

Anchored by Skillful Roots

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From all accounts, the world is going to go through a bad period: war, economic problems, insecurity of all kinds. Of course we've never really been all that secure. But apparently our insecurity is going to become much more obvious. It's like a big storm coming through. When you know a storm is coming through, you've got to do what you can to hunker down, to withstand it, so that you don't get blown away and the things around you don't come crashing down on top of you. In a similar way, when life doesn't go as you like, it's like a storm coming onto the mind, and you need to develop your powers of resilience. If you compare your mind to a tree, you want to have deep roots, widespread roots, healthy roots, the kinds of roots that will keep the tree from getting blown over and killed.

Traditionally, the Buddha talked about roots for the mind. There are unskillful roots and skillful roots. The unskillful roots are greed, anger, and delusion. The skillful ones are lack of greed, lack of anger, lack of delusion. Unskillful roots are like rotten roots. They don't hold your tree up and they don't give you much nourishment. So those are not the roots you want to depend on. The roots you want to send out are roots based on lack of greed, lack of anger, lack of delusion. There is a phrase Ajaan Lee quotes—I don't know where it comes from, I haven't found it in the Canon yet; maybe it's from the commentaries, but it makes sense: He says, generosity nourishes the roots of lack of greed, precepts nourish the roots of lack of anger, meditation nourishes the roots of lack of delusion.

These are the activities that we have to engage in order to prepare, in order to withstand the storm—not just before the storm hits, but all the way throughout the storm. Being generous, observing the precepts, and meditating keep us strong, keep us from getting blown away. If your survival is accomplished without generosity, without virtue, without meditation, it's not worth much. It's not the sort of survival that keeps you healthy and well-nourished. You look at survivors of war, who had to go and kill and steal and cheat and bomb, and then go into a lot of denial about it. Look at all the veterans of past wars, emotionally scarred for life. They did survive, but at a huge cost, the cost of the skillful roots in the mind. It's by nourishing the skillful roots that the health of the mind survives. Even if we have to leave this particular body, at least the mind has the potential for sending out skillful roots wherever it finds itself the next time around. It's nourished with its inner sense of well-being, truthfulness, self-honesty. You look at your behavior and there's nothing you have to hide from yourself. That's important. At the same time, when you reflect on your behavior, you realize you've been helpful to other people. Practicing generosity is like sending good roots out, spreading abroad in all directions, so that you're survival is not just for your own sake, but it helps other people well.

The same with the precepts: If you're very selective about who you'll treat kindly and who you won't treat kindly, or there are circumstances under which you're going to hold by the precepts, and other circumstances under which

you're *not* going to hold by the precepts, your roots cover a very limited range. But if you decide that under no circumstances are you going to break the five precepts, the Buddha says that you're giving unlimited safety to unlimited numbers of beings. In return you get a share in that unlimited safety as well. So again your survival is not just a selfish thing. It's not based on the kind of roots that are going to rot or dry out, or get pulled up easily, get blown away. These are healthy roots that spread out and keep you secure in the storm.

As for the deep roots you need, those come from meditation. These are the roots that grow deep down in the mind. It's through the meditation that you realize how your true happiness doesn't have to depend on situations outside because you've found a source inside. Your tap root has gotten down that far. It's tapped into something special. It's like the water in earthquake faults. A friend who has done a study has found out that there's water in earthquake faults, and it doesn't depend on rainfall at all. It seems to be coming up from the fault itself; maybe it's a result of a chemical reaction—Who knows?—but it's a type of water that's independent of rainfall. If you can tap into that, you've got a good source of water that doesn't depend on the vagaries of the climate.

Similarly with meditation: When you've got a taproot that goes way down into the mind—in terms of concentration, in terms of discernment—you find a source inside that's nourishing. That's the source that can feed your need for happiness so that it doesn't have to depend on anything else.

In other words, your goodness doesn't have to depend on outside conditions. When that's the case, it's a goodness you can trust. After all, outside conditions are always changing. If there isn't a war here, there's a war someplace else. If there are not economic problems here, there are economic problems someplace else. If they are not in this house, they're in somebody else's house. And then they come back here again. Back and forth like that. If our goodness depends on these things, it's a goodness we can't trust. Other people can't trust us; we can't trust ourselves.

