

A Heart Wider than the World

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There are times when the world seems wide and inviting, and others when it seems narrow and confining: Aging, illness, death keep closing in, closing in. We seem to have fewer and fewer choices, fewer and fewer options. But the important thing is not to let our minds get hemmed in by the world. We have to make them bigger than the world.

After all, what does the world have to offer? Material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain: no real food for the mind there. Yet for a lot of people, that's what life is all about. And if you make that what *your* life is all about, then when the world closes in, the mind seems squeezed. That was one of the Forest ajaan's definitions of *dukkha*, or *stress*: what puts a squeeze on the heart. As long as our aspirations are defined by what the world has to offer, it's going to put that squeeze on us.

So we have to learn to look around, expand our horizons. Think about the Buddha: He was a very large-hearted person. He was in a position where, when he was still a prince, the world was wide open before him. There were all kinds of things he could do—and he still saw that the world wasn't big enough.

He had that aspiration to find something bigger: something that didn't offer the prospect of aging, illness, and death; something that wasn't going to come in and destroy whatever happiness he tried to build. He allowed himself to imagine that.

Then he realized if it were a possibility, and he hadn't pursued that possibility, his life would have been a waste. So he pursued it, and he found happiness, true happiness. He spent the rest of his life telling people that they could do it, too. He established the teachings that have lasted now 2,600 years, saying that that option is still available to us.

So it's important that we allow the teachings to expand our imaginations, expand our ideas of what's possible, so that our hearts can be bigger than the world as well. We do this by developing the perfections. The perfections are qualities you develop in the mind, and when the mind is imbued with them, then even when the body grows grow ill, even when the body grows old, even when the body dies, they're not destroyed. They carry on, they carry on, and they give you a perspective that allows you to see beyond the confines of your immediate surroundings.

Because the world has its ups and downs, you have your successes, and your failures in terms of what the world has to offer. But you realize that the work you put into developing these perfections, even when things don't turn out as you want in terms of what the world has to offer, you've still got something of value *inside*. After all, we all have our past karma, which is going to place some limitations on us in terms of the situations that are available to us, but we

also have our present karma—the decisions we’re making right now—and those offer us an element of freedom.

Which is why no matter what the circumstances are around you, you can still develop the perfections. And they all contribute to keeping that larger perspective. They fall into four categories: Those related to *discernment*, those related to *truth*, those related to *relinquishment*, and those related to *calm*. These are the qualities of any good determination, and that’s what you have to do in order to get your heart larger: You have to determine on that.

Otherwise, you let yourself get defined by what other people want out of you, or what they expect of you. If you just go along with the flow... well you know what happens with water when it flows: It flows downhill. If you want to go up, against the stream, you need to develop determination.

You start out with *discernment*, the discernment that sees that it is possible, if you’re going to solve the problem of suffering, to solve it from *within*. That’s work that you can do in any circumstances. After all, it is *your* craving, and *your* clinging. The clinging is the suffering; the craving is the cause of suffering. You can’t pin the blame on things outside. Of course, the Buddha never talks about blame, so much. He just talks about where it’s best to focus your efforts: You focus them *inside*. You keep in mind the possibilities there.

As Ajaan Lee says, “Before you make yourself large, you have to make yourself really small, focused inside. What’s happening right here with the breath, at the mind? What’s happening in the mind, right at the breath? Looking at the details, because the details will grow into larger things. You’re making your choices. That present karma, where you have the freedom of choice: It’s made right here. So you want to see this point right here, really clearly.

Once this point is understood, that’s when things open up. As Ajaan Lee put it, “Things explode, beyond the world.” There’s the dimension that’s not confined by the things fabricated by the world or fabricated by your mind. Discernment is what’s going to see that possibility. Before it actually sees it, it holds it as a working hypothesis—something you have confidence in, and you allow that hypothesis to define your idea of what’s going to be important.

Now, together with discernment there’s *goodwill*. It begins with goodwill for yourself, because you really do want to take your happiness seriously, but if you’re going to take it seriously you have to think about the happiness of others, too. If your happiness depends on their suffering, it’s not going to last. So here again, you have to expand your awareness: Take into consideration the well-being of other beings, other people.

I’ve heard goodwill defined as non-judgmental awareness, but that’s not really the case: It’s non-exclusive. And it’s not just awareness, it’s a *determination*—you’re determined to keep your attitude that, “May all beings be happy.” You do exert judgment in the sense of realizing that if beings are going to be happy, it’s going to have to depend on their actions. You’re not saying, “May you be happy whatever you’re doing.” The Buddha put it in very different terms:

“May no one deceive anyone, may no one despise anyone, or through irritation wish for anyone to suffer.” In other words: May other beings have goodwill, too. May they act on goodwill as well. Now, the question: Will they do that? It’s up to them. It’s beyond your power. But you want to make sure that your intentions in dealing with others are *informed* by that determination.

