

Possessed by Emotions

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When I was a layperson in Thailand, I went with a couple of friends to see the movie, *The Exorcist*, and at the big climax in the film, where the exorcist gets possessed and throws himself out the window, everybody in the theatre laughed—because he was such an amateur. Over there, they're really professional in their exorcisms. They know how to do it.

I saw a case one time, a young woman who's been possessed by a spirit of an old man who had killed himself. Nobody in the village knew that he had killed himself. Yet, that's what the spirit reported. The relatives were confronted with this evidence after the spirit was driven out. They had told everybody in the village that the guy had died in an automobile accident, but it turned out that, yes, he had actually committed suicide.

It was all very strange. It shook up a lot of my ideas of what was possible in the world. But the lesson I learned was this: The young woman tended to be a daydreamer. She didn't pay much attention to the present moment, she was off in her own little worlds. She wasn't really inhabiting her body, she wasn't really inhabiting her mind, so that left room for the spirit to move in.

This is a good principle to think about, not only because of the possibility of spirits moving in, but also but also because when unskillful emotions move in, they use the same principle. Ajaan Lee treats the two things as being basically the same. You're possessed, say, by greed or possessed by anger. It'll say that it has every right to be there. But you can basically say, "No, this my place, this is my body, this is my mind. I don't need these things." And so the skill to keep from being possessed is to be very mindful, very alert, to fully inhabit your body, fully inhabit your mind, right here in the present moment.

Remember the Buddha's teaching on fabrication: bodily fabrication, the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself—technically it's directed thought and evaluation, you direct your thoughts to a particular topic and you comment on it, ask questions about it, you figure out what's right and what's wrong with it; and there's mental fabrication, which gives you the raw materials for doing that talking to yourself: perceptions on the one hand and feelings on the other. You know these things all have their causes. Some of the causes are in the present moment; some of the causes are in the past. You can't do much about the past, but you can do a lot about the present.

Say an unskillful emotion moves in: First you've got to ask yourself, "Why did you let it take your breath?" You can take your breath back, so breathe in a way that counteracts it. Try to notice where in the body it seems to have seized you. Find another part of the body that's more comfortable and then, as you

stay with that more comfortable part of the body, you can think of the comfortable energy going back through the area where the emotion has seized you, so that the very least you can reclaim part of the body. At best, you can reclaim the whole thing. In that way, even though the emotion may still be going through the mind, it doesn't have to have an effect on the body. That'll weaken it considerably.

Then you look at the way you talk to yourself. Here again Ajaan Lee says that it's very similar to being possessed, with the emotion saying all kinds of things. He says just think of it as just the germs and the worms in your body talking. They don't have any concern about your true well-being. So interrupt the conversation. Interrupt the monologue. Ask questions. Watch it for a while to see what's it's saying and try to catch where it's wrong, where it's seeing things in an unrealistic or unskillful way. Then try to steer the conversation in another direction.

Then look for the perceptions that lie behind all this.

Many of these perceptions come from your lizard-brain, especially the perceptions related to strong emotions. They flash in the mind and then go back and hide. So you have to watch for them carefully. If you don't see what underlying perception is controlling this conversation, you can try creating other perceptions. Try some of the Buddha's perceptions, such as his images for sensuality.

It's interesting that when he talks about the drawbacks of sensuality, it's mainly in terms of images. He's trying to provide you with new, opposing perceptions because we see sensuality as *so* attractive. His first one is of a dog chewing a bone—not an attractive image at all. A hawk with a piece of meat that's being chased by other hawks and crows, wanting to tear it apart so that they can get the meat. An image of borrowed goods that the owners can take back at any time. A person carrying a torch going against the wind. All these are images to make the idea of sensuality unattractive, to counteract the mind's tendency to see it as attractive.

One of the Buddha's images of dealing with anger is this: You're like a monk who's looking for a piece of cloth and who finds one with a dirty part and a clean part. He cuts away the dirty part with his foot and takes just the clean part. Why? Because he needs the cloth. One of the perceptions you may have about anger is that you don't need the other person and you don't need to be good to the other person. You're somehow in a position above and outside, where you're not going to be affected by the anger. And the Buddha's perception is trying to make you realize that you don't have that power and independence. You're a person in need. You need to think about the good points of that person.

