were smaller than we're used to being in, especially after living here where you can wander around as you like. We were fortunate that we had those places to go to. So when you find yourself in squeezed circumstances, you learn how to make yourself small.

This is something I had to learn in Thailand. We had these festivals: For instance, once a year they had the commemoration for Ajaan Lee's passing away. You'd have hundreds of monks and thousands of laypeople descending on this one monastery. The hut where I stayed was the sort of place that was designed to hold three people, but suddenly there were ten or twelve sleeping on the floor, sleeping all around.

It was just a minor inconvenience, but being American, one of my problems is I have a large sense of my space. So I learned how to make that space smaller.

As Ajaan Fuang would often say when he was asking me to do something that was a little bit more difficult than what I wanted to do: "Is it going to kill you?" "Well, no, it's not going to kill me." "Okay, well learn how to adjust."

Learn how to look inside for your space. Because there's not only the breath here in the body: If you look very carefully and get the mind really still, you sense the space element, and that's infinite. No boundaries on that at all. If you tap into that, then physically you can be in a very confined space but the mind has a sense of awareness that seems to permeate everything. You sense not only the space between the atoms in your body but also the space in between the atoms in the walls around you, the people around you. Even when there's a whole city around you, there's space all around you. There's a space that permeates the entire city.

So what this comes down to is that you have to learn these skills for finding space and well-being inside when things outside are confining, when things outside are difficult, so that you're not constantly feeding on the thought of how difficult the conditions are.

Conditions are conditions. You've got this alternative skill. And as you focus on the skill, the difficulties of the outside conditions don't weigh on you at all. Or if they do, their weight is very minor. You know they're there, but it's no big deal, because you've got this whole other realm, this whole other dimension that you can focus on.

I'm frequently asked about the time I was in Thailand: What was the most difficult part, especially during those first years? What was the hardest thing to adjust to? I stop to think and I still can't think of an answer to that question. But I've realized that the fact that I never focused on one particular thing as the hardest thing to adjust to was probably why I was able to adjust.

In other words, instead of focusing on the difficulties, you focus on the opportunities. The things outside that you can change, you change them. Dangers you can escape, you escape from them. As for things you can't change and can't escape, you learn how to live with them—

but not by focusing on them or feeling oppressed by them. Simply by realizing that you have this other dimension inside.

And there's a lot to explore here, beginning with simple things like giving your mind a place to stand throughout the day as you go through your chores, the work around the monastery. Learn how to regard your chores not as an obstacle for the practice but as an opportunity to practice in a particular way.

Learn how to stand with the breath and not get knocked off by difficulties. Or if the mind does get knocked off, learn how to pick it up and put it back in place right away. From that skill, you learn that there are other skills that can help you in more difficult circumstances so that the conditions around you don't weigh on the mind—so that even though you're putting up with them and enduring them, there's no sense that you're being weighed down by the endurance. You don't think about how long it's been oppressing you or how much longer into the future it might keep oppressing you.

Just be here with the present moment and look at the opportunities for escape. You've got escape routes in the present moment with the breath and the formless objects of concentration: space, consciousness, the infinitude of space, the infinitude of consciousness. Those are huge openings.

When you're not obsessed about the past or the future or the difficulties in the present, you find there are these openings in the present. As you make the most of them, then questions of patient endurance, equanimity, tolerance become a lot easier to handle.