

## *Push Yourself*

*January 20, 2021*

We're on the path to the end of stress and suffering, but that doesn't mean that the path itself has no stress, no suffering. Ajaan Suwat would make a comparison with eating and being full. When you're full, you can relax. There's a sense of sufficiency. But while you're eating, first you have to find the food, then you have to fix it, then you have to chew it, swallow it, digest it, clean up after yourself. There's a lot of activity that goes into arriving at that sense of being full and inactive.

We always have to keep this in mind, because there is that tendency to want the path to look like the goal, and to think that if we can clone the goal, that would be the path. Enlightened people are accepting, at ease, so we think that the path should be one of being accepting and at ease.

But you have to remember how the Buddha said there are causes of suffering in the mind, and not all of them respond to simply watching them. Some of them require that you, as he said, exert a fabrication. That can require a lot of effort.

He also said that sometimes the path is painful, sometimes it's pleasant, sometimes your intuitions come quickly, sometimes they come slowly. That leaves you with four alternatives: painful practice, quick intuition; painful practice, slow intuition; pleasant practice, quick intuition; pleasant practice, slow intuition. You can't choose beforehand which of those paths will work for you. But you have to assume that even for the people who are at the point where their practice is pleasant and their intuition quick had to go through some painful stages. So, as we practice, we have to be prepared for that.

As the Buddha said, if you could make a deal that they would spear you a hundred times in the morning, a hundred times at noon, a hundred times in the evening—altogether three hundred spears a day—for a hundred years, with the guarantee that you would gain awakening in the end, it'd be a good deal to take. When you achieved awakening, you wouldn't even feel that it had been attained through pain. The well-being of the awakening would blot out any sense that you had to go through something painful. The goal is that overwhelming.

It's not simply a matter of saying, "Okay, I'm going to accept things as they are, lower my standards, and be okay with whatever." There really is an overwhelming goal. It's touched at the body, as the Buddha said, which means that where you're experiencing the body now, that's where you'll experience the goal. It's a whole, all-around experience.

But to get there requires work. Those causes of suffering that don't go away simply as you watch them: You have to have practice in putting forth an effort to deal with them.

This is why the path begins with generosity. Generosity requires that you give first before you get the rewards. All too many people want to see the rewards first. "Show me the rewards, then I'll practice." But it doesn't work that way. It's like going to a corporation to get a job and saying, "Okay, pay me first, give me a raise, then I'll work." You have to be willing to put yourself out, and to learn to find some joy in putting yourself out.

As in generosity: Learn to find some joy in giving, joy in thinking of new ways to give, ways that are not generic. In Thailand, they have a lot of generic ways of making merit. When people want to do a *sanghadana*, for example, there are stores that sell pails of things already put together for that purpose: certain kinds of medicines, certain kinds of soap, a piece of cloth, all wrapped up in yellow cellophane. You plunk down some money, you get something to give, and then you give it. But that's not nearly as satisfying as going out and carefully choosing things that you think would be especially appropriate for the people who are going to receive them.

Remember the Buddha's statements about giving. You give in season. You give with an attitude of respect. The more thought you put into the gift, the more happiness you're going to get out of it, because that's what merit is. It's the happiness that comes from something good.

The same with the precepts: You're sure to run up against some situations where it'll be hard to hold by the precepts. If you simply say, "Well, this is the path to be stress-free, so I'm not going to stress out over the precepts." There are times when you have to stress out. You've got to stop and think, "How can I handle this situation skillfully, in line with the precepts? What's worth holding on to, and what's worth letting go?"

This is why the Buddha gave that list of different kinds of loss: loss of wealth, loss of health, loss of relatives, loss of view, loss of virtue. Those first three can actually happen through holding to the precepts. You can make money by lying, but you're not going to lie. You can save your relatives by lying about what they did, but you're not going to lie. You can feed yourself, become wealthy, maintain your health by stealing. But you're not going to steal because you realize that holding on to the precepts is more important than holding on to those other things.

So, the Buddha never promised that things would be easy. But by learning how to stress out over being good, you get the right attitude to bring to the meditation. Because you're going to have to give—give your time.

The results aren't going to come right away. I saw Ajaan Fuang teaching lots of different people, and there were a few people who would come and get their

minds very still very quickly. But for the majority of us, it took time. And as he said, “The people for whom it takes time, those are the ones who are going to know what they’re doing.” If it comes very easily, you get used to its being easy. Then on days when, for some reason, it doesn’t come easy, you don’t know what to do. Whereas if you’ve been through the difficult passages, been through the difficult times and found your way through them, you’ve gained knowledge. This is how discernment develops.

In the meantime, you have to go on conviction. It’s not the case that in every day and in every way, the practice is going to get better and better, easier and easier. There will be ups and downs. There will be long fallow periods. How you handle those fallow periods is what tests your mettle as a meditator. You have to learn how to maintain your desire to practice even when the results are slow.

After all, the path does require desire.

I gave a talk one time where people were taken aback when I said the path does require desire. They said, “Well wait a minute. Isn’t desire the cause of suffering?” And I said, “Yeah.” “Then you’re saying that the path will require suffering.” They thought that they’d caught me in a contradiction. But I said, “Well, how has your practice been? Doesn’t it require suffering to some extent? Doesn’t it require stress?”

You’ve got members of your mental committee who don’t want to practice. You’ve got to fight them. That requires exerting bodily fabrication—in other words, looking at the way you’re breathing—as well as verbal fabrication, the way you think about a particular issue. Say that anger comes up. How are you thinking about it? How are you directing your thoughts to the anger? How are you evaluating the anger, evaluating the situation? Are you doing it a way that aggravates the anger? If so, you’ve got to change your verbal fabrication. Talk to yourself in different ways.

If lust comes up, how are you talking to yourself about that object, your relationship to the object, your role in your fantasies? Can you talk to yourself in different ways to make the resolution to get past the lust stick? What perceptions do you hold in mind? That’s mental fabrication. What feelings can you develop around not being involved in the lust?

This is where you have to fight with your defilements, because it’s not the case that once you decide, “Okay, I’m going to become awakened,” everybody inside says, “Hey, that sounds good. Let’s all go together.” It’s not the case that pushing yourself is going to be bad. When the time comes that you can rest in concentration, as the Buddha said, at those times the pleasure of unskillful qualities is not there. The stress of unskillful qualities is not there. And the stress of skillful qualities is not there.

Notice the implication of that: that developing skillful qualities will sometimes involve stress. But when you finally can master all the obstreperous voices in your mind, all the lazy voices in your mind, and gain some well-being that comes through the mastery of the mind, that's when you've deserved your rest. That then becomes food for more strength in the practice—because there'll be more work you have to do.

So it's important to have the right attitude toward the practice. It will require work. It will require stress. There is stress involved in the path leading to the end of stress. But it's so much better than the stress that just leads to more stress, which is how most people live their lives. This practice here is an exertion that accomplishes something. This is pushing yourself in a way that accomplishes something, something of real value.

So, in all the aspects of the practice—making merit, following the precepts, doing the meditation—be ready for the fact that it'll require that you put yourself out, that you push yourself. Don't be the sort of person who refuses to be pushed.