

We All Start with an Impure Heart

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When I first went to see Ajaan Fuang, it didn't take me long to pick up on the fact that he had some psychic powers. The ability to read minds was primary among them. And he would tell stories about Ajaan Lee's powers. This kept up for a couple days, and then he probably realized that I was getting too interested in that aspect of the practice. So one night he said, "You know, all these different powers that come with meditation — they're just games. What the practice is really about is purifying the heart."

That statement stuck with me for a long time. Because the basic assumption here is that the Buddha's not asking you to come with pure motives, or that your heart already be pure. The assumption is that there's a lot of impurity in there, and he wants to teach you anyhow. He taught the end of suffering for all beings, and he didn't ask them ahead of time, "Is your motive for coming here pure?" Or, "The suffering that you're suffering from, is it something that you deserved?"

He could have said that, based on your passed kamma, you deserve to suffer, so he could just leave you there. But he never said that. In fact, the question of people deserving to suffer or not deserving to suffer, or of people deserving to learn the path or not, never came up.

The basic issue was, was there some desire someplace in your heart that wanted to be done with the suffering that you were creating for yourself? In the beginning, of course, that desire may not even be dominant; you may have other, conflicting desires, but the Buddha would take you on as a student anyhow. All he asked was, one, that you be observant; and two, that you be truthful. Nothing about being pure from the beginning.

Which means that all of us come here with mixed motives, and that's to be expected. You're just asked to be truthful about observing: When you act on a particular motive, what are the results? And what are you actually doing? The Buddha wants you to look at that.

This is why the primary topic of meditation is the breath. You're right here where the mind and the body meet. The fact that the mind can make the body move has to go through the breath. The fact that things happening in the body can get into the mind has to go through the breath. So you're right at the crossroads, looking at your body, looking at your mind, and to see what's going on. When an intention comes up in the present moment, being with the breath is a really good place to be, to watch it. And you try to develop a sense of well-being,

of belonging here in the present moment, because you're going to see some things coming up in the mind that you're not proud of, but that's to be expected. Having a sense of ease and belonging with the breath helps keep you on an even keel.

They make a big deal about acceptance in some schools of Buddhism, and sometimes they make way too much of it. But there is one thing you have to accept: When something's coming up in the mind, you have to accept the fact that it's there. Then the next question is, what do you do with it?

That's where the Buddha comes in to help. If you really want to put an end to suffering, he gives you instructions on how to deal with lust, anger, spite, jealousy—all the things in the mind that we're not necessarily proud of, but part of the mind likes, is willing to run with, and doesn't want to let go. Sometimes you see it coming, and sometimes it sabotages your meditation.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this. He says that at the beginning of his practice he'd get the mind quiet, and then there was almost a rhythm or a timetable where he could expect that things would start falling apart. His desire to practice, the results of the practice would begin to spiral downward, hit rock bottom, and then he'd have to start all over again. So even he had to go through periods like that.

His solution was simply to sit down and practice and say, "I don't care what the results are, I'm going to do the practice. His practice was *buddho*, but you could do the same with the breath. And the part of the mind that says, "Your meditation is off. You'd be better off doing something else," you just don't listen to that. You try to nurture that desire deep inside that says, "I want to stop suffering." And you protect that like a little tiny flame.

As the Buddha said, simply the desire to want to be skillful is, in and of itself, skillful. The more you can act on it, the more it becomes a tendency of the mind. In his terms, it "bends" the mind in the right direction. The intentions that you act on are the ones that bend the mind. So even though it may be a struggle, when the skillful desire has the last word, that's what's going to bend the mind in a skillful direction.

You may have the sense that it's like turning a large ship. You know, ships can't just turn around on a dime. They have to make a huge circle before they can get back in the other direction, but every little bit helps. And of course there will be an unskillful voice in the mind that says, "These little efforts don't amount to anything and they're pretty pitiful, so you might as well give up." You learn not to listen to that. You remind yourself of the Buddha's statement: Even the desire to

be skillful is skillful in and of itself, so keep that desire going. Where you're really done-in, is when you have no desire to be skillful at all.

So at the very least, nurture that desire: "I want to be skillful. I want to act in ways that are not harmful." And so even when you're acting in ways that are not harmful, and the mind has mixed motives, or mixed intentions, part of it is objecting, that's perfectly fine — it's part of the practice, part of the path.

