The Prison Break

August 2, 2025

One of the images that the Ajahns like to use when they talk about the practice is like getting out of prison, escaping from prison. Nobody’s going to come and open the doors and let us out. We have to find our own way out. We have to have a strong desire to get out, but at the same time we have to be very meticulous. If our efforts to get out are too obvious, the wardens are going to get us. So we have to be persistent, but patient, and very meticulous, and very observant. Fortunately the Buddha gives us a map, so we can know where we have to dig a hole, how long it’s going to be. And he gives us the tools to dig. Like we’re meditating right now. He’s trying to be mindful, alert, and ardent. Always keep one thing in mind. For instance, you keep the breath in mind. And keep in mind what you’ve learned from the past. You don’t have to keep writing it through your mind, but have it available. Make a survey of your body, make a survey of your mind. How does the body feel right now? Is it ready to settle down, or does it need some work through the breath? Because when we talk about the breath, it’s the flow of energy through the body. And you might want to check to see that it’s flowing well. How is it in your chest? How is it in your back, down the spine? How is it in your arms and your legs? How is it in your head? How does the energy feel around your eyes, around your ears? If it doesn’t feel good, what can you do to change? You can make the breath longer or shorter. Or you can be conscious about relaxing the different muscles. Start with the muscles in your fingers, go up to the muscles in the legs. The palms of your hands, up your arms, take it to the shoulders. Then start again down with the toes. Go up the feet, the legs, the pelvis, up the spine, around the ribcage, up through your neck, up into the head, muscles of your face. Let everything feel open. Think of energy flowing freely around the body. You don’t have to push it. When things are open, it’ll flow on its own. Make a survey of your mind now. What kind of mood are you bringing to the meditation? Does the mind need to be glad to be here? Think a bit about why it’s good to be here, settling down. Why you need to get the mind quiet, so that when other thoughts come in, you have a good argument. Say, “Not right now. I can think about those things some other time.” Right now it’s time to get quiet. If you’re worried about the future, tell yourself you don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, but you do know you’ll need qualities like mindfulness, ardency, alertness. And you’re developing them right here. As for things from the past, they’re gone. You should be facing forward as to what you can do right now. Because what you’re experiencing right now is not totally shaped by the past. Some things are coming in from your past karma, but you have the choice to decide which potentials you’re going to focus on. And how you’re going to focus on them. And how you’re going to shape them in the present. If you couldn’t do this, there’d be no point in focusing on the present moment in the meditation. That’s because this is where the action is. This is where we focus here. And we remind ourselves that we’re doing this because we do want to get out. This is the preliminary groundwork. So we’ve got some instructions from the Buddha. But there are also things that we have to observe for ourselves. He may be able to provide us with a map of how we can dig out of the cell, and how we can make a tunnel that goes outside of the walls. But there are other things that we’re going to have to observe. Like when the wardens come, what hours do they come? And what hours are there no wardens at all? Because when the wardens are not there, that’s when you can do your work. And that you have to observe on your own. So it’s a meticulous job. If you try to rush it, the wardens will catch you. In other words, your defilements will catch you. But if you’re not steady and consistent, then nothing’s going to happen. The wardens catching you means that your defilements take over the practice. You try to squeeze it. You’ve read that the jhanas are like this. So you try to squeeze your mind into a jhana mold. You’re supposed to gain these insights, so you squeeze it into an insight mold. Then you tell yourself you’ve attained this level, you’ve attained that level. You focus on the causes, and the attainments will come later. They’ll come on their own. What you have to do is focus on the question the Buddha said is the basic one we’ve got here. What are we doing that’s causing suffering? What are we doing that’s causing stress? Don’t worry about the levels of jhana. Don’t worry about the different insights. Just ask yourself, where can I detect some stress right now? Some disturbance in my concentration? Can I figure out what I’m doing to cause that disturbance? A question came up this morning about where to find the origination of a defilement. Do you have to run through all of the steps into Pinnacle Arising? Well, no. You’re not analyzing it in the abstract. You’re analyzing the problem as to see when a defilement comes up, what comes up with it right here, right now. If you don’t catch it right here, right now, then you’re just going to be left with a memory and a guess. Our problem is that our observation of our mind is like a connect of dots. It’s just a series of dots on a piece of paper, and you can connect them in all kinds of ways, because you weren’t there to see how they were actually connected on their own. So that’s why you have to be observant. And be meticulous, watch very carefully. You’re not here in a rush. You’re going to do things step by step. John Fung had a student one time. He wanted her to do some body contemplation, so he said, “Take all the hair off your head in your imagination, and then replant it.” And so two minutes later, she said, “Okay, done.” He said, “No, that’s too fast.” And you’re going out by handfuls if you want, but then when you