

What's Getting in the Way

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One of the main purposes of listening to the Dhamma is to get a sense of possibilities. We read the life of the Buddha to get a sense of what a human being can do, but all too often his story seems to be off there in never-never land, something someone far away in a far distant time was able to do. But to what extent is it relevant to us? To what extent can we make it relevant to what we're doing?

It's good to bring that measuring stick up close. What would it be like to have a mind that didn't have any doubts about the deathless? What would it be like to have a mind where there would be no possibility that it would ever be a slave again to sensual desire? What would it be like to be totally free of defilement and suffering? Do those questions interest you?

They should, because they're directly connected with happiness. We have tendencies in our minds that make us miserable, yet we're so used to them that we don't think that things could be another way. This means that we end up looking for our happiness within the confines of a very narrow sense of our range, of what's possible for us. That's how we keep ourselves hemmed in.

As Ajaan Chah says, it's like being a frog down a little hole. And in northeastern Thailand, what do they do with frogs in holes? They take a long wire and they put a hook at the end and they stick it down in the hole and they pull out the frog. And as Ajaan Chah adds, if the hook doesn't get you by the jaw, it's by the ribs, into your guts. The hooks go that deep. If you're hemmed in by your ideas of what you can do, that's your future. Aging, illness, and death are going to come with their hook. They might catch you by the ribs. They might catch you by the jaws. Who knows where they're going to catch you? It's because you hemmed yourself in that you're an easy target.

This is why it's good to open your mind to possibilities that you might not have thought of before and to use the Buddha's measuring stick. Even when he talks about something as simple as concentration: What would it be like to have the mind settle down so that it gains a sense of rapture, a sense of ease? Don't keep that possibility far away. Ask yourself, where is the potential for rapture right now? Where is the potential for ease right now? It's there. It may not be blatant, but it's there.

One way of inducing rapture is to ask yourself, "Which parts of the body right now feel relaxed or even just okay?" When you breathe in, can they maintain that quality of feeling okay, or is there a little squeeze on them? Try noticing your hands. You breathe in, breathe out, and does the flow of energy at any point in the breath cycle put a squeeze on the hands—on any of the muscles in any part of the hand? Can you breathe in a way that doesn't induce that squeeze? How long can you keep that up? And when you can keep it up, can you let it spread up the arms?

If you don't like the hands, you can try the feet—or any part of the body. Look for the potentials that are here right now. The Buddha says they're here. Everything we need to know for awakening is right here, and yet we don't see it. All we see are the things that we've seen before, because we look at them in the same way we've looked at them before. We don't learn to look at things in different ways.

This is why Dogen, the Zen master, said that a large part of meditation is learning how to de-think your thinking. Use different eyes to look at the potentials right here. Ask different questions. Where is the potential for rapture? Where is the potential for ease? Where in the mind is the potential for stillness? What would happen if you developed those potentials and kept at it? When, say, sensual desire does come up in the mind, what would it be like not to give in? And what would the mind need to do to be in a position where it would feel secure that it would never give in? What would that mind be like? These are good questions to ask. They expand our range.

The Buddha says that there are several things that, when you think about them or try to get your head around them, you go crazy. Two of them are, "What's the range of a person

who's attained jhana?" and "What's the range of a Buddha?" We're not here to get our heads around these things. We're here to pose the question of what it would be like to explore some of that range. That's a useful way of thinking. In other words, we can't define that the Buddha had only these many powers or those many powers, because after all, he was a pretty quiet person in one way, in that there were a lot of things he knew that he wouldn't talk about. Remember his image of the handful of leaves: What he learned in the course of his awakening was like all the leaves in the forest. What he taught was just the handful of leaves. So there's a huge part of awakening that we'll never know about—unless we put in the necessary effort to gain awakening ourselves. That was what the handful of leaves is for: to open your mind to the possibility of awakening to total freedom, and to show you how it's done.

It's the same with the powers that come from mastering the jhanas. If you gain them, and you're a monk, you're not supposed to talk about them to lay people. You may mention them to other monks, but even then, you have to be very careful. Ajaan Lee was extremely circumspect in this way about what he knew, what his attainments were. He never even told Ajaan Fuang when and where he had gained his noble attainments. And Ajaan Fuang told me that he himself had been very severely chastised by Ajaan Mun over this same sort of issue. He'd be meditating out in the forest and he'd see a mountain, so he wanted to check it out: Who are the devas over there in the mountain? Sometimes he'd mention what he saw to his friends, and even though they were fellow monks, Ajaan Mun came down on him hard. He said, "What you learn in your meditation is your business and nobody else's." So there's a lot we can't know about other people's abilities and attainments. The only way to find out about what's possible in jhana or in awakening is to master those skills yourself.

We look at the teachings in the Canon and they seem huge: 45 volumes. Many people suspect that not all of them come from the Buddha, but then, there's an awful lot that seems genuine. Yet even that is just the handful of leaves.

So to get to know that handful of leaves, and see what possibilities get opened up by following them: What would that be like? What would it be like to really see, as the Buddha says, that the best way to think about suffering is to see it as the act of clinging to the five aggregates. By defining suffering in this way, he's giving you a handle on how to understand it, how to take it apart. Yet even just these few leaves we haven't really mastered.

There's a huge range of possibilities. As the Buddha said, what he learned and attained didn't come from anything else aside from his ardency, his resolution, his heedfulness—qualities that we can all develop if we want them.

So it's good to let the range of the Buddha's knowledge and the idea of a totally pure mind, a totally free mind, capture your imagination—not so that you just think about them, but so that you ask yourself, "Right now, what am I doing that's getting in the way of knowing those things? What attitudes do I have that are obstructive? Where am I fixated right now? What do I like to fantasize about? How's that getting in the way? What would happen if I could drop those things, even for a little while?" We've had our imagination distracted by so many useless things in the world, things that have a certain amount of use but tend to put blinders on us and close our imaginations to the larger things of which the mind is capable, the heart is capable—your heart is capable. An important part of the practice is learning how not to let those obstructions get in the way.