

Dharma Warriors

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Dharma warriors going into battle with ignorance, craving, defilement, clinging, suffering: It's an old image, an old analogy. It goes way back to the early texts.

But before we take it on, it's good to think about how genuine warriors fight, especially noble warriors, because those were the warriors in the time of the Buddha.

To begin with, they put a lot of time into practice, a lot of fundamentals.

And it wasn't the sort of thing that you would do only when you felt like it. Practice every day. You don't feel like meditating, you meditate. You feel like meditating, you meditate. You learn how to put your preferences aside. Of course, the wise way of doing that is learning how to put yourself in the right mood, even when you don't come to the meditation with the right mood. When you sit down, get yourself in the right mood to meditate. Ajaan Suwat often made this point: Develop a sense of conviction, develop a sense of feeling inspired by the meditation as you sit down to do it.

So if you find yourself sitting here wondering why you're doing this, looking at your breath for another whole hour after you've been looking at the breath for the whole day, remind yourself that this is something you really want to be good at. You want to be able to hold onto this refuge of the breath in any situation.

I had a friend when I was back in school who was in ROTC training. He told me about a time when they were supposed to run a couple of miles. And at the very end, after they'd gone all the laps they were supposed to do, the instructor said, "Okay, another half-mile!" Of course, the reasoning there was that if you're out on the battlefield, there's no determining ahead of time how far you're going to have to run, how long you're going to have to fight. So just when you think you've gotten to the hill and you've secured a safe place, you look over the other side of the hill and there's a huge army coming, okay, you've got to be willing to fight them, too.

So you practice this way. Sit down and think, "Even if I don't want to do this, even though I feel I've done enough for today, maybe I should do a little bit more, just to gradually push the envelope."

And do it in such a way that it's not drudgery and boredom. Try to find something to get interested in. I think that was one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee became so good at the breath: He kept on finding new and entertaining ways of breathing. The ability to entertain yourself in difficult situations: That's an important element in being a good warrior as well.

Thomas Mann wrote a novel based on the story of Joseph, a four-volume novel, a huge thing. One of the main events in the story is that Joseph gets thrown into prison. While he's in prison, he finds ways of entertaining himself. He starts interpreting dreams: He interprets his own dreams, he interprets the dreams of his fellow prisoners, he starts interpreting the dreams

of his wardens. And it's through this that he eventually gets called in to interpret the dream of the pharaoh—you know: the one about the seven lean cows eating up the seven fat cows. It was through his ability to entertain himself that he got placed in a position of power to prepare for the coming famine.

So as a meditator you've got to learn how to entertain yourself with the meditation. Set up small interim goals for yourself. Try new ways of breathing. If one way doesn't work, ask yourself, "What's the exact opposite of what I've been doing just now?" Try that for a while. Find ways of keeping the practice interesting. Because that's the first requirement of a good warrior: Once you've got your skills honed, you keep them honed, so that even when you don't feel like meditating, you can still do it skillfully.

The second point that's good to remember is that good warriors, when they can, choose their battles. Of course, there are many times when you can't choose the battle. An issue comes up and you've *got* to deal with it. But there are other times when you have the choice: You can attack or not, you can fight or retreat. If you're in a position where you can choose, there are a lot of things you've got to take into consideration. If you have to have a clear objective, if victory really will help you, and if you've got a good place to retreat to if things aren't working out, then you can go ahead and attack. But if not, if you're not really ready for the battle yet, find some way of delaying it.

There's that biography of Eisenhower that pointed out how, during the fifties, there was a lot of saber-rattling in Congress, wanting to attack the Communists everywhere they were. Eisenhower kept us out of a lot of wars. He was able to do this because he was a soldier. He didn't have to prove himself. No one could accuse him of being a coward, because he'd already proven himself in World War II. But as a good soldier, he realized that there were some wars that were just not worth fighting. And others that were best delayed until you were in good shape and ready to take them on.

So as a meditator you should have the same attitude. We all know that eventually we want to gain insight and eventually there are lots of things we want to do on the path to gain insight, to gain understanding about the ways of the mind. But if your foundation isn't solid enough, you're not going to be able to tackle these things properly. They can overwhelm you.

So in particular: As you're developing concentration, work on the concentration every chance you get. If an issue comes up and you're not ready to tackle it yet—in other words, if you try tackling it and you realize you're just getting yourself sucked into that old mind state—pull out. Go back to the concentration.

This ability to pull out is going to be a lifesaver. When I learned Thai boxing, the first thing they taught was how to retreat. That's your lifesaver in all situations.

The question sometimes comes up, "At what point do you stop doing concentration practice and start doing insight practice?" And it really depends on the issue. Some issues come up in your mind and when you look at them, you immediately see right through them.

Those are things that you can work with, to work on some insight. With others, they come up and you think about them a little bit and an insight comes. But then there are others where you think about them, and think about them, and all of a sudden you find yourself tied up in that old mindset. Get out of that as fast as you can. You're not ready for it yet.

Which means that with rudimentary concentration you can start gaining rudimentary insights. And as the concentration gets more and more developed— not only stronger but also quicker—then you can start dealing with subtler, more difficult issues in the mind. The two processes go together.

So as a Dhamma warrior, you want to make sure you've got your skills well-honed, and that you gain a sense of which battles are worth taking on and which ones are not. In this way, you become a wise warrior, the warrior who survives, who comes out victorious. Even though you may have to lose a few battles along the way and retreat, you're not embarrassed to retreat, if it's necessary that you do. But you're aimed at having a much larger strategy, so even though you may lose a few battles, you win the war.

Even when you're losing, remind yourself: At least you put up a fight. It's better than people who don't put up a fight at all. Ajaan Maha Boowa has this phrase. He says when you don't put up a fight, if you just give in to your defilements, how can you say that you lose? You didn't even fight—you just let them trample all over you.

At least a warrior has a goal. Look at how many people live their lives without any clear goals, or with goals that will end up disappointing them. There's that old phrase, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Well, he who dies with the most toys still dies, and you can't take your toys along with you when you die anyway. And you lie there on your deathbed, looking at what you've got, and it's all toys – what a waste!

The ultimate battle that you're really got to work on is: How are you going to face death? What skills are you going to bring to it? It is possible to die with skill, in a such a way that there's no clinging, no craving, no suffering. And a life spent working on developing the skills for *that* battle is a life truly well-spent.

So keep working on your skills. They may be tedious, but you can make them *not* tedious if you use your ingenuity. The battle may be long, but at least you do your best. And at the end of your life, you look back and you say, "Well, at least I did my best." That's a much better life to look back on than one where you threw away the opportunities to practice.

There's honor and nobility in a life of a Dhamma warrior. Those are words that tend to disappear in our culture—honor and nobility—but you can revive them for yourself if you want.