

Toughen & Tenderize the Mind

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There's a paradox in the way the Buddha talks about a trained mind. On the one hand, the trained mind is sensitive—in his words, malleable, tender. And, on the other hand, it's unshakeable. It's strong. Tough. So how do those two qualities go together? They're both desirable.

On the one hand, you want the mind to be sensitive to what's going on. One of our major problems is that we cause pain and suffering to ourselves and others and yet we tend to deny it. That becomes ignorance—a big wall in the mind, which blocks off a lot of things so that we can't really see what's going on: what we're doing or the results of what we're doing. So you want to train the mind to be sensitive enough to see problems inside itself that it didn't see before and to make corrections. If you don't see them, you can't correct them. So you want to be sensitive.

On the other, if you're sensitive but weak, you get blown away by the problems in the mind and lose whatever confidence you had that they're something you can handle, something you can solve.

So both qualities are desirable and it's learning how to develop them together in the right way: that's what brings balance into the training of the mind.

We develop sensitivity by thinking in terms of *samvega*. It's a Pali term that literally means terror, but in practice it means a sense of dismay when you look at the way the world is. As the mind gets more and more still, you see that the world is filled with a lot of meaningless turmoil. And it seems to want to keep on doing it. There's not much that you can do to stop it. Then you look inside. You realize there's a lot of that turmoil in you as well. In fact, a lot of your internal turmoil is going to implicate you in the external turmoil. As long as you want things that the world has to offer, you can get pulled in.

The Buddha's image is of fish in a puddle of water. The puddle is drying up, and the fish are fighting one another over that last gulp of water. Of course, they're all going to die when the water runs out. Now, some of them decide, "Okay, we want that last gulp and we're going to push the others out of the way." Years back I saw this. I was in a stream up in British Columbia. The salmon were coming in, and there were a lot of dead salmon in the stream. Other salmon were hopping over them to get further up the stream. And there were bears on either side of the stream, waiting to get the ones that were still alive. Seeing the fish

fighting over that last gulp of water really impressed the Buddha's image on my mind.

So this is one of the things you'll notice as the mind begins to settle down and you get more sensitive. You see all the pain and suffering out there and you see the pain and suffering in your own mind. You also see your own defilements—where your greed, aversion, and delusion come in. The important thing is not to get discouraged; not to get depressed.

This is where the other emotion that the Buddha recommends comes in, which is *pasada*, which is confidence—confidence that there's a way out, that there's a solution to the problem. Having this confidence allows you to put up with a lot of things that otherwise would blow you away, because an important part of this toughness of the mind is patience and endurance.

You want to develop an attitude of mind that can watch just about anything and not get blown away. This doesn't mean that you accept everything and embrace everything. You accept things that are there, but then you accept also that there are times when you have to make changes. Even if you can't succeed in making changes outside, you want to work at making changes inside. But before you can make changes in things, you have to be willing to see what's there. This is what this quality of toughness is for.

The more you have confidence and conviction that there is a way out and there's a solution, the more you'll be willing to open up to see—because if part of the mind feels there's no way out, then you just don't want to think about it and you start closing things off.

It's in this way that the toughness of the mind actually allows the tenderness to grow in a healthy direction.

So as you're off meditating on your own, you have to keep watch over both the tenderness and the toughness of the mind. And a lot of that toughness comes from being willing to be with the ups and downs of the mind.

We all like to see progress and we'd like to be able to measure it. Unfortunately, the progress in the mind is something very difficult to measure because the mind itself is measuring itself. It's like those cases of people with brain damage who think their brains are working perfectly fine. The reason they think that is because their brains are damaged. Their powers of judgment are impaired.

So you want to be able to allow the mind to be strengthened to be able to be with whatever's up and down, and to admit, "Okay, today's mind is not as good as yesterday's. I'm going to watch it. I'm not going to get upset. I'm not going to get discouraged. I'm not going to stop meditating—I'll just watch what's going on."

Remember Ajaan Mun’s instructions to Ajaan Maha Boowa, that whenever anything comes up in the mind you’re not sure about, just stay with the sense of just knowing it. Well, your ability to stay with that sense of just knowing, knowing, knowing and letting it pass, letting it pass, and watching it as it passes to see where it leads: This allows you to see things in the long term. But to do that requires the confidence: “There must be a solution.” You may not have found it yet, but it’s there and it’s within your power to find it. Everything may seem dark in all the directions—as they say, dark in all eight directions—but that doesn’t mean it always has to be that way. It’s dark just for the moment. That’s the way things are.

You think about the Buddha in his quest. There was no guarantee that he was going to find the deathless, but his determination was that if it was there, he was going to find it. He wasn’t going to let anything else get in the way—which meant, of course, not letting discouragement get in the way. His conviction that there had to be a way out was what enabled him to stand a lot of things that other people would have been blown away by.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this as well. He says when we’re working on the mind, it’s not the case that we can expect it to progress all the time. You want a mind that’s able to watch both regress and progress, and maintain its equilibrium. That, he says, is what’s really meant by a mind that’s in a state of what’s called *ekaggata*—the mind that is gathered into one, settled into one, and doesn’t allow the events of the world to break it off into two, or four, sixteen, 256, the way normal minds get shattered. Keep your mind one, in spite of what happens in the world. There’s going to be gain and there’s going to be loss. There’s going to be status and loss of status. There’ll be praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. Those are the ways of the world. That’s what the world has to offer. And those things go back and forth.

