

The Good Fight

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Everywhere you look, you see people itching for a fight: by drawing lines, heating up the rhetoric. You wonder where it's all going to end. It makes you think of that image the Buddha talked about—his vision of the world before he left the palace. He said it's like seeing fish in a little tiny stream, struggling, fighting one another over what little water they had. The stream was dwindling. And of course, they're all going to die. Everywhere he looked, everything was laid claim to. If you wanted anything, you had to fight somebody for it. He was overcome with a sense of *samvega*, which can be translated as dismay or even a stronger term: terror. This is what the world is like. You fight and fight and then you die. Then you come back and you fight some more.

He looked for a way out and finally learned to look into his own heart. He saw that there was an arrow embedded there in his heart. When he removed the arrow, that was the end of the problem.

So what is this arrow that causes us to want to fight? It comes down to the things we identify with, and we identify a lot of with greed, aversion, and delusion. This is a type of thinking the Buddha calls *papañca*. You start with the idea, "Well, this is me. This is who I am. I'm the thinker." Then you decide, "These are the things I need." And you start laying claim. That, he says, is the beginning of conflict. So you have to turn around and look at these perceptions about who you are—and particularly, the greed, aversion, and delusion that stoke that sense of who you are, because they're the real problem.

I was reading a while back, someone saying that our problem is that we have the wrong map of reality. We think that there's a permanent self, so when things happen to us, we react as if there were a permanent self. But once you realize there is no permanent self, then there's no reaction and everybody's okay. But that's like saying, "Realizing that my food is impermanent and my stomach is impermanent, I'm not just going to eat anymore." As long as there's hunger, there's going to be eating. As long as there's greed, aversion, and delusion, there's going to be a sense of self that you've got to defend. Of course, there's a hunger. Now, the Buddha's not saying "Don't be hungry." Instead, he says to find a state of mind that doesn't require hunger. That's what we're looking for inside.

So the fight is not outside. The fight—or the good fight—is inside: trying to figure out why you're overcome by greed or aversion or delusion, what you can do to fight it off. The first line of the strategy is to be virtuous, to have principles, to

have character—in other words, to be the kind of person you can trust. You’re not going to harm anybody: You’re not going to harm yourself; you’re not going to harm other people. This principle gives you a sense of the importance of your actions. When you adopt that principle of harmlessness, you turn it inside and say, “How can I be truly harmless?” Because as you go through the world, you notice—even observing the precepts—that the fact that you’re alive, the fact that you’re a human being or a being of any kind, places a weight on the world. You need food. You need clothing. You need shelter. You need medicine. As human beings, we need to gather these things. So even if you eat a vegetarian diet and try to be as gentle as possible on the Earth, it’s still a burden you place on others. But there’s a potential in the mind where we don’t need any of these things.

The highest happiness, the best happiness, would be one where there’s no burden on anybody. So taking the precepts sensitizes you to the fact that you’ve got to do better than just the precepts. This is why we come to meditation, to figure out what it is in the mind that makes us want to lay claim to things that then we have to fight over.

The first line of business is to get the mind in a state where it sees what’s going on and it has a sense of being nourished as it looks at things and examines things. It’s like being a scientist. You want to understand monkeys so you get a huge supply of bananas to feed the monkeys. But if the scientists are hungry, not all the bananas are going to get to the monkeys. So you’ve got to feed the scientists well. In the same way, the mind has to be fed.

This is why try to create a sense of well-being through the concentration. We’re taming our hunger, sensitizing ourselves to a higher aspiration than just to go around feeding off things outside. You can feed the mind with pleasure. You can feed the mind with rapture. Simply sitting here breathing, you can get a sense of fullness, of well-being. If you’re very attentive to how the breathing works, you can figure out a way to breathe that feels really solid and nourishing. You’ve got a sense of well-being you can tap into at any time.

A lot of the hunger to take more than you really need from the Earth, or more than you really need from the people around you, that gets assuaged. It weakens. It’s milder. It’s still there, but it’s not as strong as it once was.

Then you can dig deeper into the mind, to see what’s going on—why the mind keeps creating trouble for itself. You can learn part of the answer by dealing with the distractions to your concentration. You begin to see: This is how the mind creates a thought. This is how it creates an identity. This is how it creates a world of becoming, as they say. In other words, a desire arises in the mind and then you create a world around that desire. The world is made up of the things that will

help you gain what you want and of things that get in the way of what you want. As for things that are irrelevant to the desire, those fall into the background of that particular world. But if a different desire comes up, you might create another world, and then things that were in the background of the previous world suddenly come into the foreground, depending on the new desire.