Then there are the perfections that relate to ***truth***: There’s truth in and of itself, *sacca*. Once you’ve made up your mind to follow the path, you stick with it. You hold to that truth regardless of what the world thinks, and regardless of whether it’s convenient in terms of the world. You have a larger truth that you’re holding to: You truly do want a genuine happiness and so you realize there are things you’ve got to give up. This is where *virtue* comes in: You abstain from behavior that’s going to harm yourself, and harm others.

And also *persistence*, where you work to get rid of unskillful qualities and to give rise to skillful ones. You focus your desires there. Here again, you’re measuring the skill of your actions not so much in terms of worldly success, but in terms of who’s harmed: You want to make sure that nobody is harmed. You’re taking responsibility for your actions. You’re not saying, “Well, if people are nice to me, I’ll be nice to them, and I’ll be nice to them *only* if they’re nice to me.” You say, “Regardless of how they treat me, I’m going to be skillful in my dealings with them.”

So again, you don’t let yourself be limited by the circumstances around you. As the Buddha said, if you realize that you would have to suffer in terms of your health, in terms of your relatives, in terms of your wealth, by holding to the precepts, you’re willing to suffer those losses, because they’re minor compared to a loss of virtue. And, of course, virtue comes from where? It comes from the mind. So you’re working on your intentions. That’s where the skillful qualities and unskillful qualities are going to show themselves—so that’s your focus.

This leads into the next set of perfections, which have to do with ***relinquishment***: basically, *generosity* and *renunciation*. You regard your material wealth as a tool for building the perfections, not just as something to be enjoyed in and of itself. You do enjoy your wealth to some extent, but you realize you can’t waste it all that way. You invest it—in developing good qualities of the mind, such as being generous. This applies not only to material wealth, but also to your knowledge, to your energy, to your forgiveness of others: These are ways you can be generous at all times, regardless of what your material circumstances are.

Then there’s *renunciation*, where you realize that you don’t want your happiness to have to depend on sensual pleasures being a certain way. You look for pleasure inside, in terms of the concentration you can develop.

We hear the word “renunciation,” and it sounds like deprivation, but it’s simply that you’re renouncing a lower level of happiness, sensual pleasure, for the sake of a higher happiness. It’s a trade *up*.

As we’re sitting here meditating, we’re engaging in renunciation. We could be thinking about tomorrow’s meal, or tomorrow’s place to go traveling, or where we’d like to go if we

could, but given the restrictions that are placed on us right now we realize, okay, that's a pretty futile place to look for happiness. Whereas the field inside the mind is wide open—a huge unexplored territory for a lot of us. What can be done in terms of the breath? What can be done in terms of getting the mind to settle in and be undisturbed, with a sense of fullness, with a sense of refreshment?

So think of renunciation in a positive light: It's not deprivation, it's a trade. Just as generosity is a trade.

Now, you do this training for the sake of *calm*. That's the last set of perfections: basically, *endurance* and *equanimity*. When the Buddha talks about endurance, he discusses it in conjunction with goodwill. In other words, you're willing to endure other people's unskillful behavior: You're not going to react, and you're not going to let yourself get upset by it—that's goodwill for yourself and for others. As the Buddha says, try to make your goodwill as big as the Earth, as wide as the river Ganges, as all-encompassing as space, so that no matter what happens, you can tell yourself, "I'm big enough to take that."

As for *equanimity*, you're aiming at the equanimity that comes from true happiness, but to get there, you have to develop first the equanimity that reminds you to be non-reactive—when things go well and things don't go well—and then to look for a deeper source of equanimity inside, with the concentration. There's a very subtle pleasure there: The Buddha talks about the pleasure of pleasure and the pleasure of equanimity, and he says the pleasure of equanimity is the more refined of the two. So it's not like you're eating tasteless gruel, it's just that you're learning to get more sophisticated in your sense of what true happiness for the mind is like, when it's totally undisturbed.

But even that lack of disturbance is not the goal—it's part of the path. When the mind is undisturbed, you can see very clearly what's going on inside. This takes you back to your discernment, so that what you've taken on as a working hypothesis becomes clear as you see what's happening in the mind: where the mind grabs on to things, clings to them, thinking that it's going to find happiness, and in the course of its search for happiness in that way, it's making more suffering.

You see that, and you can let it go because you're in a position of strength. And when the letting-go is all around, that's when you find that there's a dimension that is bigger than the world. The unfabricated is totally unlimited, and you've found it by not letting the world squeeze you, confine you, define what your aspiration should be.

So take the Buddha's example: Make your heart larger than the world. Then work on building these perfections into it so that you can take what in the beginning is an act of the imagination, and use it to discover the reality. Because the path is one of those truths that becomes true because you believe in it—and act on that belief.

You're not going to find this just by sitting around and being non-reactive or trying to *clone* awakening. You work. There's work to be done, but it's good work. It's work that teaches you

lessons about the mind, showing you what's possible and what's not possible. You find that what's possible as you look inside is far larger than what's possible when you're looking for happiness outside.

So try to enlarge your heart, and don't let the world keep you penned in.