

## *Free from Buddha Nature*

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There's a question that the Buddha recommends we ask ourselves every day. It goes like this: "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I doing right now?" Ajaan Fuang once asked me, "Suppose the Buddha were right here, right now, asking you that question. How would you answer? What kind of answer would you not feel embarrassed to tell the Buddha? Okay, then. Just do that."

If you were to tell the Buddha that you're trying to comprehend suffering, trying to let go of the cause, develop the path so you can realize the end of suffering, that's an answer you wouldn't be ashamed to give him. So let's spend the next hour doing one of those four, whichever one seems appropriate for you right now.

Notice that all these questions and all the answers have to do with doing. What are you *doing* right now? The four noble truths don't just sit there. They have tasks that follow in line with them. You see this emphasis in the Buddha's teachings again and again and again: actions and their results; actions and results. Which actions are worthwhile, i.e., skillful, and which ones are not? That's the basic dividing line in his teaching.

And notice that there's no question there of *what* you are. What are you truly? What is your true identity? As the Buddha said, any attempts to answer these questions, on the one hand, entangle you in a thicket of views, which simply keep you entangled, and you can't get anywhere. On the other hand, he said that however you identify yourself, you're limiting yourself. Whether it's in terms of your gender, your race, your occupation: Whatever the identification, it's a limitation. So we're not here to define ourselves, or to find out what we truly are or who we really are. We're trying to find out: What are we doing that's causing suffering? What can we do to *not* cause suffering?

Now you realize that you can have a strong sense of who you are around those activities. The Buddha said that part of comprehending suffering is to see that we cling to these five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. Each of the aggregates is defined by a verb; it's an activity. We build a sense of who we are around the activities, and that gets in the way of seeing which activities are skillful, which ones are not. If you have a strong sense of identifying with something, either you like the identity or you don't. Or you run up against resistance from other people, which makes you cling even more strongly to that identity. All of that gets in the way of really seeing what you're doing, what's skillful, what's not, and if you see that it's unskillful, what you can do to change.

I don't know how many times I've been asked the question, "The Buddha says we have Buddha nature. So why do people behave the way they do?" Let's go back to the assumption: The Buddha never talks about Buddha nature. If anyone would have the right to talk about

Buddha nature, he'd be the one. But he doesn't. He doesn't assume that we're good; he doesn't assume that we're bad. If you start with the assumption that you're basically good deep down inside, then all the problems in your life are things imposed on you by society, and your quest for the end of suffering means learning how to resist society. Or if you feel that you're basically bad inside, then you need somebody else to come down from above and help you. In other words, both assumptions get in the way of doing the work yourself.

The Buddha's only assumption is that we want happiness. If you don't want happiness, you're not ready for his teaching. But I don't know anybody who would not want happiness. He simply asks you to take the desire seriously, responsibly. Look at your habits. Which of your habits are helpful; which ones are not? Which ones can you change if they're not helpful? Which ones can be changed quickly? Which ones are going to take time? The ones that take time, that's where the issues of patience and equanimity come in. Patience, equanimity, acceptance: These are not the goal of the path. They're qualities you want to learn how to develop, habits you want to learn how to develop in cases where the changes take time.

You've got a mind that refuses to settle down? Well, that's something that's just going to take time. This doesn't mean it will never settle down, or that your nature is unsettled – that you can never do it. It simply means that you've got a lot of habits to work through. That's where patience and equanimity are important because you have a long-term goal. Our society encourages people to want quick results, and so, very often, we don't have any experience with long-term goals and how to relate to them in a mature way. This is why we have to work on patience and equanimity because they are essential to being on a path, realizing that you're not there at the end yet, but you're taking steps in the right direction. You may take a few missteps, but that's how you learn.

This is what equanimity is all about: learning how to admit your mistakes, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep on going, realizing that you can't go back and undo a past mistake. You *do* have the opportunity to make the resolve not to repeat it. But equanimity and patience also require understanding how you're going to go about this because otherwise, you're sitting there with yourself, and you're being taught to accept yourself, which is a good thing and a step. But you're not being asked to just stay there stuck if that self is unhappy, if it's miserable. There are ways out.

This is another place where it's useful to remember that you're not stuck with a permanent identity, either good or bad. You've got what you basically need in that desire for happiness. The teachings are here to bring wisdom to that desire.

In dependent co-arising, the Buddha starts out with ignorance: ignorance of the four noble truths and the tasks appropriate for the four noble truths. When you're ignorant of those tasks, you start doing unskillful things. With ignorance as a condition, there are fabrications. In other words, what you think you are is something you fabricate. Sometimes you're doing the fabrication right here and now. Sometimes it's the result of past fabrications. But it's all

fabricated. It's all put together, which means that it can be taken apart and put together in other ways.

The basic elements are five, which are divided into three kinds of fabrication. The first one is the physical fabrication, which is the breath. If you breathe in ignorance, it's going to contribute to your suffering. This was one of the reasons why the meditation technique the Buddha taught most frequently was breath meditation, to bring some awareness to the breath and particularly, bring awareness to whether the breath is comfortable or not – whether it's a cause of suffering or a part of the path leading to right concentration with a sense of ease, a sense of fullness, rapture or refreshment.

