

Battling Darkness

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One of the standard analogies for meditation is that you're going into battle with all the habits of the mind that create suffering. They're called defilements because they darken the mind. As the Buddha once said, the mind is luminous, but these defilements come creeping in. If the mind didn't have some luminosity, you wouldn't be able to develop it. Everything would stay murky and dark. But the mind does have a knowing nature. It does have the capability of seeing things clearly both inside and out—just that the defilements get in the way. They're like clouds that obscure the sun.

So these are the things that we're going to battle. Fortunately, they're not clouds. If you tried to do battle with clouds you'd really be up a creek. If you tried to cut through a cloud, what would there be to cut through?

But if you take the analogy that you're going into battle, you can start thinking about how people wage war, how they engage in a successful fight. The first thing of course is learning how to pick your battles. There are a lot of things you could fight about, but you'd waste your energy. If you waste your energy on the trivial things, then when the important things come you're not up for them.

This is why we have to focus our energies on one issue, and that issue is: Why does the mind create suffering for itself? Everything we do, we think we're doing it for the sake of happiness, for the sake of our wellbeing, and yet we end up doing things that cause suffering, both for ourselves and for those around us. Many times we see it very blatantly right before our eyes that, yes, this suffering is dependent on what we're doing, and yet we seem compelled to do it. This is *the* important issue. If you can take care of this one issue, all other issues are going to get resolved. So you focus on the qualities of mind that lead you to cause suffering. Those are the things you're going to battle.

Once you've chosen your battle, the next step is to find a good stronghold, a place where you're secure, where you have the advantage over the enemy. This is why we practice concentration; this is why we develop mindfulness of the present moment. This is going to be your stronghold because this is where you can see these things in action. So you want to create a place here in the present that's comfortable, where you feel at ease, where you feel secure, where you feel solid.

Start out by staying with the breath—and just keep reminding yourself not to get entangled in any other issues right now. If other issues do come up, fend them off just to the extent you need in order to create a space so you can get back to the breath, to a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing with the breath, so that the breath feels full as you breathe in, full as you breathe out. You're not squeezing

out the energy of the body as you breathe out; you're not building up tension as you breathe in. Allow the breath to come in and out with a sense of fullness that you can maintain both through the in-breath and through the out-. Then let that sense of fullness spread through the body. That's your stronghold.

Get so that you can stay here in all situations, because you're going to need your stronghold in all situations. There will be times when you venture out to do battle with the enemy and realize that the enemy has more troops than you expected, so you need to beat a strategic retreat. You need a good place to retreat to, a place to come back to no matter what the situation. So try to get familiar with this spot where the breath feels comfortable in the body, where the mind feels at ease with the breath. That's your stronghold.

It's from this position that you can do your work of insight. The qualities of insight, discernment, wisdom are like a sword. They cut through all the confusion, they cut through all the connections that keep those defilements together, that keep them strong. As you get to know the movements of your mind, you begin to see that there are lots of little events in the mind that you tie together. You connect this one with that one, that one with this one, and all of a sudden you've strung together a huge enemy. You tell narratives that connect this event with that feeling and that feeling with that event, and then it becomes a huge web by which you catch yourself. So you've got to learn to cut through that web.

The nature of insight, as the Buddha said, is in seeing things in five ways, or in understanding five things about whatever the defilement is, whatever the story is. Step one is learning simply how to watch it arise. Step two, watch it pass away. Learn to see these things simply as events that come and go in the mind. That helps give you some distance from them. In other words, when a story world comes up in your mind, you don't jump into the world. You look at it as an outsider. It's the same as when you drive past a drive-in theater and see a film up on the screen. If you allow yourself to get sucked into the idea that there's actually a story being portrayed up there, you could drive off the road. But if you simply see it as lights moving on the screen, you don't get sucked in. That helps to dismantle any reality you'd give to the film.

The same holds true with the mind: We give all kinds of trust and reality to the thought constructs that come up in the mind, but if you learn to see them simply as events, little firings of the synapses, you cut through any compulsion to get involved in that story line all over again. When you can pull yourself out of that thought-world, you begin to see the construction that goes into maintaining it.

And particularly, you want to see two things about the way it's constructed. These are steps three and four. Three is: What gratification do you get out of that thought-world? Even though it may be causing you suffering, there must be some pleasure, some gratification in creating it. Otherwise you wouldn't indulge in it. It would hold no attraction at all. So learn to look for where that

gratification is. Sometimes, when you see it, you'll feel ashamed that you could have fallen for it. Then, step four, look for the drawbacks: If you stick with that thought-world, what is it going to do? Where does it lead you? Some of the drawbacks you'll see immediately with the sense of tension, with the sense of dis-ease that arises both mentally and physically as you create and consume that thought-world. Some of the drawbacks will come later. You've got to learn to look for both.

The most difficult step is the fifth: Learn to see the escape from that thought-world, from that pattern, from that habit. Sometimes just looking at the arising and passing away of the thought-world is enough to undercut any sense of reality or trustworthiness in the thought-world, and it will go away. Other thought-worlds are more compelling. You have to look very carefully to see the gratification, to see the drawbacks, and you have to use your imagination to find the escape. This is not just a passive process of watching arising and passing away. You have to see where in the mind there's that little voice telling you that you've got to believe in this narrative about that thought-world, that you can't do it any other way. There will be that voice with its repeated message. That's why it's called a compulsion.

A lot of our compulsions come from the fact that we can't imagine any other way of reacting to a particular memory or a particular idea. Our imaginations are limited – and sometimes dishonest. To break out of the limitations and shake out the dishonesty, you have to sit down and very consciously try to think of other ways of reacting. One compulsion is the part of you says, "You've got to get upset whenever this memory comes back. If you don't get upset, you're just being a milquetoast. People are going to walk all over you." Put a question mark next to that, and then check to see what other voices come up. Whatever the voices, learn how to put question marks next to them, too. The simple act of questioning reminds you that there's an alternative. Ask yourself, "Does that have to be true? What if the opposite were true?" And just that much can be enough to jolt your imagination to think in other ways to get out of the rut of that particular defilement, whether it's greed, anger, delusion, lust, fear, pride, jealousy, whatever.

Learning how to cut through any defilement requires a knowledge that has these five aspects: seeing it arising, seeing it passing away, seeing its gratification, seeing its drawbacks, and then seeing the escape from it. When your sword can cut in all five directions in this way, you begin to appreciate what meditation can do: It really does free you from the mind's old habits of creating suffering for itself – the habits that keep telling you, "I'm doing this, I'm doing that because I want to be happy. You have to do things this way in order for happiness to be found," and yet turning up with unhappiness as a result. There's a wrong connection in there that you've got to cut through, and this five-edged knowledge is what allows you to cut it.

So these are your basic strategies, your basic weapons. First, you've got to choose the right battle. That's why we have Right View. Then you need a stronghold, a safe place from which to launch your attack. That's what the concentration is for. And then you have to look at the events in the mind from these five angles. That's your sword. When you're equipped in this way, you can take on the really essential battle in life, which is to free yourself from suffering. You've got the tools, the weapons, you need to win.

It's all very basic, but so many times in life we miss out on the good things because we overlook the basics. So learn how to appreciate the basics, because they're the things that can really help you.