

A Decent Education

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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If our education system were really designed for people, the core curriculum would teach how to live, how to die – how to deal with the big issues in life: pain, aging, illness, death, separation – because those are the things that plague people. The skills for dealing with them are the most important skills people can develop in life.

But one of the problems with our society is that everything is geared toward the economy. Laws are struck down because they're not good for the economy – at least for this quarter's profit margin. Educational systems are designed to fit us each into our slot in the economy. The skills we learn center on how to function economically. Then when we get too old to function, they put us out to pasture, and we're pretty much left to our own devices. And many of the skills we learned in order to be good members of the economy – good producers, good consumers – are actually bad for us as we get older. This producing and consuming self we have is an especially big problem.

So as we come here to meditate – which is practice in learning how to live and how to die – this producing and consuming self is one of the big issues we have to face down. What does it consume? Feelings of pleasure and feelings of pain. It tries to produce more and more pleasure but often ends up producing more and more pain. When you look at your sense of who you are, it comes down to these two things: the producer and the consumer. These are the habits you have to observe. When you meditate, the first thing you learn is how to produce pleasure in the present moment – not for the sake of the pleasure in and of itself, but to use it as a strategy. Often we regard pleasure as an end in and of itself, but the Buddha says, No. You use pleasure and pain – both of them – as means to a higher end.

How do you use pleasure? Focus on the breath right now and see how it feels. Then experiment with the breath to see how the way you breathe can produce either pleasure or pain. It may be subtle – the difference between the two – but it's there. We've learned to desensitize ourselves to this aspect of our awareness, so it's going to take a while to re-sensitize ourselves, to begin seeing the patterns. This is why we practice. Keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath. Try to get more sensitive to this area of your awareness, more skilled at learning how to maximize the potential for pleasure right here and now, simply by the way you breathe – not only producing pleasure but also maintaining it. After all, feelings of pleasure and rapture are part of the path. They're tucked in the noble eightfold path under Right Concentration. And as part of the path, they

have to be developed and maintained. As the Buddha said, this pleasure is blameless.

It's also useful because you can use it to examine any pain that may be in other parts of the body. When you sit here it's sometimes difficult to get the whole body saturated in pleasure. There may be parts that you can't make pleasurable so, as Ajaan Lee says, don't lie down there. It's like knowing that there are rotten floorboards in your house. If you try to lie down on the rotten part of the floor, you're going to fall through to the basement. So lie down where the boards are sound.

As the pleasure you're relying on gets more and more solid, you've got a good vantage point for looking at pain. And hopefully by now the meditation has taught you to be inquisitive: You've been learning about the breath, about the parts of the body that you can adjust to your liking, so how about these other parts that you can't adjust as you like? What's going on there? Is the problem related to the breath energy? That's one way you can deal with it. Think of breathing through the pain. See what that does. Or you can notice how you label the pain. There may be a mental image to go along with it. Try dropping the image or changing the image, and see what's left.

In other words, develop an inquisitive attitude toward pain. Put yourself in a position where you don't feel threatened by pain so that you can probe the pain and ask questions, watch and observe and learn about it. Get so that pain holds no mysteries for you, holds no fear, because you understand not only the sensation of pain but also how the mind can latch onto it and create problems around it.

Then you learn to abstain from those ways of latching on. It's like knowing that when you stick your finger into a flame it's going to burn, so you stop sticking your fingers into flames. As you learn to abstain from unskillful ways of thinking about pain, you learn more and more about the mind, more and more about ways of not getting yourself involved in suffering. You start out with little tiny pains, little tiny disturbances, but once you've figured them out you get more interested: "How about the bigger ones?"

This is one of the most important parts of the practice: this willingness to rise to a challenge, this courage that's not overwhelmed by things. You've seen people who suffer in their lives and all they can think about is, "This isn't going right, that isn't going right, people don't sympathize with me." They do nothing but pile more suffering onto the original suffering. When they see a difficult challenge, they just faint. They whine and complain. But that's not the Buddha's way. His way is to give you the skills, the tools you need, and then to encourage you, to fire your imagination to rise to these challenges.

Your tools are the meditation instructions. Your encouragement comes from the examples set by the Buddha's life, the stories of the noble disciples. They show how, when you find yourself in a difficult situation, you can rise above it using your wits, your grit, the resources you've got.

So here we are with our breath. Sometimes we've also got pain, and at other times distractions – sometimes both together – and we tend to regard them as mosquitoes swarming around as we meditate. We'd like to swat them and get rid of them so we can actually get down to the real business of meditating. But dealing with the distractions, dealing with the pain: That *is* the real business of the meditation. When you die, the big problems are going to be distraction and pain.

