

You Are Not Powerless

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There's a scene in *Slaughterhouse Five* where Kurt Vonnegut contrasts the British prisoner of war camp in Dresden with the American prisoner of war camp. In the American prisoner of war camp, the soldiers are just sitting around, each in his own world, miserable. They have no group activities. Everyone just sits there and mopes, depressed, and a couple of them are plotting revenge—not against the Germans, but against other prisoners in the camp. Whereas in the British prison of war camp, they have activities. They have a daily schedule. The group works together. They clean up the place. Everybody's clean-shaven; everybody's bathed. They put on plays, even have a little newspaper if I remember correctly.

In other words, they make the best of a bad situation. As a result, they don't feel powerless. And as the plot of the novel shows, when people are left feeling powerless, they either go into depression, or as I said, they plot revenge. The death of the main character in the novel comes from one of his other fellow prisoners who, after being released, tracks him down and kills him.

So there's a good object lesson at a time like this, when—with the virus striking anybody, and the situation in the world seems to be like a slow-motion train wreck—it's very easy to feel powerless, to feel there's nothing you can do. This is why this is an especially good time to think about the Buddha's teachings, to take them to heart, because they're all about the amount of power you *do* have.

Now, sometimes we hear the opposite. Some teachers tell you about how everything is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, beyond your power to make permanent. And although it's true that you can't make a fabrication permanent, you *can* make fabrications that lead to well-being in this life, in future lifetimes, and the ultimate well-being, which is nibbana.

In fact, the teachings are all about the powers we can develop. Look at the Buddha's life. He was told again and again that his desire for a deathless happiness was unrealistic, that it would be a waste of time, a waste of his youth, his health, and his life. But as he saw that those things—youth, health, and life—were all going to be wasted away anyhow. It would be much better to devote them to the quest of something that did not grow old, did not sicken, did not die. And he found it. That's a huge power right there: A human being can do this. That's what we take as our inspiration. And the Buddha shared some of his powers with us.

He lists, at one point, the ten powers of a Tathagata, someone who has truly gone to the other side. And three of them he shares: knowledge of actions—which

kind of actions lead to good results, which kind of actions lead to middling results, which kinds of actions lead to bad results; knowledge of the worlds that there are; and knowledge of how you can get to the different worlds. In other words, he said, “This, these are the possibilities of happiness. And these are the things you can do to find that happiness.” It’s all laid out. We can borrow that. It’s not our full possession until we’ve attained our first taste of awakening and can see that the Buddha was right. In the meantime, though, we can borrow his knowledge, and it gives us a sense of our power: that options are open to us, meaningful options. You can see this by comparing funeral rights in different religions.

I remember the funerals of my childhood. They were all pretty hopeless affairs, with a very strong sense of powerlessness. God was supposed to be loving, and yet he’d taken our loved ones away, sometimes in very miserable ways, and we had to accept that. We had no idea where they were going, especially in the versions of Christianity that teach predestination. You have no power at all to have an effect on where you’re going for eternity, and there’s nothing the people who are remaining can do to help. They simply have to accept. Whereas in Buddhist funerals, even though there is some sadness, there’s a very strong sense that you know what you can do: You do meritorious things and dedicate the merit to the deceased. You’re confident that it’ll be of help. You may not know one hundred percent, but you have a strong sense of confidence. Reliable people, the kind of people who can know these kinds of things, say that, yes, you can help people who’ve passed on.

Then you look at your own life. You realize that soon it’s going to be your turn and you’ve got to be prepared. And you *can* prepare. Ajaan Lee compares it to knowing that you’re going to have to be suddenly sent to a foreign country. So you make your preparations: You change your money into the currency of that country, you learn their language, and you get your passport.

In his description, changing your currency means being generous. As the Buddha said, the things you give away are the things that are going to be saved. It’s like being in a burning house. The things you try to keep in the burning house will get burned. But if you take them out of the burning house, they get saved. Giving things away gets them out of the burning house, and the generosity you develop will go with you into future lifetimes.

Getting your passport is like practicing the precepts, developing virtue. And then learning the language of where you’re going means learning how to meditate.

But you don’t practice just to shape a future lifetime. The Buddha also teaches us how we can shape a better lifetime for ourselves right here, right now. For instance, he describes the four things that lead to happiness in the here-and-how.

The first is being industrious. You look for ways in which you can improve your life around you, the life of the people around you, and you work at it. You look for ways in which to improve things. Try to find some form of right livelihood and engage in it.

The second quality is that once you've gained your livelihood in a good way, you try to maintain what you've earned from it. You're not wasteful. You look after your belongings. This is one of the reasons why in the forest tradition there's such a strong tradition of keeping the place clean, keeping the place in good repair.