That's probably one of the scariest things in life: to realize that you can't trust yourself. You would like to look at yourself and say, "I'm the sort of person who can be depended on to do the right thing regardless of the circumstances. But then when circumstances get really challenging, you find suddenly that you can't depend on yourself in that way. That's very unsettling, very unnerving, because if you can't depend on yourself, who can you depend on?"

So you've got to dig down inside with the meditation and find that source of nourishment that doesn't depend on the rainfall, doesn't depend on the vagaries of the outside world: that inner source of happiness that comes as you take your attachments apart. You sit here focusing on the breath, and learn to pry the mind away from the distracting thoughts that fly off in all directions. You sit here learning how not to get involved in them, in the worlds of that the mind creates, that pull it here, pull it there.

Then, as the mind finally settles down, you find that it's like an onion: There are layers and layers and layers to its concentration. You peel them away, one by one. You don't have to be in a great hurry to do this. Many people have a problem that. Once the mind begins to settle down, they're in a hurry to know, "Okay, what's the next step?" Well, the next step is staying right where you are, getting really used to that, getting well settled there. Because it's through this

habit of getting well settled that the mind can begin to relax into the breath even more deeply, so that it's not always tensed and ready to jump. You can gain a greater and greater sense of reliance on what's here inside.

As you settle in here, the superficial layers of the onion begin to fall away. You get to deeper ones, and deeper ones, not because you're jumping from one spot to another, but because you're really staying right here, getting more and more solid right here. Then, after a while, there comes a point where the activities of thinking about the breath, adjusting the breath, and evaluating the breath, can be put aside because the breath has gotten as good as it can be. As Ajaan Fuang once said, it's like putting water into a water jar. You put it in bit by bit by bit, but there comes a point where you can't add anymore to it. It's as much as the jar can hold. If you keep putting more water into it, it just spills out over the edge. That's the point where we can let go of the evaluation, because it's no longer needed, and we can just be one with the breath.

From there you work deeper and deeper, just by staying here, and settling in with more and more solidly. Have a sense of breath energy filling the body, so that every nerve is involved in the breathing process and they're all working together, from the central nerves out to the tips of the nerves. The whole body is saturated with the breath energy, so that the pores open up. All the oxygen you need is coming in and out through pores. Your brain is using less and less oxygen all the time, so the need to keep pumping things in and out gets less and less. That way you eventually get to the point where the breath can stop.

When the breath stops, you can see the mind clearly, because the movements of the mind become more obvious. Before, the movement of the breath was getting in the way; you couldn't see the movements of the mind, because the breath was so much more obvious. It's like static when you're tuning in to a radio station. It's like a background hum in the room that keeps you from hearing any subtler sounds, because the hum is always there. But once the breath can settle down and be still like this, then the movements of the mind become very obvious. You can start peeling them away as well. You get deeper and deeper inside, until ultimately you find, after the final peeling away—of the peeler—that's when things open up to a new dimension.

The tap root has hit something that's totally different from anything else it has been feeding off before. But even if you don't get that far, the sense of ease that comes from a concentrated mind, if you tend to it well, can give you the nourishment you need. So if the wind blows outside, when the rain falls, when storms come, when the earth quakes under your feet, you've got something deeper than that, something more solid than that, and that's the basis for the goodness of the mind, the well-being of the mind, something you can depend on.

Your roots are deep, your roots are spread wide, and they're healthy roots, nourishing roots. Those are the roots that enable you to weather the storm, because the worst thing that can get blown away is the goodness in the mind, the well-being of the mind. It doesn't require outside events for it to get blown away. Your own inner choices to nourish unskillful roots or to cut your good roots: Those are the things that destroy you, even more than the death of the body.

So have a very clear sense of where your true roots are, the roots that are going to keep you firmly anchored. The roots that are going to continue to nourish you no matter what the windstorms are. The roots that make it

worthwhile to survive, to keep going. Survival in the sense of the goodness of the mind: That's your primary survival. As the Buddha said, the heedful never die. The goodness in the mind never dies. People who are heedless, who don't look after the proper roots, the skillful roots: Those are the ones who are already dead.

So when you have a clear sense of what it means to survive in the true sense, and what the roots are that are going to keep it possible to survive, then it's a lot easier to hold on. We always talk about the practice as one of letting go, letting go. Well, you do let go of the unskillful roots, you let go of the things that would come crashing into you from wind and pull you away. You let go of those things. But you hold on to your skillful roots, because they keep this vital connection to your inner nourishment going. Holding on in this sense is what keeps you alive.