Even before you die. You've probably noticed this with old people: They can't look ahead into the future because all they see in the future is death. So they start looking only to the past. They cut off large swaths of their awareness. Their minds can't accept what's actually happening – and if they haven't been trained, then the pain and depression of having to face death overwhelm them. When the actual pain of illness and death comes, they're even more overwhelmed because they have no tools. They don't have the right attitude for dealing with these things.

But if you're practicing meditation, you're dealing precisely with the big issues that are going to cause suffering as you die. The more skilled you get at the meditation, the more you'll be ready for whatever comes, and the more you'll have the right attitude toward it. You see it as just one more challenge, and you're up for it. You've got your tools. When illness comes, you can deal with it lucidly. When death comes, you can deal with it lucidly, with a sense of confidence. You've dealt with pain and distraction in the past, so the basic principles are the same.

For this reason, when things like pain and distraction come up in the meditation, don't get discouraged. These are the riddles of the meditation, these are the things you want to figure out – how to spar and parry, how to sidestep when necessary, how to take them straight on when you have to. Don't get discouraged by how big the task is. Just keep chipping away, chipping away. This is another thing we don't learn from our education system: how to deal with something we're not good at from the very beginning. Often they channel you into areas where you show a talent, and neglect to teach you how to gain skill in areas that don't come to you easily. As a result, when you come to meditation you need to develop the basic skills needed to deal with a long-term project: Keep chipping away, chipping away, step by step. Learn to look for the least little signs of progress so you can give yourself encouragement.

And take things as they come. The world doesn't always throw things at you step by step. Sometimes big pains come, and then little pains, and then big pains again. But you do what you can. And don't forget that every step you take in the right direction, big or small, is an important step. It's not wasted.

So don't go for the easy way out, saying, "I'm just here to hang out in the present moment and enjoy the present moment, and who cares about striving for something large?" Many modern meditation teachers claim that the secret to good meditation is to stop trying, to stop striving – that by striving you only pile

more suffering on yourself and place obstacles in your way, so the best thing is just to let go and appreciate the way things are. People who denigrate striving, saying that it did nothing for them, forget to think that maybe they were striving in the wrong way. As in the sutta where the Buddha compares the right path and the wrong path: If you practice with Wrong View, Wrong Resolve, and Wrong Effort, he says, it's like trying to squeeze gravel to get sesame oil.

Many meditators are squeezing gravel to get sesame oil. Then they realize that this doesn't work and so they stop squeezing the gravel – and that's where they stop. They celebrate how great it is to stop squeezing gravel, thinking that that's the secret to good practice. Well, it's an important step, but the path actually consists of finding sesame seeds and squeezing them. It may take some effort but at least it produces real results.

So if you find yourself pushing, pushing, pushing and nothing's coming from it, ask yourself, "Am I squeezing gravel to get sesame oil?" In which case you'd better back up a little bit, take stock of your practice, and do what you can to get back on the right path. Don't think that just giving up on the effort is going to be a solution. The solution lies in learning how to apply the effort skillfully and learning how to read the results of your actions until you get what you're looking for. This requires not only seeing the connection between your actions and their results, but also having the imagination to realize that to stop squeezing gravel is not the only alternative. There *is* the alternative of finding sesame seeds and squeezing sesame seeds. That way you get the oil.

And the oil is really priceless. After all, it's the Deathless. Once you touch that in your meditation, you have your safe place, you have your secure place. It doesn't have to be fabricated. It doesn't have to be protected. It's *there*, and it will always be there for you to tap into when you really need it. So finding that oil is the most important skill you can develop.

This gives the most satisfying narrative to your life. The narrative of most people's lives is – what? They were born, they struggled, they went through all sorts of difficulties, and then got sick and died. If they were lucky maybe they got to do some good things for their fellow human beings, but then they still just grew sick and died. But if you touch the Deathless, that's a very different narrative, the narrative of a life that genuinely accomplished something, a life well lived. If you don't touch the Deathless, the question at the end of your life is, "What was that all about? What was accomplished by all that producing and consuming, all that struggle?" Whatever you do in time and space is going to get changed someday, like a picture you draw with a stick in flowing water. But if you touch something outside of time and space, then life hasn't been wasted. The narrative arc is really satisfying – because once you've found the Deathless it's always there to depend on. You always have something to show for your efforts.

And that's the most important thing you'll ever need to know.