

Victory

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There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about body contemplation, and ends with the famous lines, "Whoever, based on a body like this, would exalt himself or disparage others: What is that, if not blindness?" What's interesting about this sutta, among other things, is that the title of the sutta is "Victory"—i.e., victory over your lust. This is a common theme throughout the Buddha's teachings: that true victory is not a matter of winning out over other people. It's a matter of winning out over unskillful voices, unskillful habits, in your own mind.

We tend to forget that fact in our modern world. For most of us, victory is winning out over other people. But who's winning? All too often, our greed is winning, our anger is winning, our lust is winning. We like to portray that to ourselves as a victory, but actually we've lost. In Thailand, it's a long engrained cultural tradition that when you give in to your anger and let your anger out, you've lost it—both in the sense of having lost control and also in the sense of having lost the situation. It'd be good for us to develop that attitude around anger and all of our other defilements as well.

There are passages where the Buddha describes monks who win out over lust, comparing them to soldiers who are brave and victorious in battle. The ones who give in to lust are the cowards—which, of course, goes against a lot of what our society teaches us about being macho, about gaining the object of your lust and gaining the object of your desire, beating out other people, as somehow a kind of a victory. I'm sure that attitude existed in Indian culture as well. That's why the Buddha had to make the point very clear that when you win out over your lust, you're a brave soldier and not just a weakling who couldn't make it with somebody.

The same goes with anger. We often think of getting into an argument with someone and having the last word as a kind of victory, but often the last word is something so stupid and so outrageous that the discussion is not worth continuing. The Buddha says this again and again, and we see still it all around us. If people don't conduct an argument fairly—if they're not moral in the way they conduct the argument, if they misrepresent themselves, if they misrepresent what you say—then it's really not worth continuing the discussion, even though they may have the last word and think they've won. Actually, they've lost. Of course, in the eyes of others, it may look like they won, but as you're practicing the Dhamma you have to train yourself not to worry about how things look in the eyes of

others.

There's a sutta where a brahman comes to insult the Buddha, and the Buddha doesn't accept his insults. He ends with a poem where he says, basically, that people who think you've lost because you don't respond with anger to someone who's treated you harshly or unfairly—if they see that you've lost or that you're a coward—then it's a sign that they know nothing of the Dhamma.

So you have to remember, we're not here to look good or victorious in the eyes of others. We're here to win out over our own defilements. Now, that's a victory that nobody else may know, but the fact is that *you* know is what's important.

In other words, with lust, desire, and anger: Don't think that by following through with them or that gaining what the lust or anger desires is a victory. You've lost.

The victory comes in self-control: starting with self-control and then moving on to uprooting. But first, start with the control. That has a lot to do with your attitudes. It's so easy to think, "Well, someone else will think this and someone else will say that," or "I'll look bad in the eyes of others." The eyes of others reflect all kinds of things and most often they reflect their inner opinions, rather than reality outside.

So when an argument comes up, ask yourself, "Is there anything to be gained by engaging in this argument?" There are times when the Buddha would get engaged in arguments, but he wouldn't argue out of anger. He would argue with the purpose of making things clear, either for the person he was talking to or for the people who were watching and listening. They might benefit from seeing how an argument that's come to them actually works when treated in line with Dhamma principles. So there were times when the Buddha would engage in a debate because it would clear up somebody's eyes a bit.

But there were other times when someone would come, and the Buddha would totally refuse to argue. There was once a brahman who came to see him and said, "What kind of teaching do you teach?"—hoping to engage in an argument with whatever the Buddha said. But the Buddha replied, essentially, "The kind of teaching where one doesn't get engaged in useless arguments." The brahman didn't know what to say. He simply shook his head and left.

So, always keep in mind that the victory we're after here is one over ourselves.

Victory outside: There are times when you can win out to help people, poor people, people who are disadvantaged, people who've been oppressed one way or another. But don't look at it so much as a victory as a form of generosity. You're giving your time. You're giving your energy. As for whether it actually will succeed in gaining your aim—sometimes you can make it succeed, sometimes you can't.

