

Control

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Everything, the Buddha said, is rooted in desire. The problem is that we follow some desires and we get the opposite of what we want. A lot of life is learning which desires we can follow, which ones we can't; where we can exert some control, and where we can't.

These lessons apply to the practice as well. In his second discourse, the Buddha pointed out how the five aggregates are not under your control. But if they were totally outside of your control, one, you probably wouldn't identify with them. And two, you wouldn't have any raw materials from which to make a path.

So what we are trying to do here is to find the limits of control, and what skillful control is—and to see how we can control the aggregates to turn them into a path to get what we really desire, which is a happiness we can trust, a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that doesn't let us down, a happiness that's totally satisfactory. It's always good that we keep that possibility in mind, because from that perspective we can turn around and look at the ways of the world and see that even the best situations out there are really lacking.

When the Buddha wants to show how little control people have over their lives, he talks about kings, or the Canon will describe the issues of kings. There's the case of King Pasenadi. He wants his favorite queen to love him more than she loves herself, but no, she won't. Here he is, he's powerful, he has the power of life and death, but there are a lot of things he can't get out of other people. There's one point where he complains to the Buddha: He's in a meeting with his ministers, and they'll interrupt him and argue with him, even though he has the power to have them executed. Yet he can't even get them to stop talking so that he can finish his sentences. That's control over the other people.

Then there's control over your body. You know the case of King Koravya as he complains to Ven. Ratthapala. He's now 80 years old. There are times when he wants to put his foot one place and it goes someplace else. He has a disease and he can't order other people to share out the pain of the disease so that he can feel less pain. He has to feel all the pain of the disease himself.

It would be easy to talk about the disappointments and lack of control of life when you're talking about people who are poor and powerless, but the really good lessons come from people who are powerful. You see how there are limitations even for absolute monarchs. You read in history. Napoleon was probably the most powerful person in Europe, and yet even he couldn't get his ministers to do what he wanted them to do.

And we all end up old, sick, and dying. So there are limits to control. You turn and look at your mind. You get up in the morning, you plan to do x , and yet you find yourself later during anti- x , or non- x .

Fortunately, the mind doesn't have to be that way. You can train it. We're trying to take advantage of that fact. As the body starts disobeying us, and we find that things outside are not going the way we want them to, our sole recourse is to the mind. And it's fortunate that we can train it.

One of the very basic lessons Ajaan Lee gives is that when you're sitting down to meditate and there's pain in some part of the body, you don't focus on the pain. There will be parts of the mind where the alarm bells are going off, the red lights are flashing, alerting you to the pain, but you have to ignore them. You have to find a spot where it's relatively comfortable to stay.

As for any thoughts that go off toward the pain, you have to say, "Nope, I'm going to direct my thoughts to the breath. I'm going to direct my thoughts to making the breath comfortable. And I'll evaluate the breath and evaluate the success of my efforts." Because the breath is something that responds to your intentions.

It does have its limitations. Even Ajaan Fuang, who was an expert in breath matters, had what they called breath diseases at times. He'd get sharp shooting pains throughout his body. So there are limitations to what you can do with the breath, but before you give up, when you know there are limitations, you take advantage of what you can change. It's like being adrift at sea. You may find some logs that are floating in the water. You know that eventually they may start to sink, but you hold on to them while they're floating. Maybe they'll get you to someplace that's safe, or to another log, and you can hold on to that.

This is the nature of the path. It's a little bit rickety, a little bit unstable. After all, even concentration is something fabricated. It, too, will have its subtle ups and downs. But it's good enough to get you across, good enough to get you to safety. So you work with form, the form of the body, in other words the breath. Learn how to relate to the form of your body so that you can have a good place to stay. Try to give rise to feelings of ease. Even though there may be pains in one part of the body, they don't take over the whole body. If the whole body were in pain, you'd die. So there's got to be someplace where you can stay, where it's relatively easy to stay, pleasant to stay.

And then your perceptions: You ignore the flashing red lights. Stay with the perceptions of the breath as something that can permeate everything, that can flow anywhere you want. And use your directed thought and evaluation to improve things. The way the breath is going, the way the mind is relating to the

breath, you can make these adjustments. Then you can direct your thoughts to where there is still stress.

They talk about the different levels of jhana you can get into. There's a moment when you're going from one level to the next, when you step out a little bit and you're surveying: What's still there that's causing an unnecessary burden on the mind? It's a little bit of directed thought and evaluation that allows you to see what's going on that's unnecessary: "What stress is unnecessary here? And what am I doing to cause that stress?" If you can see the cause, and it will come together with slight rises and falling away of the level of stress: When it rises, what did you change? When it falls away, what changed? Look there for the cause. Then there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

This is how you take the aggregates and make a path out of them.

The path may be makeshift: Remember the Buddha's image of the raft. You don't wait for a professional carpenter to come and make the raft for you. You put it together out of the twigs and branches and leaves you can find: i.e., these aggregates. Then you hold on. Don't get discouraged, because this is your way across. If you stay on this side, you live in this world where we have our desires that turn on us, where the more we try to exert control, the more things rebel. It's not a good place to stay. Even if you were a king, you'd run up against limitations. And the limitations can be pretty severe. But there is a path across, there is a way across to true safety.

The Buddha talks of the path is being like a raft, as being like a vehicle that takes you someplace better than this. But to master the path requires that you figure out what here you can control, and what you can't, and how to control what you can in a skillful way. The aggregates can be brought to some extent under your control. But if you force them in the wrong way, it's like forcing people in the wrong way. The more you try to control them, the more they rebel.

Fortunately, we have the lessons that the Buddha set out and the ajans have passed down. You do have your breath. You can lay claim to at least some part of your body, some part of your mind. Then as you get more sensitive to what you're doing, you find that you do have enough control to make your way across.