That ties into the next level of fabrication, which is verbal fabrication. There are two kinds: directed thought and evaluation. Directed thought is when you focus your attention on a particular topic to keep it there. Evaluation is checking to see: How does this feel? Does this feel good? Does this feel right? Is this a comfortable place to stay? Is it an uncomfortable place to stay? How about my mind? Is it ready to settle down right now, or does it need a few other reflections before it'll be willing to settle down in the breath in the present moment? If your mind refuses to settle down, analyze it. What direction is it going in? Is there too much energy, too little energy? Is the energy heading off into the side of irritation or of desire? There are reflections that can help you with these things. But notice that once you get the mind ready to settle down, you come back to the breath. So you put the directed thought and the evaluation together with the breath. In other words, you apply verbal fabrication to your physical fabrication.

Then the third level of fabrication, mental fabrication, has two elements as well: feeling and perception. Once you're directing your thoughts to the breath, evaluating it, then the question of how you perceive the breath and the feelings that arise as a result are important things to look into. How do you conceive the process of breathing? What *is* this breath energy in the body? What kind of mental picture do you have of the breath? Does the mental picture help make the breath a pleasant or an unpleasant place to stay? And the way to test that, of course, is to change your perceptions. This is why Ajaan Lee talks about so many different ways of conceiving breath energy in the body. You try them on and see what seems to work best, and you'll find that different perceptions will work best at different times. So it's good to have a whole range of perceptions available.

So what you've got here are all the elements of fabrication, all brought together in one place, with knowledge, rather than ignorance. As you work with them around the breath, you find that you get more and more skilled at identifying them and learning to work through the difficult ones. Not so that you do this only while you're working on the breath— you begin to learn how to deal with other issues that come up in life as well, learning how to break them down into those same elements.

You'll find that your thoughts, as they come through the body, will be associated with a particular kind of breathing and directed thought and evaluation, feelings and perceptions. Your emotions will as well. When a strong emotion comes in, check to see: How are you breathing? Exactly what are you thinking about? How are you evaluating the situation? What are the perceptions that underlie it? If you can recognize that the emotion or the thought is something unskillful, how do you change those different elements? This is how you deconstruct a fabrication.

And this is important. When an emotion comes up, we're often just blown away by it. We tend to identify with it strongly. The idea of not identifying with emotion, for a lot of people, almost becomes a political issue. You feel like you're being told by somebody else that you can't have this emotion; you can't be your true self. But again, if you try to look at your true self, all you find are fabrications. So why would you want to *do* something, why would you want to create and identify with something, that's unskillful?

It's not that anybody else is forcing you not to identify with it. Simply look at it for yourself and see. Does this help bring about true happiness? If not, learn how to look at it wisely. Take it apart in its various parts. This is where equanimity and patience are helpful. You step back and see: "What am I doing here that's causing suffering? What can I change?" In this way, you come to realize that whatever comes up in the mind, you're not denying that it's there. You simply ask the question: Is this really skillful?

The Buddha once said that that was how he got on the path to begin with, just dividing his thoughts and his emotions into two kinds: those that led to self-harm or harm of others, and those that didn't lead to harm for anyone at all. Then he learned how to check and curb the unskillful ones. It wasn't a matter of just forcing them down. He also had to take them apart, and then take those elements and put them together in a new way.

So you learn how to look at things in a new way – to have new perspectives, new perceptions, and new feelings. These are part of your repertoire. You're not limited to what you've been identifying with all along – good or bad. You've got a wider range of tools for finding true happiness. Some people don't like the idea of not-self. You dig down a little bit into their reasons why, and finally it comes down to the question: How could you function? In other words, it sounds like you're being deprived of some very basic tools. But actually, the not-self teaching gives you a wider range of tools than you'd have by holding to a specific way of identifying yourself. You're free to identify with things or not, as you see fit.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I had a dream one night that I was in Ajaan Fuang's closet, and he had lots and lots of different kinds of hats – some Thai hats, some American hats, all kinds of hats in his closet. As I later got to know him, I realized he *did* wear lots of different hats, taking on different identities as they were appropriate to the occasion. Sometimes you hear people talking about famous teachers, "You're around them and it seems like there's nobody there." Well, it's not that there's nobody there. It's simply that the teacher is

looking at the situation not in terms of who he is, but in terms of what needs to be done, and then he just does what needs to be done – which can often be surprising, out of character. But if it's appropriate, if it's skillful, if it really does help lead to less harm, then why should your character or personality be allowed to get in the way? So learn to be a person of many hats.

There was a Zen teacher who once identified Buddha nature as change. Well, it's even better not to have an idea about Buddha nature or whatever – just that there is the possibility of change. You don't have to have a particular nature at all. All you're asked is to take your desire for happiness seriously. Do it wisely, responsibly, with compassion and with purity. That way, you find that it really can reach to a true happiness, a happiness that's not affected by conditions, that's not fabricated. It's not limited by anything at all.

Don't let your idea of who you are – either bad or good or whatever – limit you. If you think you're good by nature, then you start believing that when the mind is quiet, its natural wisdom will arise, and you can trust it. That kind of teaching teaches people to be complacent in the practice. That gets in the way. If you think you're bad by nature, you can't trust anything. You've only got to do what you're told by other people, or hope that other people will do the work for you. That gets in the way as well.

So don't *be* either good or bad. Just really, sincerely desire true happiness. And act well in line with that desire. Taking this perspective liberates you in a lot of ways right there.