

## *Fighting the Defilements*

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Ajaan Lee once said that one of the first things you learn about when you start practicing is your own defilements. It's only when you begin fighting off greed, anger, delusion, sleepiness, restlessness, that you realize how strong they are. Otherwise you just go along with the flow. Today seems to be a good day to be lazy, so you'll be lazy. Today's a good day to be industrious, so you're industrious. In other words, you tend to follow your moods without thinking about them—except to the extent that, say, you have a job that requires you to do things you don't want but you say, "Well, I've just got to do this," and you steel yourself to do whatever needs to be done.

But when you're meditating, you don't have those outside strictures. Which makes it all the more difficult to fight off your moods. Because you could be out sitting under the trees for hours and just drifting off. There's no one riding herd, there's no schedule that forces you to do this, do that. So you need inner resources to depend on. You need to have an inner sense of discipline.

Ajaan Fuang once made a comparison to having an inner teacher who rides herd on her students. And his experience with teachers was basically the first four grades of primary school. "Okay, now's your time for reading, now's your time for math." And in those days they allowed teachers to hit the students, too.

So it's a fairly harsh image but a useful one, because you need to really be able to bear down on your defilements when they start taking over. And you don't have to be afraid that their feelings will be hurt. You don't have to be afraid that their self-respect will be hurt. That's not an issue here. The issue is power: whatever power they have over the mind and how you're going to counteract it.

And basically the power of feelings comes from their ability to get into your physical system—in other words, when a thought is strong enough that it begins to affect the way you breathe, it begins to affect the way the blood flows in your body. Just the physical sense of how your body feels, say, when there's anger, desire, restlessness, the sense that you have to get it out of your system: That's when the thought has taken over.

And its techniques are basically two. One, is it gives you certain reasons for why it has to be this way, has to be that way. And then the second technique is the effect it has on the body. You feel you've got to get it out of your system and the only way you know to get it out of your system is to go along with it. Well, that doesn't solve anything at all.

You've got to learn how to withstand it from both sides. In other words, learn how to breathe in such a way that these feelings don't take control of your physical system—as you're doing right now, learning how to breathe through tension, learning how to adjust the way you breathe. These are important techniques in learning how to get at a defilement through the back door, through its influence over the body.

Then you apply these techniques to your daily life. When someone says something that has you angry, you learn how to breathe through the tension that builds up inside you, so that the anger is just a thought and not an unbearable sensation in the body.

And you have to find various techniques for this. There's not just one breathing technique that's going to work in all situations. There are techniques for dealing with sleepiness: You start breathing more heavily, say. There are ways of breathing to deal with anger and lust.

Once the physical side of the feeling is normalized, then you can start looking at the mental side: exactly what reasons there are for a particular defilement.

For example, sleepiness. That seems to be innocent enough. But often the mind is just getting bored, so it's not really innocent. You have to test it first. That's why the Buddha has all those techniques for testing sleepiness before you give in to it. In other words, once it's passed the tests and you're still sleepy, then that's a sign that the body really does need to rest and then you give it some rest.

But first give the mind work to do—like going through the parts of the body, getting up, walking around, washing your face, looking up at the stars if it's at night, imagining a bright light in front of you. You try these various techniques to see if it's simply a subterfuge of the mind, the mind's way of avoiding its work.

Once you've given it a good test, often you find that the sleepiness does go away, in which case you can get back to your meditation. If it doesn't go away, then you really do need to rest and you can lie down knowing that you've tested yourself properly and haven't just given in to a passing mood.

As for other emotions, other mind states that come through, you have to test them in similar ways, to see what reasons they have.

Say, something has you angered. Once you've breathed through the physical side of the anger, you can look at the mental side and see exactly how much logic there is, how much reasonableness there is in the anger, in your dissatisfaction with whatever the situation may be.

And try to listen to what the mind has to say. Ask it, "Why are you angry about this? What are your reasons?" Listen for the tone of voice that tries to bully its way through your mind. It's a sign it's not really reasonable. So you have to dig

further, further, further, until you find out what the reason is.

So if someone hasn't lived up to your standards, you can ask, "Okay, who do you think you are? Are you the National Board of Standards?" You have to learn how to question your reasons, be cynical. Because if you can't be cynical about your own feelings, how are you going to see through them? This doesn't mean that they're all false, but it does mean you have to test them. Otherwise, you never get around their power to delude you.

So whatever comes into the mind, you don't have to immediately side with it. In particular, when something has come into the mind and spread into the body, you have to be very careful about siding with it. Otherwise, you go through life with your old knee-jerk reactions and nothing ever changes.

The whole point of the practice is based on the premise that human beings can change. And the change can come from within. You don't have to depend on outside forces or outside strictures to keep yourself in line. You learn to have this inner teacher, this inner questioner who tests things, tries to find where they come from, and who follows through with a thought only when it really does seem proper, really does seem reasonable, really does seem right for the occasion.

Part of what makes the practice so difficult is that you're both the person being trained and you have to be your own trainer. When the trainer comes in, listen to the actual voice of the trainer inside and also to the way that the defilements can mimic that voice. There's a lot to sort out in here.

But it can be done. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible for people to act in a skillful way, he wouldn't teach it. And he wasn't talking only about superhuman people, supermen, superwomen. He was talking about ordinary run-of-the-mill people. They all have the potential, if they use it, to gain awakening.

So you've got to learn to sort out the voices inside you, sort out the feelings, sort out the intentions inside you, to see who really is your good friend in there, who needs to be trained, who needs to be expelled, and who needs to be brought into line.

You can't expect other people to do this work for you. Other people can show the way, they can give advice, but the actual work is an inner work.

They accuse Theravada of being selfish because it's not out there to save the whole world. Well, the problems of the world are caused by each person's lack of skill. And nobody else can make somebody else skillful. You can teach people, you can point out the way, but that's as far as it goes. Each of us has our own lack of skill and the only way we can overcome it is to train ourselves.

But we do have that capacity. We do have that potential. So try to ferret it out and make the most of it.