In order to live in this world and not get blown away by it, not get spun out of control, you have to be able to be still and just watch these things as they come, as they go. You begin to realize that even when bad things come, there may be a good lesson in there. You may be able to take advantage of them in ways that you wouldn’t have seen if you just let yourself get upset by the fact that things are going bad. The same way when things are going well: You have to be careful not to get heedless.

This means you have to be able to pull your mind back and have a sense of solid center that can watch the ups and downs of the mind. Or in Ajaan Fuang’s terms, seeing the mind as it puts on a red shirt today or a yellow shirt tomorrow or

a white shirt or a blue shirt or a green shirt or no shirt at all. See it go through its changes. After a while, you begin to understand.

Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. His first knowledge was the knowledge of his own past lives, and he said it was like seeing a stick thrown up in the air. Sometimes it landed on this end; sometimes it landed on the other end; sometimes it landed splat in the middle. It all seemed pretty random. It wasn't until he had enlarged his view and was able to see the process happening to all beings that he could see a pattern.

So to understand your mind, you have to be willing to sit with it in the same way that you have a child and you have to sit with it whether it's good or bad—the nights when it's crying, the nights when it's sleeping. Regardless, you still have to sit with the child. You have to be with it. You can't just abandon it the first time it cries and is totally unreasonable. You don't give up on it. After all, it is your child. It's the same with your mind. It is your mind, so learn how to sit with the ups and downs of the mind so that you can see the larger patterns over time. Your ability to develop this internal stability, this internal toughness, both allows you to see the larger pattern and nurtures the confidence that there is a larger pattern.

There's something here that you can understand. It's simply that you haven't figured it out yet. So have that confidence. That's what allows you to be strong; allows the mind to be tough in the face of all the meaningless turmoil in the world—because the stillness of the mind is going to make you more and more sensitive, and you want to be able to protect that sensitivity so you can apply it in the right place, i.e., to see where you're contributing to the stress in the mind.

This means both being sensitive to stress and being sensitive to what you're doing, because a lot of times there are actions in the mind that you don't sense that you're doing at all, that just seem to be an automatic part of the background—but they're not. You see them only when the mind gets very, very still and you can start asking questions. The questions will change as you go through the various stages of the meditation and the various ups and downs of the mind.

You begin to realize that things that seemed really good to begin with are not necessarily good all the way, like that lesson in rapture that we talked about today. For the mind to calm down, it first has to have a sense of energy. If you're already depleted and you're sitting down and you say, "Well, just get everything to calm down," you either tend to get sluggish or drowsy or zone out into what Ajaan Lee called "delusion concentration."

So a sense of energy flowing through the body is something you want to learn how to nurture. But there does come a time when there's too much of it. The flow of energy actually takes energy away from you. This is when you have to realize,

okay, you want to know how to bring it about and then let it do its work and then not maintain it any longer than you really have to. This requires sensitivity, so you know how much is long enough. At what point is the mind well nourished and at what point does the energy become too much?

It's like learning how to eat just enough food. Things that taste good are not necessarily things you want to be putting into your mouth all day long. You don't want to fill yourself up. You take just enough. Have a sense that this will serve the needs of the body and then you stop. That's the way it is with rapture. If the body needs it, you focus on the breath and there it is. Its intensity will change over time, depending on how much wear and tear the body and the mind have been through.

But there will come a point when you just have to let it fade away on its own so that the mind can get down to a sense of stillness that's even more nurturing, even more nourishing, more stable and more sensitive to what's going on, because with the flow of the energy, there are going to be things happening in the mind and the body that you're not going to see. So you want it to stop at some point so that you can see very clearly. It's like having a loud refrigerator in the house. If you really want to know if there are mice in the walls, the refrigerator has to turn off.

So it's the toughness of the mind that allows you to see things over the long term—and that means seeing patterns, which is what you're trying to do with the mind. You want to see patterns so that you can read the mind and know instinctively that this is what the mind needs. Until you can see those patterns, there's going to be a lot of groping in the dark. There'll be a lot of ups and downs you don't understand.

So have conviction that there is a pattern here. But to see it requires that you be very patient. That conviction strengthens your patience and makes the mind tougher. Then the mind has the luxury of being sensitive. It's not scared by the negative things it sees coming up inside, because if you can see them, then you'll also ultimately see that you don't have to do them. In other words, there are alternative ways of dealing with your mind—dealing with greed, aversion, and delusion that don't aggravate them; that don't fall in with them. But you're going to see those alternatives only if you're willing to look at the problem to begin with.

So it's a balancing act, and the funny thing about this balancing act is that left and right depend on each other. If you're not really sensitive, you can't be tough. In other words, if you're not tender you can't increase the toughness of the mind. And if you're not really tough, you can't increase the tenderness of the mind. The two qualities go together.

So keep in mind the fact that you have to have them both, and you want them balanced in the right way. That's how the mind will progress in a way that you can

rely on; how you can depend on yourself as a good judge for what's progress and what's not—and you have the patience to watch things over the long term so that when the mind hits plateaus, you're not discouraged. When it falls into a valley, you're not discouraged. You have the confidence that there is a way out. And there may be something good going on in the mind that you don't see. So be sensitive, and the way will show itself.