Otherwise, you're liable to behave in ways that are really going to be bad. Because when anger comes, shame and compunction go out the window. You're left with a very narrow perspective on things, and within that narrow perspective, things that are unskillful look skillful. The whole point of compunction is thinking, "What are the consequences of this action going to be?" But when anger takes over, all you want is to express your anger, express your frustration, with no thought for the consequences. Compunction serves to pull you back and remind you: There is such a thing as karma; we live in a world where karma is 24/7. It's not the kind of law that they have in some countries where the laws are in the books, but they sometimes apply them and sometimes don't, depending on whether they like you or not. The laws of karma are impartial and they're 24/7.

So you change your images. The same with fear, anxiety: What is the image driving that? Try to dig it out. Question it.

What you're doing is taking advantage of the basic principle of causality in Buddhism. When the Buddha expressed his awakening, he would sometimes go into a lot of detail, sometimes he'd express it in very short form. The shortest form is essentially the principle of causality, which comes down to the fact that your present moment is shaped by two things: your past actions and your present actions. It's because of the present actions that the past actions can be experienced at all. So look into your present actions, take some responsibility for them. Don't just say, "Well, the emotion is there and I have to give into it." That's a fatalistic way of thinking, which is certainly not the way the Buddha taught.

You hear so much that the Buddha teaches 'acceptance, acceptance,' but I don't even know what the Pali word 'acceptance' is. And he certainly didn't accept the fact that the unskillful emotions should be allowed to go on. He says you try to get rid of them the same way that if you noticed your hair was on fire, you'd put out the fire.

Now, in some cases, the fire will have to burn for a while before you can put it out because the past actions are pretty strong, but there's an awful lot that you can do with the present moment to protect yourself from getting burned in the meantime. This is why the Buddha gives his analysis of the present moment in terms of fabrication, in terms of the aggregates, in terms of the sense media, properties: All these things play a role in how we experience the present moment and all too often we let these activities in the present moment get possessed by greed, aversion, delusion—whatever. Then we complain about the results. You have to realize that you play a role in shaping them. If you want to accept something, accept the fact that you have a role in all this, and you can change the role you're playing.

Learn how to master the different skills that are needed. This is why we meditate: to see these processes of fabrication in action. We've got the breath, that's bodily fabrication. How you're talking to yourself about the breath, evaluating the breath: That's verbal fabrication. Then you've got images or perceptions in mind about how the breath comes in and out of the body, where you're going to be focused. That's mental fabrication. You're getting some hands-on experience in how to use these fabrications to create a sense of well-being, right here, right now. Then you can take those same insights and apply them anytime. Because the same principles are acting anytime.

I read an article a while back on the different meanings of the word *saṅkhāra*, and the author was trying to make the point that the Buddha uses the word *saṅkhāra*—fabrications—in many different contexts. Then he went on to assign very different meanings to *saṅkhāra* in the different contexts—and they were all unrelated. For instance, he insisted that when the Buddha was talking about bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication in the context of dependent co-arising, it was simply a matter of past karma playing out in the next lifetime. Whereas when the Buddha talked about them in the context of meditation, they were the breath, the directed thought and evaluation, perceptions and feelings. The author said that these are two totally unrelated things.

Which is missing the potential for really good insight into the fact that your physical karma comes from the breath—after all, it's expressed first through the breath. If you weren't breathing, you couldn't move your body at all. Your verbal karma has to come from directed thought and evaluation: Only when you engage in directed thought and evaluation can you break into speech. Your mental karma has to come from perceptions and feelings: These will influence what you think.

This means that the processes determining rebirth are happening right here and you can master them right here. You can grow more skillful in them, so that not only can you reclaim your body and mind right now, when they're being possessed by greed, aversion, delusion or fear, you can also gain some mastery of the processes by which your life is going to be playing itself out now and on into the future. It's all happening right here and has to be mastered right here.

So don't let other things take over the present moment. You want to take control. You want to reclaim these things. Learn how to use them skillfully, so that you, too, can become professional in driving out the defilements that have possessed you. Make sure that this is your territory, where nobody else can come in. In that way, this weak point, which has been so easily taken over in the past, becomes your strong point: Nobody else can use you, nobody else can move in, because you're fully inhabiting what you've got right here, right now.