

# *Overwhelmed by Freedom*

*March 18, 2007*

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I ran into a paradox: I was there because I wanted some freedom, freedom from the issues eating away at my mind. But I found I didn't know how to handle the freedom I had found. This is just conditional freedom. It wasn't the unconditioned freedom that the Buddha was talking about, just the conditional freedom of having a whole afternoon with nothing to do, no duties, no responsibilities. As Ajaan Fuang made clear, my only responsibility was to stay with the breath. And my mind was overwhelmed at the prospect of that kind of freedom: overwhelmed in the sense that I didn't know what to do with it, didn't know if I could handle it—a whole afternoon with nothing to do—and I watched my mind as it was trying to find ways of filling up the time.

This is a common problem we all find as meditators. We think, "If only I had more time to meditate," and then when we *do* get more time to meditate, it's overwhelming. We fill up our days—looking for chores to do, looking for things to read—because we can't face the freedom. Part of us is afraid we'll feel bored with nothing to do but focusing on the breath; nothing to do but sitting and then walking, and then sitting and walking. And part of the fear comes from the sense that we don't know how to measure progress. The mind has this tendency to go up and down, it seems to make some gains and then it loses them, and makes some more gains and then loses them again, back and forth like this. Your mind wants to measure things in terms of what was gained by this hour of effort, the next hour of effort, and yet it doesn't know what to measure. It feels lost and begins to thrash around.

This is where discipline comes in. You have to learn how to discipline yourself not to waste the free time you have. The first thing is to remind yourself: You don't really know how much free time you have. You never know when illness will come, or death: your own death or death of someone else around you, which will cut short your time here. All sorts of things can happen. Crazy people may decide they want to have another war, and it won't be just their own personal war; it'll drag lots of people into chaos along with them. So you don't know how much more time you have before that kind of chaos hits again.

This is why the Buddha's reflections on the world are important. He defines the world simply as your world of sensory impressions, but it's not a monadic little world. It's going to be influenced, it's going to be touched, by other people. And although he said that reflections about whether the world is finite or infinite, eternal or non-eternal are a waste of time, the reflection on the fact that the world is swept away, does not endure, offers no shelter—that passage we chanted just now—is an important reflection. You have no guarantee how much more time you have here or how much longer social stability is going to last.

In one of the passages that King Asoka singled out as important for Buddhists to keep reflecting on, in the series called "future dangers," the monk reflects: "I'm young now, healthy now, alive now. Society is peaceful. The Sangha is harmonious. But when these things change, it's not going to be easy to practice.

So while I have the time, I should practice and try to attain that which I haven't yet attained, to see what I haven't yet seen, so that when I do face aging, illness, death, social unrest, or a potential split in the Sangha, my mind will still be at ease." This is what heedfulness is all about: to remind you that you don't have all the time in the world. You may not even have all the time in a day.

So use these thoughts to focus your mind on the present moment. You've got this moment right now. Don't waste it, because you don't know how many more present moments you're going to have. You sit down and think about a whole day with nothing to do, and the mind begins to fill up the day with all of its paisley patterns. So stop that thought right there, and remind yourself that you don't know how much time you have. What you do know is that you've got the opportunity right now to be with this breath.

There's a famous sutta where the Buddha reminds the monks to be heedful, to reflect on death every day. And not just every day. He asks the monks how often they reflect on death. Some monks say once a day; others say twice a day. Finally he gets to the monks who say, "While I'm eating, I remind myself, 'If only I get to live as long as it takes to swallow this morsel of food, I'll have the opportunity to practice the Buddha's teachings.'" Another monk says, "If only I can live for one more in-breath, one more out-breath, I'll have an opportunity to practice the Dharma." The Buddha comments that only those last two monks really count as heedful. Everybody else, he says, is heedless. You've got this time to practice but you just throw it away, throw it away, because you spend the time thinking about endless vistas of days, or a whole day here just with nothing to do, no pressures.

Many of us who are used to the pressures of work, of having limited time, who learn to thrive within the confines of those pressures, find that when suddenly the pressure is off, the mind loses its bearings. Your mind, which is normally very active and proactive, becomes passive, loses its direction. This is why the Buddha's perspectives on karma, his perspectives on time in the world, are an important part of the practice. There are no passages in his teachings that are there just for abstract speculation. They're all part of the training. He talks about eons of time, but he always brings the discussion back to the fact that the experience of where you're going to be in those eons of time depends on what you do. And where are you going to see what you do? You see right now; you don't see it anywhere else. Right here and now is where you can see how the mind fashions its realities, how it fashions its worlds.