You don't want to measure the success as to whether you beat out somebody else. The proper attitude is more, "Did you conduct this properly? Did you do your best?" If so, okay, that is a kind a victory and, again, it's a victory inside.

So we're not saying not to try to change the world when and where you can. The practice of generosity is often best expressed in that way: in seeing that there are some injustices, some unfair activities in the world, and maybe something can be done about them—if that's an area where you feel inspired.

This is the operating principle with generosity: your sense of inspiration. You want to help. You have something to give, whether it's a material object or your time. You give that. As to whether the other person you want to help would actually be in a position to receive that help, that's something you've got to use your ingenuity to work toward, but you can't make the measure of your success the extent to which things work out outside. You have to focus on your intention and the fact that, in implementing your intention, you didn't harm yourself, you didn't harm any others. You didn't harm yourself by breaking any of the precepts, by stirring up greed, aversion, delusion. And you didn't harm any others by trying to get *them* to break the precepts or intentionally trying to stir up their greed, aversion, or delusion. There are other motivations for justice besides anger, and you want to focus on those. But again, this is a matter of generosity: whatever extra time you have, whatever extra energy you have.

As for the victory we're after here, this is a victory over our greed, aversion, and delusion.

Ajaan Mun's example is of a soldier in battle. The soldier has his weapon, which is discernment, and his supply corps, which consists of all the other factors of the path, such as mindfulness and concentration. The soldier himself is the determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again.

So this is the battle we want to win. Greed comes up, you recognize it; you can work your way around it. Anger comes up, you recognize it for what it is. Any of the hindrances come up, any of the defilements come up, your first line of defense is to recognize them for what they are—because all too often we can mistake them for our friends and allies, and that's when we've lost the battle right there.

Once you recognize them, at least you try to put up a fight. Ajaan Maha Boowa has a nice comment on this. He says that most of us don't even try to put up a fight. We can't even say that we've lost because we didn't even try to fight at all; we just sided with the other side and went along with them. That's even worse than trying to fight and then losing.

That's another misunderstanding we often have. You see that something's

really strong in the mind and you say, “If I even try to do a little battle with it, I’m going to lose anyhow, so I might as well give up.” That’s your defilements speaking. That’s their fifth column inside your mind.

So, at the very least, try to fight these things. Recognize them as the enemy. Do your best to fight them off. Even if you lose again and again, at least you get to know your opponents. At some point, if you keep fighting, you’ll finally figure out some way to get past them. That’s the kind of victory you can really be proud of. Whether other people know about it doesn’t matter. They don’t have to know. It’s really none of their business. You know that you’ve won.

And this is a victory with no bad karmic consequences. There’s not going to be any animosity coming from it. But with victories out there in the world, one side wins and the other side that lost is determined to come back some day with the thought, “We’ll see what we can do the next time around.”

It goes on and on and on, like that story of the two women. Apparently, in a previous lifetime, one of them had been a major wife and the other had been a minor wife of a king. The minor wife gave birth to a son, and the major wife hadn’t had a son, so she was afraid that the minor wife would gain power because of that. So she killed the son. And for lifetime after lifetime after lifetime, each side kept killing off the other’s children until finally, in this lifetime, one was after the child—at this point it was hard to tell who was who in terms of the first story—but one woman was after the child of the other woman, so the woman who wanted to protect her child came running into the monastery to see the Buddha. Both of them came right there before him, and he taught them the Dhamma: “Animosity is not ended through animosity. Animosity is ended through lack of animosity.” They were able to hear the Dhamma and it went to their hearts—and that was the end of that long cycle of revenge and retribution.

So sometimes lack of animosity looks like you’ve lost, but a better way of thinking of it is that someone is offering to hand their bad karma to you, and you refuse it. It’s a big ball of filth. They say, “Do you want to take this and throw it back at me?” If you do, you’re going to get filth all over your hands. Think of it that way and say, “No, I don’t want that.” If someone comes at you angry, it’s like they’re wearing a shirt all covered with shit, and they’re saying, “You want to put my shirt on?” If you respond with anger, that’s what you’re doing. You’re putting on that shirt.

So try to hold these perceptions in mind because they remind you of what true victory is—and how you can gain a victory that really matters.