

Up for the Challenge

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When the Buddha teaches wisdom or discernment, he always talks about things that are in pairs. For instance, there's one teaching where he says a sign of wisdom is when you know which duties fall to you and which ones don't. It means there's a distinction. There are some things you've got to work on, some things you've got to do; and other things you have to put aside. You have to accept them for what they are and leave them alone because they're not really your duty.

One of Ajaan Lee's most famous Dhamma talks is one he gave to one of his students as she was dying. He talked about the distinction between strength of body and strength of mind, that even though we have to try to maintain the body as best we can, take good care of it so we can get the best use out of it, still there comes a point where you have to let it go. It's going to have to deteriorate. Even as you're taking good care of it, you find that it does things without asking your permission, without warning you, and you have to learn to accept that there are new limitations.

But strength of mind doesn't have to go that way. Strength of mind is something you can develop even up to your last breath. Strength of conviction, strength of your persistence, strength of mindfulness, concentration, discernment: These are things you can keep working on. And you're going to need them, too. Sometimes we like to think that as life reaches its end, things get easier. After all, we're not as strong as we were, it's time to rest. But actually some of our most difficult decisions are made, we have to face some of the biggest challenges, at that time.

I've been reading some biographies of famous people in French history as a way of working on my French. I'm struck time and again by how their lives don't get easier as they reach their end. They actually get a lot harder, both inside and out. You'd think that people would let up. They'd say, "Oh, so-and-so is an old man, an old woman now, let them be." But no, that's when people come in for the attack. And that's outside. Inside it's the same sort of thing. As things start winding down and we realize that we're going to have to leave a lot of things in this life, the mind reacts. There can be very strong greed, very strong aversion, a very strong sense of helplessness and weakness. And that's something we can't give into. This is one of the reasons why we meditate, to develop strengths of mind so that whatever choices we have to make, we'll make well.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha's counseling one of his students on how to give advice to someone who's dying. As he said, the first thing you've got to watch out for is worries: things you're concerned about, worried about, that someone's not going to handle this, someone's not going to handle that. You tell the person, "Look, you're dying. This is not the time to be worried about that. Focus on what your real duty is right now, which is looking after the state of your mind."

If the person who's dying is concerned about leaving the sensual pleasures of the human life, you say, "Don't worry about that. Think about the better pleasures in the higher levels, the deva realms." And once the person gets his mind set on the deva realms, then you say, "Okay, the Brahma realms even higher, based on infinite goodwill, infinite compassion, infinite empathetic joy, infinite equanimity. Set your mind on them."

Here you are: The body's falling apart, and you're supposed to set your mind on things like this.

Then beyond that, if the person can get his mind focused on the Brahma realms, then the Buddha says, "Well, remind him that even in the Brahma realms there's a sense of self-identity. You're identifying with things, which means that there will be suffering, but it's possible to let that go."

This is a big challenge, letting go of this tendency we have in the mind to want to identify with something. We hope for happiness and think one of the ways of finding happiness is to identify what will be happy and what we have in our control that we can manipulate so that we can bring that happiness about. We identify with those things. And as the Buddha said, in order to find true happiness, in order to get totally beyond suffering, we eventually have to let go of those identities, too.

Here again, the body's falling apart and you're asked to do something really challenging. Otherwise, the mind just goes in line with whatever flow of whatever comes up. The untrained mind doesn't know what to do at a time like that. It just thrashes around, grabs at this, grabs at that. That's not what you want, because all too often when we thrash around and grab at things, we grab onto whatever's nearby. They have a phrase in Thai, *taam yathakam*, which means going in line with your old kamma. And the phrase usually describes things going downhill.

So what we need to do is develop strengths in mind, and realize that there will be choices that have to be made. We'll have to make distinctions between what's a wise choice and what's a foolish choice, a skillful choice or an unskillful choice. So on the one hand, you have to be prepared in terms of your attitude, that there will be times when you have to make difficult choices and you can't depend on the

strength of the body at that point because the body's falling apart. You'll have to depend on the strength of your mind.

Then, once you've got the right attitude, you have to work on the skills that will be needed. You start with the skill of conviction: being convinced that your choices really will make a difference. If your attitude is, "Well, it doesn't really matter, I'll just go with whatever," then it's hard to gather the strength you need in order to make what might be a difficult choice. So first you've got to be convinced that your actions do make a difference, and then you have to develop the perception that you've got to make an effort. You hold that in mind, and you have to keep these things in mind, even though things are rumbling around in the body. This is why we have to strengthen mindfulness, to keep these things in mind even when—especially when—the choices are difficult and the body is acting up.