Ajaan Fuang would talk about Ajaan Mun taking old rags and sewing them into cloths for wiping the feet, for using here and there. There's that great passage in the Canon where a king's wives give Ven. Ananda 500 robes. The king is a little incensed. What can one person do with five hundred robes? So he goes and asks Ananda, "What are you going to do with those 500 robes, open a shop?" Ananda replies, "No, I'm going to share them out with the other monks." "What are they going to do with the robes they already have?" "They're going to make canopies for their sleeping places." "What will they do with the canopies they already have?" "They're going to use them as rags, to wipe this, to clean that." "What are they going to do with the rags they already have?" "They're going to shred them and put them into plaster, as a binding agent." That's a short version. Actually there are many more steps in between. They make curtains. They make cushion covers out of the robes first. The king is impressed: "All these Sakyān monks use their things wisely. They're not wasteful." So he gives Ven. Ananda another 500 robes—the point being that you look after your things. As things wear out, you find another use for them. You don't just throw them away.

The third step is that you're frugal, but not too frugal. In other words, you live rightly within your means. You don't spend things wastefully, but at the same time, you're not miserly.

The fourth quality is to look for admirable friends, to associate with good people to train your mind in the right attitudes so that your views don't get changed into weird directions. Of course, nowadays this means being very careful about where you wander on the Internet. Wander in places that encourage you to look for what's good in the situation around you—not pretending there's nothing bad in the situation, but look for opportunities in the situation around you for you to do good, and keeping your views straight.

As the Buddha said, when you look for a friend, look for a person with four qualities. And those four qualities also happen to be the ones you want to develop for your well-being in the future lifetime: conviction, virtue, generosity, and

discernment. That way, if death does come—if the virus decides to strike you, and your body decides to react in a way that’s going to shut everything down—you know you have the qualities you need in order for a good rebirth.

I’ve always been amazed at how the eco-Buddhists say they don’t like the idea of rebirth, that it seems to devalue the world right here, right now. But that view doesn’t understand rebirth. One of the better rebirths is to come back here, and the shape in which you leave the world is going to be the shape of the world to which you return. So it’s in your best interest to look after the world through developing these four qualities.

First, conviction: i.e., conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, which comes down to conviction in the principle of action, conviction in the principle that your actions can make a difference. The present moment as you’re experiencing it is not just coming in from past actions. It’s also coming from what you’re doing right now, and you can change that.

Then there’s virtue, being careful in your actions and, in particular, careful in your speech: not only not lying, but being careful not to speak in a divisive way, not to speak in a harsh way, not to engage in idle chatter, i.e., whatever happens to come into your ears and eyes comes out your mouth without your thinking about the impact. You have to think about the impact of your words. “When I say this, what’s this going to do to my mind? What’s this going to do to the minds of the people around me? What kind of actions will it inspire?”

We’re in close quarters, even as we’re maintaining social distance. The way we speak to one another has a huge impact on the atmosphere in which we live, and the place to which we’ll go. So you try to create a good place here so that you’ll have a good place to go through your words and your actions.

Then there’s generosity. We’re looking at the potential for the economy to break down. When the economy breaks down, there’s a danger of society breaking down. But what keeps society from breaking down is generosity. If you have something to share, be happy to share. As I said earlier, there’s the principle that what stays in a burning house gets burnt, but what gets taken out is what’s saved. What’s taken out is what’s given to other people: That becomes your perfection of generosity. And that’s yours, something that even death can’t take away.

Finally, there’s discernment, penetrating discernment, as the Buddha said, into what arises and passes away, what’s originated and what passes away. The “penetrating” means that you realize that things can pass away and arise, but some things, when they arise, are better than others. So you try to develop them.

Here’s another irony. We’re taught that everything is One, that dualities are bad. But the Buddha’s wisdom is basically a wisdom of dualities: *X* is more skillful

than y , so do x rather than y . This involves figuring out how to give rise to x , what the causes are, because from the very beginning of the path all the way to the end, you'll be making choices. You want to be alive to the fact that in whatever you're doing, even as you're practicing meditation, even as you're developing insight, there are things that are skillful to hold on to, and things that are skillful to let go. You want to discern the difference, along with the right time and the right place to hold on and to let go.

Don't let go of concentration before you've developed it, but know there will come a time when you have to let it go. The same with insight: You have to give rise to insight, you use it, and then you let it go. We're not here just to arrive at insights. Our insights are part of the path. They're a tool. In the forest tradition, many of the ajaans use this image. You use the tools of the path like a carpenter building a chair. While you're building the chair, you hold on to the tools and take good care of them. When the chair is done, you can put the tools down. Once you have your chair, you can use the tools for other purposes, but you don't need them for the chair you've got now.

That's the stage of the practice when we begin to think about going beyond the idea of just looking for a good rebirth to something even better than a good rebirth. But the point of all this is that you have a lot of power in your hands.

As Ajaan Lee said, there are potentials in the body, potentials in the mind that human beings use only a small fraction of. And the first power you have is to borrow the Buddha's powers, to know that there are actions that are skillful, actions that are unskillful. Be clear about which is which, and then pursue the skillful actions. Abandon the unskillful ones. Look for ways in which you can improve yourself and the environment around you right now, because you're not the only one who benefits from these actions.

You create your environment by being virtuous. You create your environment by being careful about what you say. As you exercise sense restraint, as you hold to right view, as you find time for seclusion: All these things create an environment. These five principle are listed in the Buddha's instructions to new monks, but they apply to everybody. In this way, your practice is like an electric current running through a wire. It creates a field around it, a good field in this case.

So you've got this power. Try to put it to the best use you can think of, because it can take you far.