have to replant it, you have to replant it one hair at a time. Learn to be that meticulous, that precise. Because it’s in the little things, that the insights are going to come from. So you’ve got to be very, very observant. That’s how you get out. You keep at this process, minding your own business, without any thought about the Dhamma “I,” or the different levels of Awakening, or the different levels of Jhana. But you simply peel away any place where you can find that you’re creating any stress, disturbance for yourself. You’ll find that you’ll break through. The Buddha gives the image of a carpenter who’s got an axe. An axe is kind of like a hammer, only it has a blade at the end. It’s like a little axe. He says, “The handle there will wear down.” You know it’s wearing down because you’re using it every day. But when it’s going to break through, when it’s going to get broken, through all that friction of your hand, you don’t know ahead of time. But you do know that it will. And it comes from just doing what you’re supposed to do. Watch your mind, watch your breath. Any place there’s a disturbance, can you catch what you’re doing to cause that disturbance and let it go. And behind all this is a very strong desire. But you have to learn how to temper it. When the Buddha talks about the basis for success, it starts with desire. And he makes the point that if it’s too strong, it gets in the way. If it’s too weak, it gets in the way. Of course, you have to focus it on the causes, not on the results. But the fact that desire is there, it’s nothing that you have to deny or pretend is not there. Some people say that if you have a goal, there’s going to be a hidden sense of self in having a goal. That gets in the way. Well, look at the Buddha. He was the most goal-oriented person you can imagine. He was so focused on the goal that he left his family. He tried every teacher he could find who seemed reliable. When he wasn’t satisfied, he went off on his own, tried austerities, almost starved himself to death. When he realized that wasn’t going to lead to the goal, he looked for another alternative, found it, followed it all the way. Became the Buddha. And even then, after his awakening, he had more goals. To establish the Dhamma, to establish the Vinaya, so that it would last for a long time. That was a huge project. It took him 45 years. He let it go only on the night he was passing away. So there’s nothing wrong with having a goal. The same with trying to get the mind into concentration. We read in the description of mindfulness about the various fields. There are feelings you can focus on. There are feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, neither pleasure nor pain. There are feelings that are said to be worldly feelings, feelings that are not worldly feelings. And it reads just like a list. These are all the different kinds of feelings that could come and go. And some people read that as meaning you just watch them come and go. But those feelings that are not worldly, are not of the flesh. Those are the feelings of one, pain, when you think about how you want to attain the goal, but you’re not there yet. That’s the kind of feeling that doesn’t just come on its own. You have to cultivate it. Same with pleasures, not of the flesh, or feelings of neither pleasure nor pain, not of the flesh. Those are the feelings that come from getting the mind in concentration. And that requires that you be intent on doing this. Again, there are people who say if you try to get the mind into concentration, there’s going to be a sense of self doing the concentration, or the sense of self that’s going to benefit from the concentration. As if somehow that tainted the practice. It doesn’t. That sense of self that wants to do the concentration, you want to train that. The sense of self that wants to experience the bliss and ease and gain the discernment that can come from concentration, you want to cultivate that too. And the sense of you who’s watching over this and can perfect this skill. All these are part of the path. You let them go and the path has done its work, but you hold on to them to do the work. You want to get out of prison. Don’t believe the people who say, “Hey, in prison it’s okay.” Your awareness of the prison, that’s an awakened kind of awareness. They give you free food, you’ve got free shelter, free clothing, room and board. But if you satisfy yourself with that, you’re miserable. You’re outside. And the Buddha’s showing that this is how you get out. This is how you escape. It’s something you have to do yourself. By being truthful, by being honest, by being observant. He shows the way, and then you provide the mental qualities. You develop the mental qualities that are needed to get there. And to whatever extent a desire is needed to do that, cultivate that desire. Then when you get out, you won’t need that desire anymore. Think of the image of Ananda in the park. A Brahmin comes to see him and asks him, “This path that you’re following, where does it lead?” And Ananda said, “One of the things it leads to is to the end of desire, to the end of passion.” How do you do that? Ananda described the four bases for success. Starting with desire, concentration based on desire, and the fabrication is the right effort. And the Brahmin said, “Well, in that case, it’s going to be impossible. How can you use desire to put an end to desire?” And Ananda said, “I’ll ask you some questions. Before you came to this park, did you want to come?” “Yes.” “Now that you’re here, where is the desire to come here?” “Well, it’s gone, because I’m already here.” “I’ve already arrived.” In the same way, you use desire to get to the end of desire. But you have to use it right. You have to be observant and meticulous, focused on each step as it has to come, and not just get discouraged with setbacks, but keep on going. The way out is there. So if you look carefully enough and consistently enough, you’ll find it.

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