

The Courage to Set Yourself Free

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There's an incident in Ajaan Lee's autobiography where he's a young monk staying in a forest. The villagers nearby come to warn him that there's an elephant in rut in the area, running around stabbing people with its tusks. They tell him he should get out of the forest if he wants to be safe. But he decides to stay on.

Sure enough, one afternoon while he's meditating, sitting under a tree, the elephant shows up suddenly in the clearing with his ears back, its eyes wild, looking ferocious. Ajaan Lee's first thought when he sees the elephant is, "In just a few seconds, he could be on me." Before he knows it, he's starting to climb the tree. But just as he grabs hold of the tree, a voice inside him says, "You're afraid to die. Those who are afraid to die will die many deaths." So he gets back in his meditation position, staring at the elephant and spreading lots of goodwill. As he says, fighting the elephant off with metta, with no holds barred. The elephant stares at him for a while, then lowers its ears and walks away.

There are two lessons to be drawn here. One is the lesson if you're afraid to die, your fear is what's going to keep you dying. This is a theme throughout the practice. As the Buddha said, the thing that misers fear most, i.e., poverty, is precisely what they create through being miserly. If you're afraid to give because you're afraid of being poor, you're going to keep on being poor.

The same when you meditate: If you're afraid of the pains of meditation, then you're going to come back again and again and again being reborn, having to go through aging, illness, and death over and over again: more and more pain. So as Ajaan Lee says elsewhere, you have to learn to see pleasure and pain as words that people speak in jest. Don't take them seriously. You realize that there are some pains you have to put up with. But you learn how to relate to them in a way where they don't have power over you.

I've been reading a book on the history of fear in Western civilization, and this is a theme that comes up again and again: The nobility say the reason they're noble is because they don't fear death, whereas ordinary people do fear death, which is why you can keep them down. Well, that's precisely what your defilements are doing. They keep you down. If you want to learn how to depend on your own mind, if you want to turn your mind into its own refuge, you can't let yourself be afraid of pain, because if you're afraid of pain, your fears can order you around. You won't be depend on yourself anymore. That way you're confined by your

fears. Your own mind confines you—and other people can use your fears to confine you, too.

So when pain comes up in the meditation, learn to look at it in a way that it's not so oppressive. That way you can sit for longer periods of time, and take the advantages of having a mind that has been quiet for long periods.

You learn a lot about the mind as you sit for long periods of time. But you're not just putting up with the pain. You want to comprehend it. That means viewing it from a position where you don't feel threatened by it. This is why we work with the breath to make it comfortable. Then we can look at the pain simply as a phenomenon to be studied. Taking that attitude immediately changes the relationship. You're not running away from it. You're stopping and you're looking at it. Like Ajaan Lee sitting under the tree, looking at the elephant, look at the pain with goodwill, telling yourself, "This is something I want to understand." You can begin to see that the pain is one thing, the body is something else, and your awareness is something else. Can you learn how to take apart the perceptions that would tell you otherwise?

And make sure you don't view yourself as being victimized by the pain. This is why I like that perception of the pain as being discrete moments of pain and, as each moment arises, it's not coming at you. It's going away. That way, you're not the target, and the pain just goes, goes, goes away. You're not gathering it up. All too often, we gather up the pain that we've felt for however long the pain has been around. We carry that with us, and we also carry with us the anticipation of how much longer it's going to last. But the past pain is gone. The future pain is not here yet. Don't weigh the present moment down with more than it can take. In this way, the lessons you learn about how the mind creates suffering where it doesn't have to can liberate you in ways that you wouldn't imagine.

So that's one of the lessons to be drawn from that story Ajaan Lee tells.

The other lesson is that when you are fighting other people off, you fight them off with goodwill. There's another story from later in his life as a monk. He's leading a group of laypeople off on a tudong, and they stop at the edge of the ocean, staying in a forest right there coming down to the sea. One day as they're sitting there in their meditation nets—they had meditation umbrella tents—Ajaan Lee sees a huge cloud of mosquitoes coming in off the ocean. So he calls out to everyone, "Get out of your mosquito nets. Sit in meditation." He told them he was going to fight off the mosquitoes with goodwill—again, no holds barred. And after a while, the cloud of mosquitoes dispersed.

The principle here is that when you do take on other people when you get into a conflict, always fight with goodwill. Don't just decide that you're going to

abandon your fears and do whatever you think is the brave thing, because sometimes bravery can be foolishness.

The French have a word, *dechainé*, unchained, which means going berserk, which is what you don't want. When you decide to overcome fear, it has to be with goodwill and wisdom aimed at your long-term welfare and happiness.

So it does require courage to practice, but courage tempered with wisdom. That's what real courage is. It's not just foolhardiness. What you want is the courage that comes from seeing that this is for your long-term good, and that you're willing to put up with the difficulties in the meantime.

One of the forest ajaans was asked one time what special quality he had that enabled him to find the Dhamma. And he said, with all due humility, that he didn't have any special qualities, except for one, which was that he *dared* to do the practice.

Another famous ajaan, when he was young, was studying in Bangkok and going back and forth over the issues of whether he should go off into the wilds to practice. After all, in Bangkok at that time, they were teaching that the time for the noble paths and fruitions had passed. He was wondering if going off to practice would just be a lot of useless pain. But then he realized, the Buddha didn't set out the practice as an executioner. It's not there to kill people, to cause them useless pain. It's to free them. He began to realize that his fears were hiding behind the official line that said the practice was impossible in these days. So he went out to practice.

The practice does require courage. When you look at your doubts that get in the way, often the doubts are disguising fear. But you want to make sure that your fears are not confining you, that in being afraid of certain things you're not chaining yourself to them, like the misers who chain themselves to poverty because they're afraid of poverty, or the half-hearted meditators who chain themselves to more aging, illness, and death and more pain, pain, pain because they're afraid of the pain of, say, an extra hour of meditation. If your fears can confine you like this, other people can use your fears to confine you. Your defilements can use your fears to confine you.

So have the courage to set yourself free.