

The Prison Break

May 29, 2019

Ajaan Suwat made an interesting observation one time. He noted that all beings are looking for happiness, all beings want happiness, and what that shows is that we don't have it. We're suffering. Otherwise, what good would happiness be? Why would we need it? As he said, we're born into suffering. If you survive birth, you don't just lie there happily. You cry, you squirm around. And for the rest of your life there's a lot of squirming. There's a basic sense of discontent that we all have. What the Buddha does with his teachings is try to tame that discontent, to civilize it, and put it to good use.

Think of the teachings called the customs of the noble ones. There are four altogether. The first three say you should be content with what you've got in terms of food, clothing, and shelter, and you focus your discontent someplace else. That's what the fourth custom is. You want to learn how to delight in developing and to delight in abandoning: to delight in developing skillful qualities and delight in abandoning unskillful ones. You do this because you realize you can't stay content with what you've got in your mind. There are things you've got to develop and things you've got to abandon if you're going to be happy. And if you want to do it well, you have to delight in doing it.

This principle comes down to heedfulness, realizing that just because you want to escape from something, you can't simply run away. If you're going to escape for good, you have to plan it well. It's like those movies where they have a very well-planned prison break. If you're trying to get out of the prison, then if you just rush at the guards, they'll shoot you, and that's the end of that. You have to figure out very carefully how to make a clean escape, and you have to take a pleasure in working out all the details, in doing it right. That's how heedfulness trains your discontent. We want to let go. We want to go all the way to awakening. We want that happiness. So we have to follow the steps.

Think of the Buddha's image of the cow. It's in a nice pasture. It's got nice grass and nice water in the pasture, but it looks over to another hill, across the ravine, and there's another pasture. And it wonders, what's the grass like over there? What's the water like over there? Now, because the cow is foolish and inexperienced, it doesn't know how to go down into the ravine and get back up in either direction. And as a result, it loses the grass and water it had to begin with.

The Buddha's example here is an image for people who are beginning to gain some concentration and they're discontent. They want to move on. You've got to

learn how to tame your discontent. Realize that if you're going to do a good job, if you really want to get out of suffering, then you have to follow the steps. The part of the mind that's really in a hurry, that's really impatient: That has to be tamed.

We usually think of the mind taming the heart. The mind understands things but can't get the heart to go along, yet the heart sometimes goes along too well. It's in too much of a hurry. It hears about all these wonderful things along the path and at the end of the path, and it says, "Gee, I'd really like that. I want to go right now." But when it can't get there right now, it gets disillusioned, gets upset, and loses interest. You've got to train the heart so that it's ready for these things and develops some persistence.

That's why we have the practice of generosity, why we have the practice of virtue. You're training the heart and mind in the basic habits you'll need as a meditator, and you want a good foundation. Now, it's not the case that you have to wait until your foundation is good before you start meditating. You develop your generosity and your virtue as you meditate. But you have to realize that all of this is going to require work.

One of the reasons the Buddha sets out steps in the path is that he's taking a really big job and breaking it down into little pieces, so that you can content yourself for the time being with this piece, and then, when you've mastered that, you remind yourself, okay, you can't rest here, there's another piece. That's what heedfulness tells you. You can't rest there. There are some good things along the path—if you get the mind into concentration, there's a sense of well-being, even a sense of rapture—but you realize that that's not good enough. Your heedfulness and your discontent keep pushing at you, but your heedfulness also has to say, "I've got to do this well. So I'll have to focus on the next step, and only when I've got it solid will I think about the next step after that."

So while you're here, what is the next step? Well, basically you stay with the breath, then you adjust the breath to the point where it's good enough to settle down with. We're not here to create the perfect breath. We're here to get the breath good enough so that the mind will be willing to settle down in the body. If you don't adjust things with the breath, the body's not a very comfortable place to stay. It has its aches and pains here and there. But, as you breathe comfortably, breathe around the pains, breathe through them, allow the bands of tension to dissolve away, it gets to the point where it *is* good enough to stay.

And then you allow the mind to stay. Try to keep your gaze as steady as possible, and energy will come up. The Buddha's image is of a spring in a lake. It keeps flowing and flowing and flowing, and the rain keeps coming in so that the spring doesn't run dry. That's satisfying for a while, but sometimes it gets to be too

much. That's where you think of the energy flowing out the hands, flowing out the feet, flowing down the tailbone out down into the ground, flowing out your eyes. Or think of adjusting your focus, so that instead of focusing on the gross energies in the body, you focus on the subtler ones that are right there in the same place. Try to erase any perception you have of the skin of the body holding things in. Remember, the skin is full of pores. The atoms of the skin are largely space. Hold that perception in mind, and the excess energy can diffuse. It has nothing to push against.

