

Start with Yourself

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The world is a very disappointing place. You'd think that people would be able to find ways of living together in peace. After all, the human race has been around for a long time. But you don't have to look very far to see all kinds of injustices: There's torture and killing and oppression of all kinds. And it breaks your heart.

So the question is, what are you going to do? You want to do what you can to help, but where do you start? Because if you ask the people who are doing the torture or whatever, and they'll say, well, they're doing it for a good purpose: to protect their loved ones, to protect whatever. And you see how easy it is for people to get really skewed viewpoints, thinking that for a good purpose they end up having to do evil, without thinking that the evil they're doing cancels out the goodness of their purpose.

There's a book called *The Gate* by Francois Bizot. He was a French scholar studying Buddhism in Cambodia. Back in the early years when the Khmer Rouge were not yet in power, they captured him and imprisoned him. Like most of the people who the Khmer Rouge had imprisoned, he was probably destined to die. But there was one very idealistic member of the Khmer Rouge, a young man who said, "Look, we're trying to build a just society here. This man is not a spy, he's not doing anything evil. Why should we imprison him?" So he fought very hard and got his superiors to free Bizot. So Bizot eventually was able to get out of Cambodia.

Then years later, after the Khmer Rouge were finally driven from power, he went back, and discovered that that young idealistic cadre who had helped free him ended up being the person in charge of the Killing Fields. He'd arranged all the ways of torturing and killing people, millions of people.

This is what can happen with ideals when they start getting very abstract, feeling that you have to kill people in order to make the world a better place because those people are evil. So a lot of efforts to improve the world end up creating more trouble, doing more evil than might have happened otherwise.

When you look at yourself, you sometimes wonder: Do you have that potential to do evil as well? You don't think you do. But you have to stop and think: If you can't trust other people to behave well in difficult situations, how are you any different? How can you trust yourself? As long as you have greed, anger, and delusion inside the mind, especially delusion, you can't trust yourself at all.

This is why the Buddha's way of improving the world starts from inside. You've got to start with yourself first, or as Ajaan Suwat used to say, each of us is responsible for only one person, ourselves. You may have an influence over some other people, but they have the right to make

their own decisions, their own choices, too. So ultimately you're the only person you're really responsible for.

When the Buddha was teaching his son, he started him right here. He said, "Look at your actions. Before you act, look at your intentions. If you think that what you're going to do or say or think is harmful, you've got to tell yourself No, you can't do that. If you don't foresee any harm, then you can do it. If, while you're doing it, you see that some harm is happening that you didn't anticipate, you stop. Otherwise you keep on doing it. Then when you're done, you reflect on the long-term consequences of your actions. If you see that there was any unforeseen harm, then you resolve not to repeat that mistake again. If you don't see that there was any harm, then you can take joy in the fact that you're training the mind well and that you haven't harmed anybody at all."

This, he said, is how people become pure in their actions. And this is where you have to start. Because it's only by taking a good honest look at your actions that you can begin to trust yourself. Otherwise, you never know: If somebody were harming you or other members of your family, would you try to kill that person? Or would you go out and steal food when you were hungry? Do you know? Most of us have never been really faced with starvation or those kinds of difficulties. It's a scary thought to realize that you can't trust yourself. So you want to learn how to make sure you have the right values and that they're firmly implanted in your mind.

And not just the right values: also the right emotions. We tend to think of emotions as things that come and go naturally, but they're caused by certain factors. And the emotions are what will often determine whether we'll follow through with our values or not. So when you're training the mind, you're not just training it in terms of ideas. You're training it with the raw material of emotions.

The first set of raw materials is your breath. When an emotion takes over in the mind, it's going to have an effect on the breath, the breath will have an effect on the body, and the emotion will hijack everything. So if you see there's an unskillful emotion arising, if there's greed or anger or delusion, the first thing you do is stop and take stock of your breath: How is your breathing right now? Even though you're angry, you can calm your breath down. Even though there's fear, you can calm the breath down, so that the fear and anger don't totally take over.

Then another element in an emotion is how the mind talks to itself, the dialogue you have inside. This is why we have these chants every evening, to train the mind in telling itself the right things. For example, you remind yourself, "May all living beings be happy." Just keep repeating that over and over in your mind. Remind yourself that this is a good value to have. And then when someone does something really nasty or horrible, you realize that you have to include all beings—both the victim and the oppressor—in your wish for happiness. That's not easy.

Sometimes you see someone doing something evil and you want to get revenge. You want to stop them at all costs, you want to do away with them, even. But if you keep reminding yourself, “Okay, may all beings be happy,” you want to make that the basis for your decisions. This replaces your anger with a different kind of emotion: compassion, goodwill. If you see someone suffering, you want to stop their suffering. If you see them doing the causes for suffering, you want to find a way to help them stop. Not by doing away with them but by helping them understand what the results of their actions will be.

