

## *To Excel*

*September 11, 2020*

You know that vision the Buddha had before he went into the forest. He said that everywhere he looked in the world, everything was already laid claim to. So if he were going to try to find happiness in the world, he would have to fight other people off. Rather than do that, he decided to look for happiness someplace else. He looked for happiness inside. That way, he didn't have to fight people off.

You find that as you meditate, you're here watching the breath, and no one else is trying to push you out of the way to watch your breath. There's no competition from outside. The breath is fully yours. You're inhabiting the part of your awareness that only you can know: the body and the mind as they're felt from within. This is your territory.

But because no one else can move in here, don't think that there's no competition at all. Look inside yourself. There are a lot of other voices, a lot of other attitudes that would pull you away from the practice. They all sound like you because they all *have* been you at one point or another. Those are the things you have to fight off. The Buddha had Mara, someone he could actually see. In our case, we have our Maras as well, but they're the minions or the troops of Mara. All our defilements are all lined up ready to pull us away from the practice. So you *are* in competition with those.

If you feel that there's no competition, after a while it's easy to get lazy, and laziness, of course, is one of the defilements. You say, "I can do this at my own pace; I'll do enough to get by." But how much is enough to get by, and how are you defining "getting by"? If it's enough not to get criticized by others, that's a pretty low bar. The high bar is set by death. Are you ready to go? What are you holding on to that would make it hard to go? Death can come very quickly, unexpectedly.

When I was young, we lived for two years in a town in Kansas, and there was an old Indian mound out to the west of town. The mound was named not after the Indians, but after a family that had set up an inn next to the mound. It was discovered after many years that the people running the inn would wait for someone who was coming on the trail alone, going west, and who wanted to spend the night. They had a table where the person could eat food and then the room where the person was supposed to stay. But they would place the chair at the table over a trap door. As the person was sitting down to the meal, they'd open

the trap door. The chair would fall down, and someone down in the basement would kill him.

Death is like that. It's like a trap door. You think you're settling down to something nice and easy like a nice meal. All of a sudden, whoops! You're someplace else. That's it.

So are you ready to go? If you've just been getting by, you won't have the skills you're going to need. The Buddha talks about future dangers: aging, illness, death, social unrest, or a split in the Sangha. When these things come, he says, it's going to be really hard to practice. This means you have to practice now. And you have to practice to the level where you know that even if aging comes, illness comes, death comes, social unrest comes, or a split in the Sangha comes, your mind is solid enough so it won't have to suffer.

A verse in the Mangala Sutta says that you want to get the mind so that even when it's touched by the ways of the world—gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure or pain—it doesn't shake at all. That's the standard you want to aim at. So if you're shaken by criticism, you're not up to standard yet. If you're shaken by praise, you're not up to standard yet. This means we all have work to do. We can't just get by.

We may not be fighting anyone else as we sit here to practice, but we do have to fight our defilements. And you have to recognize that they *are* defilements. That's one of those concepts that Western Buddhists don't like to hear about. They like to hear that the mind is innately good, innately luminous, and that the luminosity and the goodness are the same thing, so that the practice is simply a matter of getting in touch with your true innately good nature. In fact, the less you do, the better. That's what we want to hear. But you look at the mind, and it's hard to say that it's innately anything. It has all kinds of potentials. And whichever ones we're following, those are the ones we're strengthening.

If you're following your laziness, your laziness is going to become strong. If you follow your conceit, your conceit becomes strong. These things then take over. And when they take over, it's not in your best interest.

So remember, you are in competition. There may not be anyone trying to pull you away from your nose so that they can get in and watch your breath at your nose in your place. But the defilements will pull you away, and you go with them because you think they're you—*your* greed, *your* anger, *your* whatever. But you don't seem to be too picky about what they are. As long as it's "you," you go with them. That's where we all fall down.

So it's wise to look at defilements *not* as you, but simply as other voices in the mind that don't have your true well-being in mind. And you are in competition

with them. Now, there will be times when you're going to lose to them, but at least put up a fight before you lose. As Ajaan Maha Boowa used to say, if you don't put up a fight, how can you even say you lose? You just lie down. There wasn't even a fight to begin with.

So put up a fight. Give it a try. And as you take these defilements on as your opponents, you begin to know them. You begin to understand where they're strong, where they're weak, and it's through engaging with them like this that you can get past them. Otherwise, they have a power over the mind that's pretty mysterious. All they have to do is whisper, and you go with them. They're like the subliminal messages on TV. You hardly notice at all that they're there, yet they do have an impact. But if you recognize them for what they are, that changes the balance of power inside. That way, you see that your desire simply to get by is not on your side. It's your enemy. It's your opponent. You have to develop a stronger sense of the you who wants to practice and the you who wants to excel at the practice.

Given our nature that we work hard only at jobs where there's competition—we learn to excel in areas where there's competition because the competition forces it—you have to develop that same attitude inside. You want to excel at the practice so that you'll be beyond the power of all the defilements that have ruled your life for who knows how long.

So remember, we're not just getting by. We're here to excel. And when you can tell yourself that in all seriousness, in all honesty, that's when you're really on the path.