

Defeatism? - Anything But

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It's a great irony that Buddhism is often presented as being defeatist. The Buddha is portrayed as saying that your body is impermanent, your mind is impermanent, the world is impermanent, anything you try for would be impermanent, so just give up. You'd be happier not trying—which, of course, is nothing at all like what the Buddha actually said. One of his terms for the noble eightfold path was, “unexcelled victory in battle.” He often uses images drawn from soldiers and battle, comparing the successful meditator to a soldier who comes out victorious after overcoming enemies.

Success is another word that's often treated ironically in Buddhist circles: You're often told that you don't try to succeed in meditation. There's no such thing as a good or bad meditation. Everything is just about accepting things as they are. There's no success. There's no failure. But that, too, is not true. The Buddha presented one version of his path of practice as four bases for success. He was very clear about the fact that there's successful meditation and unsuccessful meditation. There is a goal. And it's worth attaining, worth focusing your efforts toward, simply that you have to learn how to be mature in how you go about it.

The four bases for success are desire, persistence, intent, and ingenuity. The desire there comes first because it's your motivation. You have to *want* to do the practice. William James once made a distinction between two kinds of truth. There's the truth of the observer, in which your desires should not get in the way if you're going to see the truth. In other words, things like measuring the gravity of the sun, measuring the orbits of the planets, running scientific experiments: If you desire things to come out in a certain way and you skew the results in that direction, your desires are going to ruin your chances to actually see the truth about these things.

But there's another kind of truth, truths of the will: things that will become true only if you want them to become true. If you're going to be good at a sport, to be good at a musical instrument, to be good at cooking, to be good at carpentry, you have to *want* it to happen. Only then will it actually happen.

And the path is that second kind of truth. It's not going to happen on its own.

There are passages say that, once you get started, each step follows naturally from the preceding one without your having to desire it. But you have to have the desire to get started on that first step. Without that initial desire, it's not going to happen. And you have to have the desire to persist with it. So you have to learn

how to motivate yourself, to make yourself want to do this in whatever way works with your mind. For instance, you can use thoughts of heedfulness, in other words, thoughts of the dangers that come when you don't master the skill, along with thoughts of the benefits that come when you do.

They've done studies of people who are especially skilled in their areas of expertise. And they found that the ones who are excellent, as opposed to those who are merely good in those particular fields, have a very strong sense that if the skill is not mastered, there's danger. If the skill is mastered, there's going to be wellbeing. There's going to be safety. So that's one way of motivating yourself.

Another way is out of compassion. After all, we are doing this for the sake of putting an end to suffering. There's one passage about a monk who's beginning to get discouraged in his practice and is thinking of giving up. And the Buddha says, "You should ask yourself, Don't you love yourself? Didn't you start this practice for putting an end to suffering? If you stop the practice, what's going to happen? Are you giving up on your desire for happiness?" So compassion for yourself, compassion for others, is also a good motivating factor. If you develop more skillful factors of the mind and abandon unskillful ones, the people around you are going to benefit from your presence, as opposed to being harassed by your presence.

So there are lots of ways to motivate yourself.

With the motivation comes the second base for power, which is persistence. You really stick with it. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "You have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well." This is where, if you have obsessive tendencies, they're useful. You have a few free minutes, you focus on your breath. You stop at a stop light, you focus on your breath. You're sitting in a doctor's office in a waiting room, you focus on your breath. You're standing in line, you focus on your breath. You're sitting in a boring meeting, you focus on your breath. Every time you've got a chance, you keep coming back to the breath. That kind of persistence is going to pay off.

But simple persistence on its own is not enough. You can't take nibbana by storm. You need the remaining two bases for power, too, such as being intent. You focus really carefully on what you're doing and what results you're getting. You pay very careful attention. This is how the Buddha was able to find the path to begin with. He noticed that he wasn't getting the results he wanted, so he looked back on his actions. "What's lacking in my actions? What am I doing wrong? What can I change?" Which means you have to look very carefully at what you're doing and very carefully at what the results are. That's what intent is all

about. You try to be as sensitive as you can to what you're doing. This is what you can use to temper your brute force as you push at the practice.