You can see this as it happens as you meditate. You're sitting here and all of a sudden you find yourself someplace else. Or you come back and then you're off someplace else again. You want to learn how to see those steps. How do you go to that other place?

The mind likes to hide these steps from itself, like people who put on a play. Between the scenes, they have the curtain go down so that the stagehands can move the scenery around. If the audience watched the scenery being moved around, it would destroy part of the illusion. So the curtain goes down; they change the scenery. Then the curtain goes up and you're in a new place.

So what is this act of the mind that drops the curtain? It's almost as if it's in collusion with itself to deceive itself. Can you see through those steps? You'll find that as you make up your mind to avoid any distraction from the meditation, you get more and more sensitive to the steps—"Oh, this is how the mind creates this new world." If you see that it's going to be an unskillful world, you can nip it in the bud. That skill is useful in all areas of life.

When you're sick and find the mind dwelling on things that make you miserable, you can tell yourself, "I don't need to go to those thoughts. No matter how true they may be, they're not useful right now. They're not beneficial. This is not the time and place for them." And you have a better place to go. You can work on figuring out which parts of the body can be made comfortable so that you can gain some nourishment there. Then watch out for the mind's tendency to go off and think in ways that are going to be harmful.

The other way you learn about the process of becoming is through watching the state of concentration itself. You can do this in two ways. One, just being in a state of concentration and then pulling back a little bit from it, to notice: "What's going on, how do I keep this concentration going?" You want to do this only after you're well settled in the concentration and it becomes easy for you to stay. If you do it too early, you tend to destroy it before it's gotten there solidly enough. But it is possible once the mind really is well implanted in its object that it can pull back a little bit and then notice, "What's going on here? How did the mind create this world and this identity in this world?" Because when you're creating the worlds, it's not just the world. There's also a sense of identity. There's who you are in that world related to that particular desire. You can see this process.

Some worlds are actually worth creating. Others are not. So you learn to get very discerning. You develop a good sense of judgment. As you fight off the worlds that are not conducive to the path and maintain the worlds that are, you get a better and better sense of how the mind is creating these desires and the worlds that go around them and the identities that go around them. You begin to realize: Even these states of concentration are fabricated. It's one of the reasons you don't want to do this type of analysis too early, because early on in the process they're obviously fabricated. But as you get more and more used to them, they become more and more part of the way the mind is. And you tend to forget what went into creating the mind that way.

You feel that you've come down to a deeper level of reality inside the mind, which you have, but you have to see that this, too, is fabricated. And, as I said, one way of doing this is noticing the mind as it's in a state of concentration. The other is that, as it moves from one state of concentration to another, you begin to realize that you drop certain things. There are fewer and fewer elements that go into each of the progressively higher stages of concentration. You can see them fall away as you go from a lower level of concentration to a higher one. You see that all this is part of that construction, part of that fabrication.

When you begin to see that this, too, is not as solid or as reliable as you thought it was, that's when you look for something better. It's in looking for the something better that you find that there is a state in the mind that does not need to be fed. It's a dimension. And that's where all the conflict ends.

So we realize that the good fight is not outside. The good fight is inside, overcoming your hungers: the greed, the aversion, and the delusion that create the identities in the worlds in which you have to struggle with others or struggle with yourself. So, at the very least, even though other people may be fighting, you don't have to fight with them. And you've also got something they can't touch—in other words, something that their fight cannot destroy.

One of our problems with living in this world is that some idiot decides to declare war, and suddenly we all get implicated. We're all put into danger—as long as we're identifying with things other people can touch, other people can harm. The only real safety lies in finding something inside that nobody else can touch.

That's the good part of this: It offers true safety. It's not just a matter of saying, "I'm going to be passive and just kind of give in. Let other people trample all over me and I'll find peace that way." That's not the peace that comes with victory. Victory lies in going inside and seeing: How did you place yourself in this position of danger to begin with? How can you get yourself out? You realize that you got

in there because of your own greed, aversion, and delusion. Those are the things you've got to fight. But you fight using skill, and you convert the mind into a mind that doesn't want the greed, aversion, and delusion anymore. It's got a higher hunger and you've found something to satisfy that hunger. That's how you come out winning.