

The Best of a Bad Situation

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If you ever go to Thailand and spend some time in the Buddhist world over there, you'll be struck by the emphasis placed on the issue of protection. People make merit because they feel the merit will protect them. One of the most popular sayings there is that the Dhamma protects those who practice the Dhamma. People go to monasteries hoping for protective blessings. There's a huge market in protective amulets. What it comes down to is that people there have a very strong sense of how unstable society is, that there are lots of dangers all around. So they look to the Dhamma for protection on one level or another.

And living over there, I came to take that attitude for granted. But on coming back to the States in the early nineties, I found a huge difference. Over here the Dhamma was mainly concerned with how to make the best of a good situation. Society seemed stable, the economy was thriving, everybody was happy. People wanted to meditate so they could learn how to make the most of their pleasures. How to not hold onto them too tight. Learn to accept the fact that these pleasures were impermanent but basically learning how to let go of one pleasure so you could embrace another. That seemed to be the main attitude.

Then there came the airplane attacks and everybody's attitude changed. All of a sudden people were suddenly aware of danger. And it's interesting to see how people who were so complacent reacted with such terror to the fact that their lives might be threatened, their society might be threatened—as if it hadn't been threatened before and if it had suddenly become a possibility. I mean, the immaturity of people's reactions was amazing to see. That's what happens when people who expect nothing but good things to come their way suddenly find something bad comes their way. They haven't learned the skills to deal with bad situations. Some people said that the attacks burst their complacent Buddhist bubbles. Of course that's an oxymoron, a "complacent Buddhist." But that was the kind of Buddhism we had back in those days. It was very complacent. People were used to consuming good things, not learning how to produce good things in their life even in the midst of a bad situation.

This is what the practice of meditation is all about. In fact, all of Dhamma practice consists of how to make the best of a bad situation. We have that chant regularly—we are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation—and yet we want to be happy. The Buddhist teachings are precisely instructions on how to be happy in the midst of impermanence, in the midst of inconstancy, stress, things that lay beyond our control. In other words, we gain training not just in being consumers of happiness but in being producers of happiness. This is what the teaching on the power of kamma is all about. So that no matter what the situation you know how to find happiness. It's like being a good cook. A good cook can walk into the kitchen and no matter what food is there in the kitchen can make something really good out of it.

So this should be our attitude as we meditate. As you sit down to meditate you'll find some days that things are going well and other days things are not

going well at all. You've got to pull out your toolkit to see what tools you have to deal with that particular problem. Sometimes it's just a problem of a bad mood; some days nothing seems to go right. You want to think of these things as training opportunities because worse situations are going to come along—serious illness, unexpected accidents, death—and they're not pretty at all. Remember in the old days how they would talk about how life is good, death is a part of life, therefore death can be good? Death is no good. You lose control of the body, all kinds of things happen. So you really need to prepare for it.

This is why we practice concentration, why we practice discernment, so that we'll have the tools we need at that point. We also want to practice the right attitude that no matter how bad things get, there's still something we can do about it. If you haven't developed the skills to deal with this particular problem facing you right now, well, use your ingenuity. Try to remember what different Dhamma teachings you've learned and see what might be relevant. The attitude that one meditation technique can cover all situations is a definite mistake. The Buddha himself never taught that. It's just part of our modern assembly line approach to meditation: Just give people one method and all their questions will be answered; all you have to do is whatever you do in the course of the day, just stick with that one method and it will see you through. It's like Henry Ford's old statement—we'll give people whatever color they want as long as it's black. One car for everybody's needs.

As meditators we have different needs. And even as an individual person, you'll find you have different needs as you go through the day, as you meditate, deal with other issues that come up in your life. So it's good to have a full set of tools and then to gain a sense of what tools will work for you right now. When the mind is reluctant to practice, what can you do to get it back in the mood to practice? If it seems scattered, with lots of frenetic energy, how can you put that frenetic energy to good use? If it seems sluggish, how can you wake it up? Instead of looking at these problems as obstacles, look at them as challenges, as opportunities to develop new skills, to learn how to produce a really great meal out of unpromising ingredients.

One of my students in Asia was a chef before he became a monk. He told me about one time when they had a set meal at this club where he was working and cream of asparagus soup was on the menu. They ended up having a lot more people come than they had anticipated and they were running out of soup. So he went into the kitchen and said, "Don't anybody come in, don't see what I'm doing." He went and got all the asparagus scrapings and peels out of the trash, put them in the blender, seasoned it well, and came up with a perfectly acceptable asparagus soup.

