

The Line of Fire

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So much of our suffering in life comes from putting ourselves in the line of fire. The body changes. Feelings change. Perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness: These things are always changing, and no matter how good they get, the goodness deteriorates. They're stressful, inconstant, not-self. No matter how much we try to make them easeful, constant, and self, they just can't quite make the grade. And when we put ourselves in them with our sense of identification—"This is me, this is mine," and we hang on—then we're putting ourselves in the line of fire. It's like they're shooting arrows all the time, and we position ourselves right in the way.

So what should we do? Our life is just these things we experience. Our whole experience of the world is form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. We live with these things, so we have to learn how to live with them without getting in the line of fire. We don't try to run away from them, but we learn how to let them go right through our range of awareness without snagging on to anything inside of us. In other words, we practice so that there's nothing inside of us for them to hit. Then it's like shooting through the air. There's a passage where Ven. Moggallana compares his mind to space. He says that no matter how much you try to dye space - trying to make it yellow, white, blue, or any other color - the dye just doesn't stick, for there's nothing there to stick to. That's the state of mind we should be working toward. In other words, instead of sucking these things in, laying claim to them, embracing them, holding onto them, saying, "This is me, this is mine," we learn to pry them from our grasp.

The reason we hold on is because of our fear that if we don't hold onto them, we're going to fall down. It's like a little child learning to walk, afraid that if he doesn't hold on to his parent's hand he'll fall down. In the beginning that's the way it is when you're learning to walk, but there comes a point where you don't need to hold on, where you're strong enough to walk without assistance.

This is what the training of the mind is all about. You learn how not to hold on, because it's when you don't hold on, there's no grasping. As Ajaan Lee says, "When there's no grasping, there's no sweat in the palms of your hands." And when there's no holding, there's nothing that anybody can shoot, nothing that anybody can hit. The place where we hold on is where we get hit. When there's no holding on, the mind is like wide-open space. You can shoot an arrow

through space, but you can't shoot space. That's the quality we're trying to develop in the mind.

Now, before we get there we do have to learn how to hold on skillfully, to skillful things, skillful activities, skillful qualities of mind. You might think of the path of practice as a ladder: You go up rung by rung by rung. You can't get to the higher rungs without first holding onto the lower rungs. And before you can let go of a lower rung, you have to have another, higher rung to hold onto. Your right hand is holding on to one rung so the left hand can let go of a lower rung and go up to a higher rung. Then you hold on with your left hand so that the right hand can let go and reach to a higher one, back and forth, back and forth like this. You've got to hold on. In other words, there are the precepts, there's concentration, there's discernment. You have to hold onto these things to get to where you want to go. Suppose you have a ladder and you want to get up on the roof. You have to hold onto the rungs of the ladder, one after another, until you're securely on the roof. There's nothing above you but sky. Then you let go.

The other traditional image is taking a raft across the river. We all like the end of the story where the Buddha says that when you get to the other side of the river you don't have to carry the raft around anymore. The person who takes the raft and carries it on his head as he walks further: that's not the right approach at all. When you get to the other side you just leave the raft on the shore and you can walk on without any assistance. But while you're crossing over the river, you need that raft; you've got to hold on. If you don't, you fall into the water and get swept away.

So the trick is learning to give the mind something really good to hold onto so that it doesn't go out holding onto other things, grasping after other things, thinking it has to depend on this or that person, this or that thing that will end up sweeping it away. And what we're developing here...they seem so ordinary, these qualities of mind. Take virtue, for instance. Virtue is not just following the precepts, but it's a quality of mind that's solid in its intentions. You make up your mind that you're going to avoid evil, and then you just stick with that intention. That's the essence of virtue. The word "*sila*" in Pali is related to the word "*sela*," which means rock. In other words, there's a solidity to that intention that you hold onto. You don't let it go.

Initially it may not seem like much, but you find that as you really hold onto these intentions—"Not to harm, not to harm, not to harm"—it really protects the mind from a lot of things. You learn not only not to harm people outside, but you also learn how not to harm yourself. And as you don't harm yourself, you find resources of strength in your mind that you wouldn't have guessed at otherwise. Because as long as the mind is harming itself, it keeps sapping its own strength, thinking in ways that get it depressed, thinking in ways that get it fearful, that

just drain its strength away. So when you learn to give up those habits, you find resources of strength inside that you wouldn't have anticipated. You can hold onto them.

The same with concentration: the ability to keep the mind on one object, using mindfulness, using alertness, which are really basic, basic mental skills. Again, in the beginning they seem unremarkable. "How could you base your happiness on little things like this?" you might think. But you find that when you really do devote yourself to developing them and you give them priority, then they're right there when you need them, when aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes. These are the things that will be able to help you.

