

# *Thoughts with Fangs*

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There's a passage where the Buddha teaches Rahula how to take joy in the practice. He says, "If you reflect on the things you've done, the things you've said, the things you've thought and you see that you didn't harm yourself, you didn't harm other people, that in and of itself is reason enough to take joy." Notice he doesn't say that if you reflect and see that you did better than somebody else, take joy in that. Because how do you measure "better"? If you're going to measure "better," look at yourself. Are there areas where you used to act in a harmful way but now you've learned to act in a less harmful way? Are there areas in which you used to act unskillfully and now you are more skillful? If you are going to make a comparison, make that kind of comparison.

Because the practice after all is the practice in learning how to overcome suffering. Your suffering is a totally private matter in the sense that only you can experience your own suffering. Nobody else can look into your mind and measure how much you're suffering. And you can't look into other people's minds to see how much they're suffering. So whatever basis you might have for comparing yourself in the practice with other people is totally nonexistent. Or to put it in another way, it can't be measured in any way at all.

So if you find your mind slipping into that old issue of whether you're better than other people or worse than other people, realize that both sides have fangs. When you feel that you're better than other people, you tend to get complacent. When you feel you're worse than other people, you tend to get depressed. It's one of those perceptions of *papanca*: proliferation or complication. There's contact at the senses, and from contact there arises feeling. It's an interesting passage in one of the suttas, where the Buddha starts out in a totally impersonal way like this. There's contact, and from the contact comes feeling. And then what you feel, you then label—all of a sudden *you've* come into the picture. And what you label, you think about. And what you think about, you tend to complicate. And then the complications turn around and bite you.

You've been bitten by the categories of thought that tend to complicate matters or to proliferate in this way. The big category is thinking about yourself in comparison with other people. That really has fangs. It gets you worried about issues that really are useless. The real issue is, "Are you getting more skillful in learning how not to create suffering for yourself?" This is not a narrow or selfish issue. After all, you hear about all the abuse that people inflict on others, and it's usually because they themselves are suffering. If they weren't suffering, they wouldn't inflict abuse. To the extent to which you can learn not to suffer, you are much less likely to harm others. That's the big issue. It has nothing to do with comparing yourself as better than or worse than or even equal to other people. The whole comparing mindset is out of order here.

It's often related to the way we judge ourselves. Something doesn't go well in your meditation, something doesn't go well in your life, and you tend to judge yourself as a bad person. Something goes well and you tend to judge yourself as a good person. The reading, the judging of your *self* is what gets in the way.

When the Buddha was teaching Rahula how to look at his actions, at his words, at his deeds, the point was that he should try to purify the thoughts, the words, and the deeds. He wasn't focused on making himself a better person; the point was to learn how to respond to situations in a more skillful way. That's something you can evaluate, something you can learn from. If you make a mistake, you learn from the mistake and learn how not to repeat that mistake. If you do something well, remember that, take joy in that, and keep on training.

In other words, when you look at your actions, don't make them a gauge of how good a person you are. That's where the fangs begin, and then they start you thinking about, Well, am I better than that other person over there? Do they do a better job? Are they more generous? Are they more virtuous? Are they better meditators? Am I better than they are?" However you answer those questions, that kind of thinking has fangs because it really obscures what you've actually done and what actually can be done to improve your habits, or improve that particular action the next time that particular situation comes around. That's what the real issue is. Everything the Buddha teaches gets analyzed down into actions, intentions and their results. The intention you can gauge as to whether it's skillful or not, the results you can gauge as to whether they are skillful or not. What kind of person you are, how good or bad you are, that's not anything you can gauge at all. If you try to do it, it really gets in the way.

So your duty here is to look at your intentions, and then to see how well those intentions play out when you act on them. And learn how to judge the results. Look at things simply in terms of cause and effect, and measure the effects in terms of whether they're harmful or not, whether they lead to happiness or whether they lead to stress and suffering. It's all very simple, but we don't like things simple in that way. We like to complicate matters. And when we complicate things, our thoughts turn around and attack us.

Learn to keep things pared down and simple. While you're sitting here and meditating, for instance, how is this breath? And then how is this breath? How about this one? How is your focus? Where are you focused? Is it working? Is it getting results? If you like the results, stick with what you're doing. If you don't like the results, you can change. As for the issue of how good a meditator you are, if that somehow pops into the mind, just let it pop out of the mind. It's really irrelevant. And it can get into the way of deeper insights.

There's a passage where the Buddha mentions that it's a sign of an untrue person who, on gaining strong concentration, uses that attainment to measure himself against other people. "I've got this attainment; they don't have this attainment. I'm better than they are, I'm a better meditator." That right there blocks the insight that could come from that attainment. The true meditator should reflect: "The Buddha teaches non-fashioning even with regard to states of concentration and attainments along the path."

"Non-fashioning" here means that you don't fashion a sense of self around these things. You simply see them as action and result. You look at the meditative state, not so much as a state, but as a product of what you're doing to create that state. And to what extent does it still involve stress and suffering? In what way could you create less stress and suffering? This reduces everything to actions and results. The type of person you *are* just gets put aside.

So when you find the mind coming around and attacking you with those

thoughts with fangs, learn to remind yourself, “You’re not here to compete with anybody else. You don’t know who else is suffering and how much they are suffering.” Even when they try to make a science out of happiness—they ask people to measure their happiness on a scale of zero to ten. Well, happiness doesn’t come with little numbers like that. It’s all very subjective. It’s not really a science at all. So on the one hand, you can’t really measure how much someone else is suffering, and two, it’s really irrelevant to the issue at hand, which is how much suffering are *you* creating right now? And how can you learn to create less? That’s the only issue that matters.

Remember that point and use it to cut through any other thoughts with fangs that come and attack you. And you find that just this simple analysis, cause and effect, action and result, can clear away a lot of problems and keep you focused on what’s really important.