This is how you begin to notice what needs to be changed. And that's what the fourth base for power is: your ingenuity. When you see you're not getting the results you want, try to figure out: "Okay, why? What can I change?"

These two qualities correspond to what Ajaan Fuang would talk about more than anything else when he was giving meditation instructions. One, be observant. Two, use your ingenuity—because, as he said, if we could get to nibbana simply by desire or through persistence, everybody would have gone there a long time ago.

It's in using your sensitivity, your powers of observation and your ingenuity: That's what allows you to temper your efforts so they're not right only in a general direction, but precisely just right. This is where the element of discernment really has to enter into the path. The Buddha talks about the middle way, this unexcelled victory in battle, as being a middle way between two extremes. If we could find our way to true happiness simply by being extremely accepting or extremely effortful, again it would be very easy. It wouldn't take much discernment. But to get results requires finding the middle way between those two extremes. What's just right? What kind of effort, applied at what time, to what extent is just right? And what kind of effort misses that point of just right? This is where you have to observe and evaluate.

Use your ingenuity to figure out other ways of approaching things that you might not have thought of before—because, after all, you're learning a skill. And, as with any skill, you learn by doing it and then looking at the results. Then you figure out, "Is this good? Is this not good?" You start with the instructions you get from the teacher and what you read in books. But then you have to apply it to your own situation.

So you're learning not just from the books. You're learning from your own breath. You're learning from your own mind. When you figure out what's not quite right, then you figure out, "Okay, what can I do to change what I did?" And you go back and you do it again. And you do it again. And you do it again. In this way, your powers of observation and ingenuity don't replace the effort. They just make it more finely tuned. But that quality of persistence and the desire have to stay there, simply that you learn how to temper them properly so you know when to push and when to be patient.

Patience doesn't mean you simply put up with whatever. You realize that you're in this for the long haul. And sometimes the mind needs some time in order to mature. It's like that image of the mango. You want a ripe mango and so

you ask people, “What’s a ripe mango like?” And they say, “It’s yellow and soft.” Well, you look at your mango, and it’s green and hard. So you squeeze it to make it soft and you paint it yellow. That way, you get a soft yellow mango, but you don’t get a ripe mango. Sometimes it requires just watering the tree; taking care of it and waiting for it to mature on its own, at its own speed.

It’s not totally on its own, of course, because you’re caring for it. But the mind does sometimes need time. Other times you have to push it. Otherwise, it just gets lazy. So, here again, using your powers of observation and your ingenuity, you figure out, when’s the time to push? When’s the time to simply tend to things?

One of the monks here, before leaving home, wanted to bring some of his library. So he sorted through the books and kept just a few that he thought might be useful. And one is a book on learning how to swim, because, as he said, it had really good advice on how to practice, not only on learning how to swim. It had plenty of principles you can apply to practicing any skill. And a lot of them concerned maintaining proper form. Even if you don’t have a lot of time to practice, make sure that when you do practice, you maintain proper form. And that you be really observant about what’s getting results and what’s not.

So here, proper form is keeping the mind with the breath; keeping yourself centered here with a sense of wellbeing so that the mind and body feel good together. And then watch. Ask questions. Stick with it. And that way, your desire, instead of getting in the way of the practice—as desire sometimes can do—it gets tempered and becomes a base for success.

That way, you get to find what the Buddha was teaching for. He wasn’t being defeatist. He said there is victory. There is a true happiness that can be obtained through human effort. It’s not in a lot of the activities that most people assume will lead to happiness, and that’s something you do have to accept. But, he says, your desire for true happiness is something you should honor. That’s what he himself did. He gave his life to his desire for true happiness. And he got results. If you give your life to that desire, and round out that desire with all the other bases for success, you’ll get results too. There’s nothing defeatist about this at all: pure and total victory.