So you have to be as sensitive and as precise and meticulous as possible in looking into the present moment, having a very strong sense that this is very important right here, right now. It's a rare opportunity even when you have two whole weeks or three whole weeks to do nothing but this. That time passes and when it's gone you don't want to be the sort of person who says, "Gee, I didn't take advantage of it. I got sloppy or careless. All I could think of was filling my time with styrofoam peanuts, shredded paper"—i.e., all the stuff with which we fill up time when we don't know anything better to do.

But here we do have lots of better things to do. The problem is this is one of those jobs where you can't measure your progress with a ruler or a stopwatch. You churn out papers or have projects—it's one of the useful ways we have, especially for the monks, of maintaining our sanity. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if you do nothing but meditate all day, you're going to go crazy quickly. It's for this

reason that we try to do our chores meticulously and well. But if you do have chores, make sure they don't occupy your whole day. Have a little time every day for a chore to give yourself something tangible to show yourself something that got accomplished today. As the Buddha noted, the job of wearing away your defilements is like wearing down the handle on an adze—a small ax for carving—that you use every day. You know that over time your use of the adze will wear away the handle, but you can't see it being worn away from day to day to day. But don't let the projects take over. Make sure you have plenty of time to stick with the intangibles.

This is why conviction is such an important part of self-discipline. Even though you may not see it, you know some good is being done each time you bring the mind back to the breath. Each time you try to focus as precisely as possible, you're creating new habits. That's a long-term process, a long-term project. So you have to know how to give yourself pep talks along the way to keep yourself going. You don't want self-discipline just to be the ability to push yourself through drudgery. You want to be able to make the meditation as entertaining as possible, as interesting as possible, as enjoyable as possible, to bring as much enthusiasm as you can to a process which, without the enthusiasm, simply dries right up.

So squarely face the fact that you've got a big project here: all these huge defilements of the mind. But they don't come as an avalanche of huge boulders all at once. They're little tiny things, one by one by one, as they come through the mind. And they come in lots of different guises. Anger for instance: There's not just one reason why we're angry, which means that when you work through one type of anger it's not going to get rid of all the kinds of anger you may have. But your experience in dealing with one kind of anger will give you some ideas on how to approach other types of anger as well. Anger gets built up from lots of different narratives in the mind, and different narratives will get activated by different events. When you've seen through one kind of narrative—i.e., the way certain events recall a type of relationship you had when you were a child, and you realize that you're not being forced back into the restricted place where you were when you were a child by this new event—okay, you've seen through that particular narrative. But there are many other narratives for anger just as there are many narratives for greed.

So there are lots of these things you've got to learn how to work through. Just because you see through anger once, don't get discouraged when you find anger returning in another guise. Keep reminding yourself that this is a long-term project. There are lots of ins and outs. As the Buddha once said, you look at the animal world and it's all so variegated: all the different kinds of animals, each with its own special little niche, its own coloring, its own peculiar tools and shapes and forms, its own ways of behavior. And yet the human mind is even more variegated than that. So we've got a lot to deal with here. It's not an impossible task, but it does take time. Fortunately we have the time now. So make the most of it. These windows in time won't come all the time. You've got the window right now. Make the most of it.

It's a paradox: discipline leads to freedom because it helps you make the most of your free moments. Without it, everything falls apart. Remember Shackleton's expedition to Antarctica. There were so many times when things looked hopeless,

but the men were well disciplined. They knew that if there was any hope at all, it was going to lie in maintaining their discipline. That was what saw them through. Looking back on it, we can see that Shackleton made a lot of wrong judgments, but the discipline of the party got them through even his misjudgments.

So your mind, in the course of the practice, is going to make some false starts. There are times when some issues come up in the mind and they really are worth looking into, but other issues turn out to be distractions. How are you going to know beforehand? You don't know beforehand. But you give things a try.

Your first line of defense as you're practicing concentration should always be: Any other issues that come up are not what you're here for right now. But if they come up persistently, you have to look into them to see why they have such power over the mind, what their drawbacks are, and why you really shouldn't have to listen to them. Learn how to see through them. That requires getting involved with them for a little while. If you find that getting involved with them is useful, if your involvement helps you understand some deeper issues in the mind, then pursue them. But also learn how to read what's going on in the mind so that you know when it's just turning into a major distraction and all you're doing is reliving old garbage. That's when you have to pull out. Learn how to read those telltale signs, but you can learn the tales told by the telltale signs only from trial and error. We don't like trial and error, but it's the only way you're going to learn about the mind.

So even though there may be false starts and wrong decisions, the element of discipline is what's going to see you through. It's the discipline that makes the most of freedom and actually yields in a higher freedom. You learn through trial and error how to apply that discipline, how to develop that sense of self-discipline. You've got the time now, so do it now. The results may not come instantly, but working on the mind is what you *can* do now. There's no other way it can be trained.