

## *Things Don't Have to Be This Way*

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The Buddha's teachings focus on the main problem in life, which is that there's suffering. And he says that there's something we can do about it. We don't have to just sit there and wallow in the suffering, or accept it, or pretend that it's okay. The mind has the power to put an end to suffering. That's the essence of his message.

And he can teach this message because the mind has a lot of power. There are a lot of powers in the mind that we abuse, or that we never really develop. But he's saying that if you train the mind in the right direction, you can use its powers to solve *the* big problem in life.

This is what we're doing as we meditate. We're taking this power of the mind—its power to shape its experience—and train it in the right direction. The reason we're suffering is, as the Buddha says, clinging to things that are going to change, hoping to find happiness in things that can't really provide happiness. Or, in the Buddha's image, twisting a cow's horn in order to get milk out of the cow. When we find that it doesn't get any milk, we just keep twisting it harder and harder and harder. Of course, not only do we not get any milk, but it harasses the cow—and we get worn out.

Some people tend to think, "Well, maybe you can't do anything at all. Just sit back and just accept everything, because there's really nothing you can do to change things. Stop twisting the horn, and you'll feel much better. You won't get any milk, but you'll feel much better." That's actually a mild depression. Depression comes from when you try your hardest to find happiness, and it just doesn't work, and something inside gives up: can't think of any strategies, can't think of any ways to change things, to bring about the happiness you want. So you just give up.

In severe depression, people have a very ill-formed sense of self. This is one of the real misunderstandings of the Buddha's teaching: When he talks about not-self, he's not telling you, "Don't have any sense of self; try not to identify with your desire for happiness." That's not what he's teaching at all. Because, if you think in those ways, it leads to depression. He's actually saying that there *are* ways you can develop the powers of your mind. There are *skills* you can develop.

And so—instead of just being frustrated with the fact that your old skills are not working, and are coming to a dead end—he says, "Try these new skills. They work. Pull on the udder of the cow and you'll get the milk you want." The skills are very simple. They require persistence. This is where it's hard: in the sticking-to-it. He says, simply, "Be mindful: Keep in mind the fact

that you want to act in a skillful way.” Keep remembering that the power of the mind lies in its intentions, and that you want to learn how to focus those intentions properly. When the power of the mind is focused, it has a lot of strength.

Like the light of the sun: It shines down on a piece of paper and it doesn't burn the paper. But if you take a magnifying glass and get the focal point just right, you can focus the light of the sun and burn the paper up. It's the same with the mind. If you're just simply *aware* of the fact of suffering, or aware that maybe some of the things you're doing are causing suffering—but you don't really focus on this issue—you can't get rid of those causes of suffering; you can't burn them up.

This is why we practice focusing the mind on one topic. For instance, keep the breath in mind. And what is that going to do for the problem of suffering? It's going to train the mind in the skills it'll need to understand what it's doing to cause suffering and how it can stop.

The first skills are mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

The mindfulness is, for instance, keeping the breath in mind each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. The alertness is actually watching what you're doing. First, you're watching the breath: “Is the breath coming in? Is it going out? *Where* is it coming in? *Where* is it going out?” And you also watch the mind: “Is it staying with the breath? Is it getting ready to leave the breath?” Just notice these things. Is the breath comfortable? Is it not? Is the mind comfortable with the breath?

And then there's the quality of ardency: trying your best to make this all work. This includes an element of discernment: trying to figure out, “What kind of breathing can the mind stay with? What kind of breathing feels comfortable? What way of *conceiving* the breath makes it easy to keep in mind? What way of conceiving the breath makes the breath comfortable?” To answer these questions, you experiment.

Ajaan Lee recommends thinking about the breath energy throughout the body. When you breathe in, notice: Is there a sense of energy running down your spine? Is there a sense of energy running through your shoulders? In your torso? How about the energy in your head? Does the energy flow freely, or is it constricted? If it's constricted, what muscles can you relax to allow it to flow more easily? Can you breathe in a such way that tension doesn't build up as you breathe in, and that you're not holding on to tension as you breathe out? Give it a try.

And what rhythm of breathing feels best? Long in, long out; short in, short out; or short in, long out; long in, short out? This kind of experimentation all comes under ardency. When the mind wanders off, try to bring it back as quickly as you can. But bring it back skillfully—not with a sense of self-recrimination or frustration. Just reminding yourself, “This is a skill. It takes a while to work on it; it takes a while to develop it.”

To adults, this is particularly hard. We're used to learning skills as we're younger, and as we

get older it gets more and more frustrating. We don't like going back to square one. But then you can remind yourself, "Well, you've been going on to square one in a lot of other things. It doesn't hurt. This is one opportunity to keep yourself young, because young people are always willing to learn new things. You're old when you decide that you don't want to learn anything new: That's when you're done for."

So this is another part of ardency: learning how to talk yourself into maintaining a good mood as you do this. And finding a sense of joy in exercising your powers. Learn to appreciate the step-by-step progress that comes. Sometimes there'll be a fluke, and things go *really* well. And then there'll be a setback. Here again, learn how to console yourself during the setbacks. Get back on your feet and keep on trying. Remind yourself: The mind does have a lot of power to shape its experience. You can create a lot of happiness out of very small things, and you can create a lot of misery out of very small things. So, why create misery? Who wants it?

It's possible to develop a sense of fullness and well-being in the body simply by paying very careful attention to how you breathe—adjusting things here, adjusting things there, and noticing that, as the mind gets trained, it really does have the power not to suffer from the things that it used to suffer from. This is one good way of getting over depression: finding that you *do* have these skills; you have some power to make a difference.

It starts with the breath, but then the skills you develop here can be used in other areas of life as well. If you're more mindful in your work, more mindful, alert, and ardent in the way you approach problems in the family, problems at work, you find you really *can* make a change for the better. And you develop a more mature attitude about making a change for the better. You realize that it's not a matter of just wishing for things to be better and then getting frustrated because they're not happening on their own. You've got these potentials in the mind to make a difference, and they're just lying fallow.

So you want to develop them; you want them to grow. Then you can use them to make a genuine difference. You begin to catch yourself as you think, speak, or act in ways that used to cause suffering, where you used to tell yourself, "Well, that's just the way it has to be," but now you realize that it doesn't have to be that way. We're not here simply to accept the way things are. We're accepting the fact that we have some powers that we haven't really developed, but we have the chance to work on them now. We don't know how much longer we'll have the chance—after all, life *is* uncertain.

But these powers work not only in everyday activities. Even as you face death, you're going to want to be more mindful, more alert, more ardent, making sure that the mind doesn't have to suffer even from the fact of death. Aging, illness, and death are things that you don't have to suffer from. They'll happen, as one of our chants say. We haven't gone beyond them; they're unavoidable. But the suffering that comes around them *is* avoidable. That's an important

principle to keep in mind.

So what we're doing as we meditate is taking these powers of the mind—which in some cases we're misusing, and in other cases we're not even using at all—and learning how to focus them on this issue of why the mind is creating suffering when it doesn't have to. And it *is* a problem we can solve.