Now, there's an even subtler level of well-being. Stay with it long enough, keeping your range of awareness wide open, until everything in the body seems so well-connected that the breath energy can feed itself. In other words, if there's a lack of energy in some part of the body, the energy in another part will flow right there. You get to the point where you don't even need to breathe in and out. This is what the Buddha means by the stilling of bodily fabrication. The mind gets really, really still and very content. The body is still. The breath is still. And you can stay there.

That's when you can see events in the mind clearly, because that's what we're here for: to see the movements of the mind. To make sure that the sense of the body is fully balanced for this stage, Ajaan Fuang would have you experiment first with thinking about the different elements in the body: earth, water, wind, fire.

You start first with the breath, which is part of the wind element. The breath is all smoothed out now, so you think about fire, the warmth. Notice where there's warmth in the body, which spots seem to be warmer than others, and then focus there and allow that sense of warmth to spread out and fill the body. If it gets excessive, then you think of coolness, the water. Where's the coolest spot in the body? You focus on that, and then let that sense of coolness spread out. Then you think of the solidity. The whole body is solid. Then you try to think of mixing these elements together so that everything feels right—in other words not too cold, not too hot, not too light with the breath, not too heavy with the solidity. Get it just right.

What you've done is to learn about the power of perception, and you've learned how to control your perception so that when you go to the perception of space, thinking of the space filling the areas between all the atoms in the body and going out beyond the skin, your ability to hold onto that perception is a lot more solid. Then you can ask yourself, what it is that knows the space? You've got the awareness, just your sense of awareness sitting right here. Focus your attention there.

In other words, you learn how to take things apart, bit by bit by bit. As the mind settles down like this, you're peeling away this layer, peeling away that layer, and it's in the peeling away that you see the movements of the mind, how the mind puts things together.

That's when both the mind and the heart are ready to start letting some of these things go. You've been letting go of certain things just to get the mind in concentration, but now you can see things a lot more clearly, because you've established a good foundation, and you've sensitized yourself to what's going on as you've stilled everything down.

It's like trying to find a mouse in a wall. Say you've heard a scratching sound in the wall. If you've got the generator going and your TV going and your stereo going and your refrigerator going, you're not going to hear the scratchings in the wall clearly enough to locate them. You've got to turn off all these machines, make less and less and less noise, and then you can start picking out the little sounds that you wouldn't have heard otherwise. That's how you can locate the mouse and catch it.

In the same way, as your sensitivity gets more refined, you begin to see how even little subtle things in the mind can have their harm. We started out with blatant suffering, we learned how to work our way through that so that we now see subtle things and realize, "Even this, too, is stressful." You're raising your standards for what counts as well-being.

This is how the mind gets ready to start peeling things away even more radically. But you can do it only because you've trained both the heart and the mind very patiently and gone through the proper steps.

Again, it's like the prison break. You do the steps very carefully. You have to be subtle so that you won't be detected. Or it's like one of those old Mission Impossible episodes on TV, where they're assigned something impossible—it seems impossible—but bit by bit by bit, very delicately, very carefully, they can do it, so that the mission impossible turns into a mission possible, a mission done.

If they just rushed at the evil person, the evil person would have killed them, and that would have been that. They had to do everything very subtly and very skillfully.

Well, that's what we're doing as we get the mind to settle down. We're learning about the subtleties in the mind by developing our skills, and this is what it means to delight in developing. You take delight in the subtleties; you take delight in doing things well—almost to the point where you forget why you're here. Still, there's that discontent that's eating away at the mind, and your heedfulness reminds you that even though things get really comfortable as you're

settled in, you're not meant to stay there. The Buddha said there's something even better than genuine heartwood.

His image is of going through the parts of a tree and not contenting yourself with the leaves or the bark or the softwood. You want the heartwood, something that really is worth worthy of your contentment. In other words, once you've got it, you don't need anything more. That's what it means to be really content. We can't clone contentment by saying, "Well let's just be okay with whatever." That aborts the path right there and leaves you contenting yourself with things that are less than ideal. But at the same time we can't let our discontent run wild. We have to tame it. We have to civilize it.

As you follow the steps, then step by step by step you get out of the prison, by learning how to take delight in being really subtle in how you understand your mind, how you deal with your mind. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if we could take nibbana by storm, everyone would have gone there a long time ago. It's because it's delicate work that we haven't gotten there yet.

So learn how to take some delight in the delicate work. This is why the Buddha taught so much about the path in detail. He didn't teach about nibbana that much in detail. He said, "Do the path carefully, and the path will get you there." That's what counts.