

## *Outside of the Box*

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

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We start the meditation every evening with thoughts of goodwill. When you practice goodwill systematically, you're told to start first with thoughts of goodwill for yourself, then with thoughts of goodwill for people who are dear to your heart, and then you work out gradually in ever widening circles: people you like, people you're neutral about, and then even people you don't like.

It may sound Pollyanna-ish. "With people I hate, people that have been unjust, it just sounds a little too syrupy to say, 'May they be happy.'" But think about the type of happiness you're wishing for them: true happiness, happiness that comes from within. If they had that kind of happiness, they wouldn't be cruel or unjust.

So, it's not just a syrupy kind of thought. It's actually a radical way of thinking about how the problems of the world might be solved if everyone could look within. This is a way of learning to think outside of the box. You read day after day in the newspapers about this political party, that political party: "They've treated us unfair so next time around we're going to be unfair to them." Well, nothing gets accomplished that way, and you can't expect the people who fight like this to trust each other and patch up their differences. That's the way the world is when everyone stays in the box.

Look at our own families. There are issues in our own families that may never get patched up. A lot of people have long lists of grievances they carry around, grievances that will never be resolved. As the Thai ajaans are always saying, "The work of the world is never finished. The issues of the world are never resolved." One side seems to win, and then all of a sudden its winning gets too oppressive to other people and so they've got to fight back one way or another. When you think about the way the world is, you realize that the affairs of the world are never going to get settled.

So we can't wait for the world's issues to be settled, we can't even wait for the issues in our own lives to be settled, before we start looking for peace, because peace is the way out—peace within the mind, a happiness that comes from within. If you find yourself entangled with a lot of issues in daily life, remember that they're never going to get absolutely settled. There is never going to be a final resolution. People die, but then that's not the end of the issue; they come back again. Old, dead issues get reformulated and revived. So try to learn to think in ways to help disentangle yourself from those issues so that the mind can

settle down. Tell yourself that you're doing this for one of two reasons: either from the realization that your outside issues are never going to get settled, or that to the extent that those issues *can* be alleviated, the right actions will have to come from a clear mind, a mind that's not operating under the cloud of delusion, the cloud of ignorance, or the simple inability to think straight, to think things through.

So, either way, the solution to the problem is to settle the mind down. Think in this way if you're having trouble getting the mind to stay with the breath. Ajaan Maha Boowa once compared meditators to two types of trees. One type of tree is standing alone in the middle of a field. If you want to cut it down, it's easy. You just go out, figure out which direction you want it to fall, and then you cut it. There's no big difficulty. That stands for the type of people whose minds don't have a lot of entanglements in the world. They can sit down, focus on the breath, and stay with the breath with no problem at all.

The other type of tree is one in the middle of the forest whose branches are entangled with the branches of the trees around it. If you want to cut that one down, you've got to use a lot of strategy: learn how to cut this branch, cut that branch, disentangle things before you can then bring the tree down in the direction you want. So if you find that you're that second kind of tree, if you focus on the breath and the mind is not willing to settle down, look and see where your branches are entangled and what you can do to cut them. Learn to think in ways that make it easy to disentangle yourself.

A friend once told me about a question he had posed to a number of his friends. The question was this: "Suppose that you're dreaming, and in this dream you're in a boat with your mother and your child, and a lot of other people you really feel you love a lot. A pirate comes along and demands one person's life. What do you do?" He said as he tells this problem to adults, they think about their mothers and they think about their children, they think about sacrificing themselves and also think, "Well, if I sacrifice myself the kid will suffer..." And they can never solve the problem. But if you pose the question to kids they'll say, "Well, *wake up*. It's just a dream, right?"

So, when you think about your life, try to see which problems are like that: You get into a situation and you lose your perspective on it. You lose your perspective on the alternatives that are available to you. You're trying to solve the problems even though they're dream-problems. If you woke up, they wouldn't be there anymore. So wake up.

That leaves you with the real problems. These are the ones you actually have to work through. If you can't seem to get anywhere with them, look at what the real issue is: It's not so much that the problem is intractable, it's just that your tools for cutting through the problem have gotten dull. Your mindfulness, your

alertness, your concentration, your discernment, have all gotten dull. That means you've got to sharpen them. So you put the problem aside for the time being and say, "I'll get back to that when my tools are sharper."

So either way, whether your entanglements are dream problems or real problems, you have ways of thinking yourself out of the entanglement so that you can get the mind to settle down.

We often forget that our mental tools are just that—tools—and they have to be cared for. Sometimes the situation they show us is not the real situation because they're dull. They've been over-used. You haven't taken proper care of them, so when you look at a problem you don't really see it for what it is. That's why you can't see through it. So you leave the problem as it is, even though it's unsettled and unfinished, and turn around to take care of your tools.

This is a lesson every craftsman should know. You're working on some wood and your saw hasn't been sharpened properly. Even though there may be a deadline for your work and you've got to get it done, you have to stop and sharpen your saw, however much time it's going to take. Then when you get back you find that you can do the job a lot better. Even though it may seem like you're wasting your time, or you're running away from the problem, you're not. You're simply putting yourself in a better position to deal with the problem, to see the problem for what it is.

Many times you come back to it and realize it was a dream problem, or one of those problems where you've put up parameters around the problem that make it impossible for you to solve it. Like the brain teasers they put in the newspapers: They set up the conditions, so you have to ask, "Where have they *not* set up conditions?" That's what gives you room to maneuver. Oftentimes you realize your inability to solve those problems stems from carrying in a few extra conditions that have not been placed on it. So, the best way to see that is to step out of the problem for a while. Sharpen your tools and then come back in.

