

Freedom Through Painful Practice

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One of the measures of your wisdom is the extent to which you have a sense of yourself. When the Buddha was talking about this theme, he wasn't talking about some sort of mystical knowledge of the Self. It was more having a sense of where your strengths and weaknesses are, and how you can build on your strengths to overcome your weaknesses. After all, as you practice, even though you may be listening to a Dhamma talk or living with a teacher, still the teacher can't get into your head and say, "Okay, do this, focus there." If you're lucky to have a teacher who has the ability to read your mind, that's one thing. But even then, the teacher's not going to be there 24 hours every day. You've got to learn how to gauge what's going on in your own mind and become your own teacher. And one of the prime lessons we learn looking at the Buddha becoming his own teacher, was noticing where he was causing himself unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering. In some cases, it's obvious. In others, it's more subtle.

Sometimes you're holding onto a Dhamma teaching you think is absolutely good Dhamma, but it's not the right teaching for that particular time, that particular place. And so you end up using even the Dhamma to create suffering. One of Ajaan Lee's recommendations is to turn things inside out. If you're holding onto something, ask yourself: "What if the opposite were true?" Or if you think you're holding onto something that's giving you pleasure, ask yourself: "What if it were destroyed?"

Last night I was talking to a woman who's got an art studio. She was complaining that sometimes in her meditation she spends the whole session thinking about her art: whatever project she has going. And so I recommended that prior to the meditation, or at the very beginning step of the meditation, she should just imagine torching the whole studio: nothing left of any of her artworks, past, present, or future. She found the idea startling, and that's the whole point. Ask yourself, suppose your art studio were no longer there, everything had been trashed. And it's amazing to realize that a part of the mind would actually be happy.

I had a friend years back who was working on being a novelist. He had written a novel and was very proud of it, but it required constant tinkering. Then a few months later, I learned that he had burned the whole manuscript. He said it was the most liberating event in his life as a writer. So sometimes the things that you hold to dearly—and not just things, also ideas you hold to in your mind—you

have to experiment dropping them for a bit to see what the results would be. Which parts of the mind would actually be lighter? Which parts of the mind would actually feel less burdened? Even the things around which you create a very strong sense of your goodness as a person: It's good to imagine them gone.

And of course there's the body. A lot of people say they're not attached to their body, so they don't understand why we have the chant about the 32 parts of the body. It seems to be a lot of negativity. But the chant is to remind you that this body you're depending on is not all that dependable. What would you do if you didn't have it? Or what would you do if parts of it were paralyzed? Unusable? The immediate thought that comes in, of course, is that you really are attached to the body after all.

The next question is, can you use that thought to help spur you in the practice? After all, there *will* come a time when you simply won't be able to use the body anymore. It won't move. Your eyesight will go; your hearing will go. All your connections with the world have to come through the senses of the body, so when they go, so goes your connection with the world. Do you have something in the mind that would be willing to, or be able to, find a sense of well-being, even when they all stop functioning?

The thought may sound negative, but you can get a positive use out of it. It gives you a sense of renewed purpose in the practice. Contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body, the certainty of death, and, of course, the uncertainties of death: These can all act as a spur to heedfulness.

There's a story in one of the commentaries about the Buddha talking to a young girl who's very wise. He asks her, "Do you know?" She says, "Yes." "Do you really know?" "Well, no." "But do you know?" And she says, "Yes." And then he leaves.

Her parents are upset with her. They say, "Why are you talking back and forth with the Buddha like this?" And she replies, "He asked me if I know I'm going to die, and I said yes. Do you really know when? No. But you do know that you're going to die? Yes." That, she said, was his meaning.

Many times we view these meditation objects as negative ones. In fact, the Buddha talks about contemplating the body, contemplating death, as painful practices. But you'd be surprised at how liberating some of these painful contemplations can be. Especially when you realize the extent to which you are holding onto things that really weigh the mind down unnecessarily in areas related to the body, related to your identity of who you are in this lifetime. So even though these practices are painful practices, remember they have a positive

side, a positive purpose. As the Buddha said, contemplation of death, when it's done rightly, leads to the deathless.

You might also say that contemplation of the body, when it's done rightly, leads to happiness that doesn't have to depend on a body. It helps cut through a lot of areas where you think, "Well, in order to be happy, I need things just to be this way, that way." We're beginning this meditation right now with the heat wave coming through. But the heat wave is an affair of the body, it doesn't have to impinge on the mind. If you can develop a sense of detachment from the affairs of the body and just leave them at the body, not dragging them into the mind, a great sense of freedom can come as a result.

So look at the positive side of these painful practices, because they *are* your friends. Ajaan Suwat made the point many, many times that we've got everything backwards. We think suffering is our enemy and craving is our friend. He said if you can learn to look at the pains of life, look at the sufferings of life, and gain discernment, you can free yourself from them. In that way, they're your friends.

As for your cravings, you have to learn how to dissociate yourself from them and be very leery of what they're telling you. Otherwise they, to use Ajaan Fuang's phrase, lead you around by your nose. The image is of a water buffalo. It's got a ring in its nose, and the owners tie a rope to the ring. Wherever they pull the rope, the water buffalo's got to go, because the ring hurts so much.

It's the same with the affairs of the body, and a lot of the other things that you hold onto as being really precious. They're a ring through your nose. These contemplations are for the purpose of taking the ring out so that you're free to go where you want. You don't have to be pulled around. You don't have to be a slave to craving.

So these painful practices can lead to joy. Always keep that side of them in mind.