It's like being in a ship going down. You have to remember: What did you learn about getting into the lifeboats? What did you learn about how to behave when things like that are happening? Then you stir that up inside you, and you stay focused on what has to be done: That's what concentration is for. Then you try to use your discernment as best you can as to what would be the wise course to take when things come up that are not in the instruction manual. Say, when the ship goes down, it goes down at a different angle than you thought it would. You thought you could get out the right side, but no, the right side is sinking, so you've got to go out the left side. Learn how to look at the situation and make your choices.

These are the strengths you'll need, and these are the strengths we develop as we meditate. The whole reason why we meditate is to get the mind under our control, so that when we make a good choice, we can stick with it. If we make a foolish choice, we can realize, okay, we've got to change that.

This is why meditation is proactive. There's that instruction the Buddha gives to Rahula before he teaches him breath meditation, "Make your mind like earth"—telling him basically to be nonreactive in the same way that the earth doesn't react when you pour garbage on it. But he's not saying to stop there. The amount of acceptance we need is simply the amount that admits that whatever is here is here, so you can do something skillful with it. Because the Buddha then goes on and teaches Rahula breath meditation, and his steps in breath meditation are proactive: Try to breathe in a way where you're aware of the whole body and notice the effect that the breath has on the body. Breathe in a way that feels refreshing, feels pleasant, and then allow those feelings of pleasure and refreshment to settle down. Allow the breath to settle down.

There's some allowing here but there's also some directing. You don't just sit with whatever comes up. You ask yourself, "What's going on right now? What needs to be brought into balance?" If the mind's level of energy is low, what can you do to bring the level of energy up? If it's feeling scattered and wired, distracted, what can you do to make it steadier as you breathe in, as you breathe out? How can you calm the mind down? How can you release the mind from things that are burdening it?

When you think about it, the Buddha's instructions for breath meditation are basically questions, focusing your attention on possibilities to look for as to what can be done. All too often, he doesn't give very precise instructions. This is why we look, say, into the teachings of the forest ajaans for more detail. Ajaan Lee, for instances, gives very precise instructions on how to develop a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness, and then how to let it spread through the body. But even his instructions raise questions: How do you do that? How do you do this? How do you spread a sense of pleasure without forcing it and turning it into not-pleasure? If you run into a problem, what do you do?

This is where you have to develop your own discernment. As you follow the instructions and find that they can take you only so far, you have to look at what you've done and learn how to choose wisely between what needs to be changed, what needs to be left alone. In other words, the instructions are not foolproof. After all, if you had foolproof instructions, you could complete them and still be a fool. The Buddha's giving you the kind of instructions that make you more discerning, wiser. He points out areas that are worth exploring, gives you some tips, but the particulars of what you're going to find as you explore, and your ingenuity in figuring out how to explore: That will depend on you.

So this is where you have to put your effort in, and this is how concentration develops the strength of your effort, so that when things are not going well in the body as you're meditating, you don't get discouraged, you don't feel defeated. You tell yourself, "Here's a challenge." If you take the meditation as a challenge, you're developing the right attitude.

Remember what the Buddha said about the qualities he developed that he needed for his awakening. He had to be heedful, he had to be ardent, he had to be resolute. "Resolute" is that quality of mind where you're up for a challenge. "Heedful" is remembering that your actions do make a difference. And "ardent" means that you try to do the best you can. Then the resolution comes in again: that you're going to stick with your ardency, stick with it regardless.

So life is not just a matter of just accepting things as they are and letting them flow, which is why meditation is not a matter of just accepting things as they are

and letting them flow. You have to be more proactive. As the Buddha said, you have to learn how to direct yourself well, give yourself a goal. In this case, the goal is to live well, and when you have to die you want to die well. Die without creating suffering for yourself. Die in such a way that if your practice isn't yet complete, you'll be able to die and go to a place where you can make further progress on your path.

It'll be challenging, but you've learned from the meditation to be up for challenges. You've learn not to get discouraged; you remember the example of all the great noble ones who've gone before us. They've been able to solve these problems. And as the Buddha said, you want to have the attitude that "They can do it, I can too." And let that thought give you strength—and let the practice of your meditation make that thought a reality and not just a hope.