These are just a handful of ways of thinking about the unsettled issues in life that keep the mind from growing still. You've got to learn to disentangle yourself, even just temporarily, if you're going to get the mind into the proper place, in proper shape, with the realization that some problems simply can't be settled. If you're going to wait until everything gets settled and then go for Awakening, you're never going to get there.

When the Buddha left home, he left a lot of unsettled issues behind. When he came back he was able to straighten all those issues out, not by working on the issues directly but by having each member of his family focus on his or her own mind. Almost the entire family became arahants. Whatever issues they had before became non-issues. But then there are people who go off and then can't train their families on their return. There's the story of Ratthapala. He leaves

home, much against his parents' wishes. He comes back, wants to teach them, but they're unwilling to accept the teaching. So he just drops the whole issue, realizing that there are some problems that will never be settled. As the Buddha said, winning out over yourself is better than winning out over thousands of other people, because when you win out over other people it's never resolved. If they don't get killed off they're going to plot their revenge, plot their return. If you do kill them off, *they come back as your children*—and then you've got a real problem. Karmic debts with your own kids.

Victory over other people, victory outside, victory in war—even if it's not victory in war but just everyday, back-and-forth squabbling—never resolves anything. Even when issues get settled in court in the most fair and just way, there will always be some people who feel mistreated and they'll find some way to get back. This is the way of the world. Nothing gets settled, really. The only way to reach any kind of closure is to disentangle yourself. And this is your way out: through training the mind.

There's a poem where the Buddha talks about looking at the world and seeing nothing but conflict, nothing but people struggling over things when there's never enough. Like fish in a pond that's drying up: After a while there's not enough water for the fish and so they struggle and struggle and struggle and make things worse. He saw that that's the way the world is. It gave rise to a real sense of dismay, a real sense of confinement.

Then he looked inside and saw that the problem was not outside. It lies in this arrow we have in our hearts, this arrow of craving. We always want the things we like to be better than they can be, more permanent, more lasting. As for the things that we don't like, we want them to be annihilated. That craving is the problem. It's what creates all of our issues in life, our participation in those issues. Once you deal with the craving, you take yourself out of the issue entirely. You're no longer involved in that constant back-and-forth, that unending back-and-forth. You're no longer grappling with other people over impossibilities.

It's important always to realize that we have the choice to get out. In fact, we actually chose to get involved to begin with. If you try to trace it back to the beginning point, you'll probably never find it, but you will find the choice constantly repeated in the mind again and again in the here and now.

One of the interesting points in the Buddha's teachings is that he never talks about a first cause, unlike most other religions. And where would you find that first cause? If there were a first cause in time, it happened a long time ago, too long ago to trace back. He realized, though, that the pattern of reality is constantly repeated over and over again, and that there's an element of creation with every moment. So focus on that. Look at the habits in your mind, the

choices you're making right here right now. You see that the pattern of your choices is the real problem and that it's right here for you to look at, analyze, and *solve* right here. This is one of the few things that can get solved, the issue of craving in the mind.

That craving is based on ignorance, and ignorance can be ended. What is it ignorant of? It's ignorant of what really is stress and suffering; what's causing it; what the end of stress and suffering is; and what qualities you have to develop to get out, to put an end to suffering. So you focus on them. What are you doing right now that's putting a burden on the mind? You're making choices that are putting a burden on the mind totally unnecessarily. So get the mind quiet to see if you can watch that happening. Until you watch it happening, it sounds pretty abstract. But when you can actually see the movements of the mind, that's when you can see: "When the mind does *this*, it hurts. When the mind does *this*, it's harmful, and I don't have to do that — *it doesn't have to act that way*. It doesn't have to think in those ways."

This is where you resolve the issue. When you end this ignorance, all the other causal factors that lead to clinging, craving, and suffering fall down like a line of dominoes. So this is where the problem lies, this is where it can be solved, and it's up to us to take responsibility for it right here, right now. If we don't, who's going to suffer? Well, *we're* going to suffer. And when we suffer, we find it easy to make other people suffer, too.

The Buddha doesn't force anyone to practice. He simply says that if you want to resolve the issues in your life, this is how they get resolved. This is what you have to do, and it's up to you to choose: "Am I going to finally take the way out, or do I want to go back and settle a few old scores before I go?" The choice is yours, and you're making that choice over and over and over again. If you see that the desire to settle scores is dominating your mind, you can always choose to change. That's one of the good things about the path. You're never committing yourself to suffering forever. You can always say, "I'm out of here." This is not a question of irresponsibility. You're taking your contribution to the troubles of the world and you're removing it. That's a choice each person has to make for him or herself alone. We're the ones who choose to get involved, so we're the ones who have to choose to say, "I'm out of contributing to that particular problem. I'm out of that unending back-and-forth. I want to focus on the real problems, the real causes of stress and suffering in life."

It would be nice if we could do this for everyone else in our life, but we can't. Each one of us has to do this for him or herself alone. The best way to encourage other people to do it is for you to do it yourself. That way they can see that it's possible. As the Buddha once said, having the Buddha as our noble friend, as our admirable friend, is what makes it entirely possible to put an end to stress and

suffering. We've got an example. Without that example, everybody stays in the parameters of the problems, the issues, as everybody else around us defines them. Within those parameters nothing ever gets resolved.

The Buddha thought outside of the box, he acted outside of the box, and now he's an example for all of the rest of us to get out of the box, too.