

Worry

March 31, 2020

The news can be very worrisome when you think of all the dangers that face us and that face of the people we love. Many of us have relatives who are high-risk. And then there's a larger picture of what will happen to the economy, the society. It's very easy to get overcome by worry. But being overcome by worry is not going to solve anything. As the Buddha said, worry is a hindrance—one of the obstacles we have to get over if we want to act skillfully in life.

One of the first things you have to remember is that what's going to happen in the future has always been uncertain. We make plans and sometimes the situation allows for those plans to come out as we hoped; other times it doesn't. The times when it doesn't, what are you going to fall back on? Well, you fall back on the qualities of mind that you've developed, the qualities of heart, the qualities of the character, to help you figure out a solution. And those qualities are things we develop as we practice the Dhamma.

When you're facing uncertain situations, you need mindfulness to keep in mind what's important, what's not important, what's skillful, what's not. You need alertness to notice what has actually happened as the situation changes, becomes unexpected. And you need ardency, the strength to keep on wanting to do things well. Those are precisely the qualities you develop as you meditate. So when worries begin to eat away at your meditation, you have to remind yourself that meditation is actually a much better preparation for the future than any amount of worrying. We get the mind in the present moment, not just for the sake of the present moment, but also for the sake of the future, so that we'll have good qualities, good habits to fall back on.

So as you're mindful of the breath, you're getting ready for the future. As you're alert to the breath, as you're alert to what your mind is doing right now, you're getting ready for the future. And as you're ardent in trying to do this well—in other words, do it skillfully—that's getting ready for the future, too. You also want to train yourself not to be overcome by pain, not overcome by pleasure—what the Buddha calls being developed in body and developed in mind. And you do that by getting the mind into a good state of concentration.

As you focus on the breath, then when you meet up with pains in the body, you don't let yourself get chased away from the present moment. You stay here. You face them—and you have tools to deal with them so that the pain doesn't scare you. You can breathe through the pain. You can breathe around the pain. If the pain doesn't change, you can focus on some other part of the body where you can develop a sense of well-being. In that way, even though there is pain, you're not overcome.

The same with pleasure: Pleasure comes up as you get comfortable with the breath. If you're not careful, you go wallowing in the pleasure and you forget the breath. And either the concentration disintegrates or you move into what's called delusion concentration, where you're still, quiet, but you don't really know where you are. There's no alertness. No ardency. In that case, you've been overcome by the pleasure.

The right course is that when there's pleasure, you learn how to use it as a source of inner strength. You understand the causes that it comes from—in other words, your continuous attention to the breath—so you stick with the causes. Then you learn how to make the best use of the comfort. Spread it around. Learn how to breathe in a way that feels good regardless of the situation in the body, and you have something you can fall back on. Because if you want to think straight, you need a sense of well-being inside. Otherwise, the mind will be hungry, desperate, and will jump at anything.

So again, you're training the mind not to be overcome by pleasure, not overcome by pain. You're not only establishing something good here in the present moment, but you're also doing this for the sake of the future. You will need these abilities when things get difficult. When unexpected things happen, when unfortunate things happen, you'll have something good inside to fall back on as your inner resource.

It's also important that you have some discernment. And here the discernment comes in having a sense of priorities, realizing that everything we have in life we're going to have to lose—except for one thing that we don't have to lose, and that's the skillfulness of our actions. And fortunately, that's our most important resource, our most important treasure inside. The body, we'll have to lose; our relatives, we'll have to lose; society will break down at some point, whether it happens while we're alive or after we die. But if it doesn't break down before we die, the fact that we're dying means that society is not going to be much help at that point. What *will* be of help is the fact that we've maintained our devotion to being skillful. And we see that as our top priority.

The Buddha himself talks about this in his discussion of loss. He says there are five kinds of loss. The first three are loss of relatives, loss of wealth, loss of your health. And those kinds of loss, he says, are not serious. They're going to happen at some point anyhow.

There was a woman I knew in Thailand who lived down near the monastery, and she started having dreams. Some spirits came to her in a dream and told her that they wanted to use her as a medium. She refused. They said, "Well, if you don't become our medium, your father's going to die, your mother's going to die." And even in the dream she had the good sense to say, "Well, they're going to die someday anyhow, but being a medium is a miserable life. If you could

guarantee that they won't die if I became a medium, that would be one thing. But they're going to die regardless." The spirits went away and left her alone.

She had a clear sense of priorities, a clear sense of the fact that loss will have to happen, but you don't want to lose your good character out of fear of loss. There's a saying that's popular among the military in Thailand: "Be willing to sacrifice your wealth for the sake of maintaining your body, be willing to sacrifice parts of your body to save your life, and be willing to sacrifice your life to save your honor." Now, we can interpret the word "honor" here as being your willingness to do only what is good, only what is skillful, and your unwillingness to do what is unskillful, and in that case, this principle is a good one to keep in mind as a Dhamma practitioner. In terms of the five kinds of loss, loss of relatives, loss of health, loss of wealth, are unimportant when faced with loss of honor in the Buddhist sense.

The serious losses in the Buddha's eyes are loss of right view and loss of your virtue. Those are things you want to hold on to, and those are things that no one else can take away—unless you let them. Those are things you do not have to lose, no matter how bad the situation gets. But, you have to be willing to make some sacrifices. And as long as you can accept the fact that life will involve sacrifices, and you can keep in mind what's important, then you can keep your head in any situation. The concentration, the mindfulness, the alertness, the ardency are there to help keep you strong in those decisions.

But the discernment is what's paramount. Here again, as I've said many times, discernment is a value judgment. You want to make sure that your values are in line with the fact that, Yes, we do have to face loss in life. With the people we love, if we don't go first, they'll go first. The things we love: Again, they may leave us or we may leave them. But our virtue, our right views: Those are things we don't have to give up. If we give them up, we've made a foolish choice, a foolish trade. If we maintain them, they'll stay with us, they'll support us.

There's a passage in the Ajaan Mun biography where someone comes and asks Ajaan Mun about the relationship between virtue and the mind. And Ajaan Mun says that you can't separate the two. If you could separate the two, there'd be cases where people's virtue could be stolen. But the truth is, if you have the virtue, nobody can steal it from you. It's what they call a noble treasure, something that supports you in this life and will support you as you go to the next life and can support you all the way to point where you don't have to be reborn at all and won't need any further support. That's something you don't want to sacrifice.

So if have a clear notion of what's worth giving up for the sake of what, and if you have at the top of your list the things that you protect at all times—your right views, your virtue—then you can face any danger. And although you may

have to lose people who are dear to you, lose your health, maybe even lose your life, you've still got something of permanent worth. And *that* you don't have to worry about. It'll support you always.