So you want to have that same attitude toward your meditation. Sometimes the materials are not promising. You've got the body and it's got pain. Well, remember that someday further on in your life, the pain is going to be a lot worse. It's not going to just be an issue of pain at that point. You'll actually be facing the end of your life. And it may happen that the people around you will be getting all upset as well. You want to learn how to not pick up their mood and how not to go with the story of how you're going to miss this and miss that. You've got to learn how to put those things aside. You have to figure out how to deal with the pain so that it doesn't overcome you, so it doesn't sap your

strength.

So often the way we deal with pain is what saps the strength that we really need to use at a time like that. How do you learn not to go with all the stories that are screaming through your mind? Well, it turns out that these are the skills you learn as you meditate: how not to go with a vagrant train of thought no matter how insistent it may be, no matter how relevant it may be to certain issues in your life. When you realize that this is not useful at this very moment, as a good meditator you should learn how to put it aside even when it's screaming in your mind again and again and again. Your attitude has to be, okay, maybe I can't get you out of the mind but at least I'm not going to let you have the whole mind. I'm going to hold onto just the simple fact of awareness. That way you can fend off a lot of the power of those thoughts.

And the same with the pain. Sometimes you can use the power of concentration to deal with the pain and sometimes it just wears you out. My teacher had a student who had cancer. She's had cancer for many years now, it's taken different parts of her body. It's amazing that she's still alive. And a lot of the fact that she's still alive has to do with the fact that she is meditating. There was one time when she had to undergo radiation treatment and they discovered that she had an allergy to the anesthetic. So the question was what to do. She said, "Well, I'm a meditator, so let me try just dealing with the pain raw." So they tried it. She kept using the power of her concentration to fend off any reaction to the pain. She was able to get through the treatment, but she came out exhausted. Ajaan Fuang visited her the next day in the hospital and she told him what had happened. He said, "If you use just the power of concentration, it's going to wear you out. You've got to use your discernment, to see the pain as something separate, hold that perception in mind. The awareness is one thing, the pain is something else, your body is still something else." In other words, the sensations of body are the earth, water, wind, fire sensations. The pain is something else. Learn how to see the distinction.

Exactly what is the pain? You sit here with your awareness of the body from within, which is made up of these four elements, or four properties. Then when the pain comes you tend to glue the pain onto those different properties, as if they become one and the same thing. As an observant meditator you should learn how to undo the glue. The pain sensation is one thing and the body sensations are something else. And you begin to notice that the pain moves around; it arises and passes away. It's a lot less solid when it's separated out like this than it was when it was glued, say, to the earth sensations, your sense of the solidity of the body or the pressure of the blood flowing through that particular part of the body as it runs up against the solid parts, or whatever.

So no matter how bad things get, remember that the skills of meditation are there to make the best of a bad situation: How you can still find happiness in the midst of birth, aging, illness, death, and all the craziness that tends to go on around us. How you can maintain your sanity in an insane world. And having the confidence that no matter how bad it gets, there's always an approach, there's always a tactic, there's always a strategy, there's always a skill.

This is why the Buddha made *dukkha*—pain, suffering, stress—his first noble truth. He pointed directly to the issue that most people like to run away from. He said, "Look, you've got to comprehend this. Only when you comprehend pain can

you put an end to it.” So he was willing to face down the pain, face down all the facts of aging, illness, and death. He talks about these things not because he’s pessimistic but because he’s optimistic. He has a solution.

So try to keep that optimism in your own mind—that there is a solution for every bad mood that comes through the mind, every bad situation there is around you. There is a way to respond skillfully, there’s a way to maintain a sense of well-being no matter what. That’s going to require that you change the boundaries of what you claim as you and yours. Remember that those boundaries were simply part of an attempt to find happiness. It’s not like you’re abandoning anything essential. You’re just putting your true happiness first, which is why you had those boundaries to begin with. You claim certain things as yourself, certain things as belonging to you because you feel that you have some control over them and they can help you find true happiness. But in many cases you find that you’ve got to abandon these things because they actually weigh you down. When the Buddha has us let go like this, he doesn’t have us let go and just be deprived. He has us let go because he’s got better tools.

So have that confidence. And if you find that you haven’t developed the skills that you need to deal with these particular issues, well, when times are good work on them. And even when they’re not good, work on them. I don’t know how many times people have come to me saying, “There was a period when things were pretty bad in my life and I didn’t have any time to meditate.” Well, that’s precisely the time that you need to meditate. And even if you don’t have time to sit with your eyes closed, the breath is still there. All the mental skills that you need in the course of meditation can be developed in any situation. It’s just that it’s easier to develop them when you are sitting here with your eyes closed. But they are meant to be used no matter how bad the situation gets. That’s a sign of how good they are.