So we have these phrases that we chant night after night after night. “May all beings be happy. May all beings be freed from stress and pain. May all beings not be deprived of the happiness they’ve found.” That’s how the inner dialogue gets peopled with the right voices, the right ideas.

Then finally there’s another element which is more basic, which are your feelings of pleasure and pain together with your perceptions, the way you label things, the things you notice. When you’re working with the breath, you begin to realize that no matter what’s happening outside, you can change the way you breathe so that you feel ease inside, so you feel well-being inside. It may be hot outside or cold outside, there may be a lot of turmoil outside, but you can still create feelings of ease inside by the way you breathe. This puts you in a better position. You’re not a slave to circumstances outside; you’re not totally pushed around. You can push back a little bit, but you push back in a skillful way by creating a sense of well-being inside.

So when you combine that sense of well-being with the thought, “May all beings be happy,” you realize that that’s the kind of thought you want to act on, the kind of feeling you want to act on. When you act on those thoughts and feelings, you can trust yourself more, so that when you try to change the world to be a better place, you’ll do it in a way that doesn’t cause harm.

And at the same time, it doesn’t burn you out. Most people, when they go out trying to change the world, go on the strength of their anger. They’re angry at the oppressors. Or they’re driven by sorrow, sorrow over the sufferings they see. But anger and sorrow can wear you out. This is why they say that people who push too hard with anger and sorrow end up burning out. Or as Ajaan Fuang used to say, their goodness breaks. It snaps.

Years back, when I was first meditating in Thailand, it was during the Vietnam War. I’d be sitting early in the morning, before dawn in Rayong, and I could hear the bombers flying over: They were on their way into Vietnam or Cambodia, and I knew they were going to release their bombs. I began to feel totally superfluous, totally useless: I wasn’t out there stopping this. But then the question arose, okay what should I do? I talked to Ajaan Fuang about this, and he said, “Watch out. If you take on too much of the world, your goodness breaks.” It wears out. You get discouraged, you get cynical, and you lose sight of the fact that you *need* the energy that you create inside by training the mind—one, to maintain your goodness, so that you know

you won't harm anybody; and two, so that you can really have the energy to help other people and not have it wear out.

And maybe you can't change the whole world but at least you can change your own mind, and you can make a change for the better for the people immediately around you. That counts for a lot. Sometimes one peaceful person can have an influence that spreads in a way that people like to see the influence spread. If you go out and fight oppressors, they don't like to see your influence spread and they're going to fight back. But if you come in with a peaceful mind, other people will like that. They'll want to have that peace too, and they won't begrudge your influence spreading.

Think about Ajaan Mun: one very peaceful person. Other people were inspired by his example. They wanted that peace too, so they were willing to train under him. Then, over the generations, more and more people have benefited from that one person who really wanted to find the Dhamma. He wasn't out to change the world. When he started out he wanted to change himself, to learn how to trust himself. And then, when he was fully able to trust himself, other people could rely on him with a sense of true confidence. And it was that sense of confidence that allowed his influence to spread in a way that people were happy to see it spread.

So that's where you have to start. You have to realize that the world may be an untrustworthy place, but the even scarier thing is the realization that maybe you can't trust yourself. You have an untrustworthy mind. If things were difficult, if the water supply broke down, if American society suddenly collapsed and you found yourself hungry, day after day after day, thirsty, no water around, what would you do? Could you trust yourself not to be harmful? That's a scary thought.

So you train the mind to find the inner resources that enable you to trust yourself. You get the mind in a position where it's not affected by hardships for the body. Or you can learn how to develop an attitude of goodwill for all beings, so at the very least *you* wouldn't act in a way that would harm them.

So you've got to start here: Learn how to trust yourself; train the mind so that it can trust itself. And then whatever influence you have in the world is sure to be good.

When we started this monastery years back, Ajaan Suwat made the comment, "We're not here to get anybody else." If you spend all your time trying to get other people—i.e., to have an influence over them, gain support, whatever—you often lose yourself. And if you lose yourself, you've lost everything. But if you focus on gaining yourself—i.e., gaining the set of qualities inside that you learn how to trust—then if other people are attracted, if other people want to learn that same kind of trustworthiness, they'll come on their own. You'll be able to live together in a way that's not a burden to anybody. That's a good attitude to take in all your activities.

If you're going to start anywhere, you've got to start with yourself. When you can develop genuine goodness inside yourself, then you can trust yourself. Other people can trust you. And don't think that it's selfish. As I said, when other people see a good example, they'll come of their own accord.