

In Times of Danger and Fear

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A king once came to see the Buddha in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asked him, “What have you been up to?” The king was remarkably frank. He said “the typical things of people obsessed with power.” It’s hard to imagine politicians admitting that today.

The Buddha asked him, “Suppose a reliable person came from the east and said there was a huge mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path. And suppose another person came from the south, a reliable person, with the same report—a huge mountain moving in from the south, crushing all living beings in its path—and then a person from the west with the same news and another person from the north: altogether, four mountains moving in. In the face of all this destruction of life, realizing how hard it is to find a human life, what would you do?”

The king said, “Well, what else could I do, but calm my mind and practice the Dhamma?” So the Buddha went on to inform him, “I tell you. Aging, illness, and death are moving in, crushing all living beings in their path. What are you going to do?” And the king said, “Well, what else can I do, but calm my mind and practice the Dhamma?”

This is a good reflection to keep in mind in times of danger, in times of fear, to remind ourselves we’re always living in danger. It’s simply that we tend to get complacent. Then when danger comes in a blatant form, we tend to lose our wits. We don’t think straight. We think that because things are dangerous we have to take special measures that are really not reasonable. Reason lies in realizing that dangers are around us all the time, and that we have to behave well in spite of the dangers. Or we might say we have to behave well, practice the Dhamma *because* of the dangers.

If we don’t practice the Dhamma, we’re going to suffer. If we do practice, we won’t suffer—no matter how bad the situation is outside or how bad the situation is inside our bodies—because we’ve made the situation in our minds skillful. This is the message of the Buddha’s teachings: For all the trouble there is in the world outside, the real trouble that weighs down the mind comes from within.

When the Buddha analyzes suffering, he gives a long list of things that are familiar to all of us: aging, illness, death, separation from things we love, having to live with things we don’t like, and not getting what we want. But then he says the

common denominator in all these forms of suffering is something that's less obvious: the five clinging-aggregates.

What are the aggregates? They're activities, activities of the body and of the mind. They're things we're doing, habits we've developed, and as with most habits, we tend to cling to these things without really knowing what we're doing. The Buddha's solution is to observe carefully what you're doing so that you don't act in ways that create unnecessary suffering for yourself or for others.

So instead of acting with ignorance, we act with knowledge. They're the same actions, but when they're done with knowledge, they're done more skillfully. The desires and the intentions that are done with ignorance lead to suffering. But when they're done with knowledge, they can lead to the end of suffering. Of course, the intentions will change when you're aware of what you're doing. Your desires will change when you're aware of what you're doing.

This is why we meditate, to see the mind in action. The Buddha gives us a task: Try to keep the mind with one object. Relate to that object in a way that's comfortable. For instance, you can focus on the breath. The breath can come in and out on its own without your paying attention, but now you're going to pay attention to it. And you'll notice as soon as you pay attention to the breath, it's going to change.

So you try to notice what kind of breathing would be best. Change it in that direction. This is where you experiment. This is how you begin to learn about the mind. What kind of perceptions do you have of the breath? What kind of beliefs do you have about the breath? What sensations do you associate with the breath? Are those sensations necessary? Sometimes there are painful, tense sensations that go with your breathing, but they don't have to be there. Yet you allow them to be there because, again, you're ignorant. You don't know what you're doing. You're not paying attention.

Now that you're paying attention, though, try to breathe in a way that feels good. You don't just sit there watching whatever comes up. As the Buddha said, the task of mindfulness, when you put mindfulness in charge, is to give rise to skillful states, get rid of unskillful states, and if skillful states are there, you try to maintain them. Let them grow. And how are you going to do that? Well, you find that the way you breathe has an impact. The way you talk to yourself has an impact. The perceptions you hold in mind and the feelings you focus on all have an impact on how you relate to the breath and whether the mind can become calm, have a sense of well-being, happy to be with the breath.

In other words, as you focus on getting comfortable with the breath, you're going to begin to notice the mind as well—what the mind is doing. This is the

whole point of the meditation. In the beginning, though, give 90 percent of your attention to the breath, and let the other 10 percent deal with feelings and mind states because you want to give the mind a sense of well-being, a sense of belonging and being anchored in the breath. As you get more and more skillful at this, more and more adept, you become more sensitive to what the mind is doing.

It's like learning how to play a musical instrument. In the beginning, your main concern is just getting the notes right. But as you get more familiar with the notes, you start listening to yourself. And you notice where you're playing well and where you're not playing well. You notice your phrasing. You notice the notes that you emphasize. In other words, you become more sensitive to what you're doing—less focused on the notes, more focused on playing them well. And in being focused on playing them well, you begin to notice a lot about the mind as it engages with the music.

Well, it's the same with the meditation. You learn more about your mind as you get better and better at calming it down. The Buddha's giving you a task to be calm with the breath, to be centered with the breath. Allow the breath to fill the whole body. Allow a sense of ease with the breathing to fill the whole body. As you're doing this task, the burdens of the mind grow less. It can watch itself more and see itself more clearly. This is an important principle in the practice. It's learning how to reflect on your own actions and learning how to reflect on the actions of the mind.

Someone once wrote a letter to Ajaan Fuang, a person in Singapore who was just getting interested in Ajaan Lee's teachings. He said he was practicing meditation all through the day, trying to see everything as being inconstant, stressful, and not-self. He watched TV, trying to see things as inconstant, stressful and not-self. He engaged in his work the same way. Ajaan Fuang told me to write back to the guy and say, "Don't focus on things outside. Focus on what's inconstant, stressful, and not-self in your own mind." He said the problem isn't out there; the problem is in here, in the part of the mind that criticize things outside for being inconstant and unreliable. Your own mind is inconstant and unreliable. That's the big problem.

So the Buddha is giving us tools. He assigns the task to get the mind still. And he gives us the tools of insight to look at our own actions to see what we're doing and where we're causing harm, where we're causing unnecessary stress and suffering, and how we can change what we're doing. No matter how long you've held to a particular habit, when you really see that it's causing unnecessary harm, and it's *not necessary*—that's the important part that it's not necessary, so you

don't have to do it—that's when you let go. You've brought awareness to what you're doing.

These two things, acting in ignorance and acting with awareness, are worlds apart. So bring awareness to the mind, bring awareness to the breath, and you create a refuge inside so that even though you know the mountains are moving in, they don't have to crush the goodness in the mind. They don't have to crush the happiness you can find as you get to know the actions of your mind really well.