There was a German poet and philosopher, Schiller, who once made a distinction between acts done with grace and acts done with dignity. Grace is when you feel inclined to do something skillful, and there doesn't seem to be anything in the mind getting in the way, so it becomes very easy to do what's skillful. As for acts done with dignity, those are the ones where part of the mind wants to do something skillful, and part of the mind wants to do something unskillful, and there's a battle. But the skillful side finally wins out.

So this is a practice that we do beginning with dignity, and then eventually it evolves to grace, where the mind really is pure. But there will be setbacks along the way. They're to be expected. In cases like that, you've got to learn how to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and just get back on the path. And don't listen to the discouraging voices inside. Especially the ones that say, "Hey, your meditation used to be a lot better, and now it's horrible. See what happens to good meditation? It just turns into nothing, so you might as well not even try."

But you know what the real problem was. You weren't nurturing it consistently enough. So you start all over again. You say, "This time I'm going to nurture it." It's like having planted a lot of trees that you forgot to water. It doesn't mean that when you plant the next tree you're going to forget to water it. This time around, you're going to water it. A little bit of water here, a little bit of water there, and the tree will grow. And all those other little dead trees you've seen in the past, you don't have to think about them, except as a warning: You've got to keep watering your tree.

Keep nurturing that little desire: "I want to be skillful; I want to stop causing myself unnecessary suffering." This is called heedfulness: realizing that your actions really do matter, and they're going to make the difference between whether you suffer or not.

This heedfulness is based on conviction. There are a lot of voices out there saying that your actions don't matter, that you don't have any free choice anyhow. There are the people who will even believe that their DNA forces them to do things, or that the laws of physics force them to do things, that they have no freedom.

Some people like that thought, because they think it lets them off the hook, but you see where it leads: simply to more suffering. The Buddha says there's a way out. It starts with the assumption that your actions do make a difference. And the desire to do something skillful is skillful in and of itself. As the Buddha said, "All things are rooted in desire." That's the desire you want to foster, so that it does grow. You keep watering it bit, by bit, by bit, until it begins to take hold and forms the root for even more skillful things.

Even then, you have to protect it. This principle holds all the way through the path. Think about those noble disciples on the lower levels: Stream-enterers still have lust; non-returners still have conceit. It's only when you get to be an arahant that your mind is totally pure. So you'll be dealing with a mind of mixed pure and impure intentions all the way along. The question is which intentions are you going to act on?

Starting with stream-entry, the intention always is to act on the skillful intention. Prior to that time, there's still going to be part of the mind that's going to have some doubts: Did the Buddha really know what he was talking about? Is this just an Indian religion, or just for Asians? Is it a bunch of delusions? There will be that voice in the mind, and you've got to learn how to live with it, but not let it take over.

Even when you're confident that that voice will never come back, you've got to be careful, but that's what heedfulness is for: so that you will take care, in the midst of all the other intentions that are sloshing around in the mind. Make sure there is at least that little voice saying, "I want to be skillful; I want to act in a skillful way."

That desire, when you nurture it, is what will lead to purity: the purity of heart where your happiness is totally skillful and doesn't need to be nurtured anymore. There does come a point where the mind is totally pure. There are no germs that would make it impure again.

So this is not an endless struggle. This is what the Buddha and the great noble disciples have already guaranteed for us all along. It's simply for us to decide that we're going to heed their message. But it's a message that they've been giving us, out of compassion, for a long time.

And they give it for everybody. One of the things I noticed when I went to Thailand and started practicing the forest tradition was that I was meeting a lot of people who had come to the practice after having lived on the very edge of the law, or outside the edge of the law. More people of that sort than I'd ever met ever before. Which made me realize: This is a practice for everybody. You know

the story of Angulimala. He'd killed all those people, and yet he could still become an arahant.

It requires determination, and where does determination come from? Not simply from force of will, although that does play an important role. It also comes from the simple realization: "Okay, I've been suffering and I really can't blame anybody else, but here's some help—the Buddha's offering a helping hand. And it's up to me to take it." You realize that he's offering that hand regardless of what your past kamma has been, or how mixed your motives are for taking his help. But if you're observant and truthful, he's got a path that allows you to sort things out inside, so that even an impure mind can find purity. And with that thought, even your impure mind can take heart.