I was often struck by this fact when I looked through funeral books in Thailand. There, most monasteries have loads and loads of books in their bookcases that were published at funerals. It's a custom over there, a way of making merit: publish a book at a funeral and dedicate the merit to the person who's passed on. A lot of good Dharma books have been printed that way. Now, most of the books, as a preface, will have a little biography of the person who passed away. And they always come to that part of the person's life — if the person didn't die of an accident — where they say, "And this little symptom here, which at first was just a little annoyance, started getting stronger and stronger and stronger. So the person had to finally go to see the doctor, and the doctor said, 'It's this disease.' And the doctors did their very best, but there came a point where the doctors had to throw up their hands and say, 'That's as far as we can help you.'" And so what does a person do then? If the person doesn't have these skills of mind, he or she is totally at sea.

But if you've been meditating, you know what to do. You're mindful of the breath; you're mindful not to give in to the unskillful mental states; and you're alert to what's going on in the mind so, as soon as you catch it latching onto anything unskillful, you let go. Anything unskillful, anything that would weigh the mind down, you learn to let go, let go. And when the time comes to let go of the body, okay, you've practiced that. You're prepared. Ajaan Fuang always said, "Meditation is learning how to die" — learning how to let go of the things you've been holding onto for so long and realizing you don't have to. There's the fear that if we let go of these things we're going to be totally lost, but, no, that's not the case at all. When you let go of the body, you find that that's not the end. You let go of your concerns, you let go of your worries, and you're actually much lighter. There's a dimension to the mind that just doesn't die, and if you're really alert and mindful in your letting go, you can find it. Even if you're not that alert, at least you protect the mind from falling into bad mental states, and this guarantees a good passing, a good transition. So these little skills, being alert, being mindful: they're enough to really help you if you really hold onto them.

The same with discernment: Develop your ability to see, “Where is there stress?” That’s the big issue in discernment, the Buddha said. “Where is there stress in the mind? What are you doing that causes stress? Can you learn how to stop doing that, learn how to let it go?” We feel like we’ve got to let go of the stress, but that’s not what will free you of stress. You *comprehend* stress. You let go of the craving. You let go of the cause, and the stress goes on its own. So the meditation is about learning to look for that craving, learning to catch the mind as it’s causing stress through its cravings, through its ignorance. And once you catch the mind in the act, you let go of that act and the craving behind it.

But as long as you still haven’t gone all the way to the end, you hold onto that ability to ask the right questions about what’s going on in your mind right now: “Where am I causing myself stress right now? Where is the stress unnecessary? What do I stop doing so that the stress can come to an end?” Keep that question in mind. Other questions you let go, but these are the questions you have to keep in mind.

So you find—as you hold onto virtue, concentration, discernment—that these qualities get you across. If you hold onto them, you can let go of everything else. You can think of awareness as like a big screen, like the screen on a window: Anything can go right through. Anything that comes at you can go right through. You don’t catch hold of it, you don’t latch onto it, you don’t put yourself in the line of fire. And so you find that you have the sense of spacious wellbeing that comes from being open, but without the dangers and wounds that come from opening yourself up to other things, by putting yourself in the line of fire. And you find this way, that as you’re not shooting yourself or putting yourself in the line of fire, the mind has strengths you wouldn’t have anticipated, whole reservoirs of strength that you can draw on when you need them.

So don’t let the mind indulge in things that would drain its strength. Don’t weigh yourself down, because if you weigh yourself down with unnecessary things, it’s like weighing down the body: You carry lots of burdens on your shoulders all the time, and no wonder you don’t have the strength to do anything else. When you put down the burdens, you find that there’s lots of strength there in the mind that you hadn’t realized.

So hold onto these practices—virtue, concentration, discernment—because if you hold onto them, you don’t have room in your hands to hold onto unskillful things. You find yourself letting go of all kinds of unskillful things you never even knew you were holding onto. And there’s no sense of loss. Sometimes there may be a sense of fear around the idea of letting go of certain things because you think you need them. But when you suddenly realize, “Hey, you don’t!” it can be surprising, not only in how much you can let go of, but also in how much stronger you are in the letting go.

And then when you've let go of all the unskillful things in the mind, that's when you can let go of the path, leave the raft on the shore. That's when the mind is totally free. But until then, you want to maintain that sense of commitment to the path, because if you commit yourself to the path you'll find that it's committed to you. It will be there for you when you need it. It's not like ordinary commitments in the world where you give all your time and energy, and "Whoops! There it goes," you get let down. These things don't let you down. We've got the Buddha's word on that. We've got the word of all of his Noble Disciples to guarantee it. If you look after the path, the path will look after you, all the way to the point where you don't need it any more. And it won't get upset when you finally put it aside.