

The Power of the Will

May 12, 2021

Tonight it seems like the helicopters are nonstop. It's a good symbol for samsara. If you want to get out, you can't wait until everything is nice and neatly put to rest, put in its proper place, straightened out the way you like it. It's in the midst of this mess of samsara that we've got to practice, because samsara's always going to be this way. And unless we really want to get out, we're going to just follow along with the rest of samsara.

Sometimes you hear that when you practice, you shouldn't exert your willpower because the will is an assertion of self, and we're trying to get away from self. But it's interesting to note that when the Buddha talked about his own awakening, he never mentioned anything about discovering there was no self.

And if you think of someone who had strong willpower, the Buddha's the world's number one example. It was because he *wanted* to find something that lay beyond birth, aging, illness, and death that he was able to find it. Without that desire, there would be no Dhamma. There would be no practice. It's simply a question of learning how to train your will. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if it were simply through brute force that we get to nibbana, everybody would have gone there a long time ago.

So the will has to be trained. It has to be turned into the will of right effort, the *chanda* of right effort, the *chanda* of the bases for success, focused on the causes. The causes for samsara are inside, and the causes for getting out of samsara are inside as well. So we have to look in here to straighten things out. It's not a matter of simply watching things arise and pass away, showing their true nature. You're not going to find out their true nature unless you want to, unless you probe and ask questions.

It's like scientists trying to find out about the behavior of an animal. Sometimes you simply watch the animal in its natural environment. Other times, though, you have to change the environment to see how the animal's behavior changes so that you can get an idea of what's driving it. That's what we're looking for. We're not simply watching the passing show; we're trying to see the connections. Simply seeing events without understanding the connections is not insight. Ajaan Lee made this point: You can see causes, but if you don't see their effects, that's not insight. Or if you see the effects but without the causes, that's not insight either. You've got to see the connection.

So in your own mind, you decide you're going to change things inside and see what happens. You make up your mind to stay here with the breath. Without your making up your mind, it's not going to happen. There may be some fluke times when the mind simply settles in, but you wouldn't understand anything. You wouldn't understand why causes and conditions came together at that point. But if you actively change the causes and change the conditions with an eye to seeing what in the mind adds unnecessary stress and suffering and what in the mind can take it away, that's when you know.

So make up your mind you're going to stay right here.

As for affairs of samsara, you've just got to let them go. There are a lot of things going on out there. You look at the news, and it's very disheartening. But then you look back at the human race in its history, and it's been disheartening all along. There have been good examples. This is why we have the Dhamma. There are good examples of people who found the Dhamma, carried it on, passed it on, put it into practice, and made it something real. Those are the people we focus on so that we can become one of them. We remember how they went about it.

You read the stories of the ajaans. If they hadn't had a strong will, they probably would have just ended up tilling the fields, having families, dying, and they would have disappeared. But they had that will to figure out what this is that the Buddha has to offer. His teaching has a lot to offer, and it's open to anybody. Think of Ajaan Mun's statement that it's like being in battle. Your weapon is your discernment. Concentration and mindfulness: These are your stores of food. The question is: Who is the soldier? The soldier is the determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again.

That's a very strong statement of the will. But things don't stop simply with the will. The Buddha gives directions, because we've got to learn how to train it. Focus it on the causes. Why are we the laughingstock of the defilements? Because we fall for their tricks again and again and again. They make promises, and then they renege. Then they come back and make promises again, just like Lucy with the football. Charlie Brown knows she's going to pull it away, and yet she talks him into thinking that this time it's going to be different. Then it's the same. No wonder they laugh at us.

It's also why the ajaans say that if you don't want them to laugh at you, you have to show that you're really determined. So you stick with it. On days when you're discouraged, you stick with it. On days when things are going well, you stick with it. You learn how to encourage yourself. Remember the Buddha's way of teaching. There was instructing, urging, rousing, and encouraging, and you have to learn how to speak to yourself in those ways. Try to remember the Dhamma

you've read, but then go beyond that, because the Dhamma speaks in general principles, and we're not here to see general principles. We're here to see specifics.

You might see that in a general way that, yes, craving does cause suffering. But try to look at particular cravings and particular sufferings to see how it happens and to see why you fall for each craving, why you hold on to it, why you're passionate for your cravings—why you even crave craving. There's an interesting passage where the Buddha enumerates the various places where craving can be focused, and many of them are the factors of dependent co-arising that come prior to craving, and then craving itself. We love our desires. We desire our desires, and then they turn on us. No wonder they laugh at us. So show them that you mean business.

Get the mind to settle in, and the mind will come up with, "How about this; how about that? Why don't you think about this now that you've got some free time?" You have to show that you mean business. You stick with it. You hold on. The image the ajaans give is of a red ant. In Thailand, they have large red ants that live in mango trees. For some reason, they're very defensive of the mango trees. Anyone who climbs up in a mango tree to get mangos will get bitten. They bite hard, and it hurts. If you try to pull them off, they hold on so tightly that the head will detach before they're willing to let go. The ajaans say, "Try to have that kind of tenacity."

Show yourself that you mean business because after all, it is your heart, and your heart is the one who's been having to suffer all along. It doesn't suffer in general terms; it suffers from specifics. There are general patterns, and that's what the Dhamma's for: to teach us the patterns that show us where to look and what questions to ask. But it's watching the mind in action: That's when you're going to get the answers to the questions.

When greed, aversion, and delusion arise, how do they arise? How do they pass away? How do they come back again? When they come back, why do you go for them? What's the allure? Again, the texts will answer in general terms, but you want to answer yourself in specific terms on what the drawbacks are in going with them. Then it's a kind of calculation: Compare the drawbacks with the allure. You see that the allure is not worth it. The drawbacks are so much greater. That's when you develop dispassion, and that's when you can let go.

Now the letting go: That's not something you can will. You set up the conditions. But when the mind lets go, it lets go from understanding—seeing a connection that it didn't see before.

So, yes, the will does have its limitations in the practice. There are certain things you cannot will. But you *can* will the causes for them. Try to get the conditions right. That's the best use of your will.