

Control from Within

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There's a passage in Thomas Mann's book *Joseph and His Brothers* where Joseph's younger brother is being born and his mother is dying as she gives birth. All the women in the family are gathered around chanting various spells to protect her, to make her live, and they're not working. She's dying. And Joseph's father has a kind of an epiphany, realizing how small-minded our attempts are to control things. He sees that there is so much in life that's beyond our control that we simply have to accept.

Mann, of course, had read his anthropology. He was using this incident to illustrate the difference between the magical mind and the religious mind. The magical mind wants to control everything, whereas the religious mind realizes there's a lot that's not under our control. Of course, in some religions, there's somebody else in charge. But in the Buddha's teachings, there's nobody in charge. That's one of the things we chant: *anabhissaro*—"There is no one in charge."

It's a scary thought. We'd like to think that there's some sort of Providence that ultimately will take care of everybody, or that things will ultimately work out for the best. But all you have to do is glance through any book on the universe with pictures that the Hubble telescope has shown us about what happens to stars. They blow up. The material gets ejected out into star clouds, and then new stars form. And the whole process just goes over and over and over again, which is very similar to the way the Buddha saw things. The universe goes through periods of expansion and contraction, expansion and contraction. And it's all totally beyond our control.

So the question is, how do you find happiness in all that, and what *can* you control? It comes down to our minds. The problem is we don't really control them. There is the possibility to train them, to bring them under our control, but most people like to place the responsibility on somebody else, thinking that things will work out okay because somebody else is doing the work. It scares us to think about how much we have to do, how much we have to rely on ourselves.

But that scary fact is actually our only hope. After all, we can control our emotions, we can control our intentions—if we try. We do have the potential to choose to do this or not to do this. That's our freedom and that's our responsibility, i.e., nobody's going to force us, but events force us. If we don't train the mind, we're going to suffer. If we do train the mind, we have the opportunity not to suffer. That's our big choice in life. The Buddha once said the point that

distinguishes a wise person from the fool is that the wise person sees the necessity of training the mind, whereas the fool doesn't. That's the difference right there.

So if you're looking for happiness in life, this is where you have to look. If you're looking for some measure of stability, this is where you have to develop it: in the mind. This is why we practice sticking with the breath, developing as much mindfulness and alertness as we can, and keeping ourselves inspired to stick with the path, as it's going to have its difficulties.

The Buddha offers us different ways of finding that inspiration, and it's up to us to learn how to use them. We can reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—the example they've set. We can reflect on our own goodness, the times in the past when we chose to do the right thing. We were generous when we didn't have to be. Or we held by our principles when we didn't have to. We made the right choice: That's an expression of our freedom. That's one of the things we have to appreciate. Freedom is scary, but it's also our opportunity. We think about the goodness that's come from our skillful decisions and take that as our energizing factor in the path.

There's also the recollection of death, which is a very strong spur. When the Buddha advises recollection of death, it's not that he wants us to get depressed or start getting sentimental about how lovely the world is and, gee, some day we're going to not be able to see the sunrise or the sunset anymore. That's not his purpose. His purpose is to make us realize that the fact that we're alive means that we can do things that will have an impact on what we'll face after we die. We can train the mind. We've got this opportunity right now. We don't know how much longer it's going to last. So that's another way of inspiring yourself to stick with the path.

So these are two types of examples of that things that can keep us inspired. They've done studies of people who are very skillful in different fields, and in every case, the skill develops from realizing two things: on the one hand, the dangers that come from not being skillful, not being scrupulous, not being careful, not really mastering the skill, the problems that can come when you slip up; and then on the other hand the rewards that come when you *do* master the skill. And although the Buddha's teaching us a skill that for many of us is totally unknown territory, when he starts out his explanations, he starts out with things that are familiar to us: giving as a skill. Giving is a skillful thing when you choose to, at the very least, delay gratification.

There's that old riddle in Thailand. You've got one fish so how do you learn how to eat it all year long? Some people would say the answer is that you salt the fish. But the actual answer to the riddle is that you share it with your neighbors.

Then your neighbors are going to share some of their fish with you sometime down the line. That, according to the Buddha, is the lowest possible motivation for giving. But it's still a good motivation because it builds on a sense of trust and it builds on a sense of your own ability to say No to your desires right now because you know you have to think about the future. There's also the sense of community that develops when you start sharing that way. After all, a gift is something that breaks down barriers.

So when the Buddha talks about the path, he starts by talking about generosity, the act of giving a gift. Everything else develops out of that, because to give a gift you do have to restrain some of your desires. And you have to take the needs of other people into account. It's a way of finding a happiness that you can share with other people. Both sides benefit, as opposed to the more mercenary view where you gain and other people have to lose. If you lose, you can't stand it. So you've got to make sure that you win and it's going to mean trampling on other people. That's the mind state of the untrained mind, one you can't trust because it's going to cause you trouble down the line.

This is something pretty radical. Most people say that it's either your happiness or somebody else's happiness. Even later Buddhist teachers would say that if you go for your happiness, it's a sign that you don't care about other people. They've missed an important point in the Buddhist teachings on generosity, which is that there is a way where your happiness can be conducive to other people's happiness. Theirs can be conducive to yours.

The same with the precepts: The precepts emphasize your freedom of choice, and also the possibility that there is a happiness that's not harmful to anybody—not harmful to yourself, not harmful to other beings. As we practice, we tend to overlook these teachings on generosity and virtue. After all, generosity is a pretty generic virtue. Every society talks about it. A lot of the precepts are things that we've learned from our own society, and we see them in many, many other societies, too. That's part of the Buddha's point, but he takes it a little bit further. He says that if you really look carefully at this, you can see the beginnings of what would be a true happiness.

So these are qualities we should nurture in our lives: this conviction that it is possible to find happiness in a way that's conducive to other people's happiness. It is possible to find a happiness that's totally harmless. Generosity and virtue hint at these things. It's important to realize that they're the beginning of how we gain some control in our lives by learning how to control our intentions.

Ajaan Suwat was fond of saying that each person in the world has only one person, i.e., you have yourself that you're responsible for. No matter how much we

love other people and care about them, they are free to change their minds. They are free to do all kinds of things that are not under our control. Our only potential for gaining any control in our lives is learning how to control our own intentions.

This is why we're working here to develop this potential that we've already had some taste of in our acts of generosity, acts of virtue, realizing that working directly on the mind is probably the most rewarding thing we can do. There will come a point in the meditation where you realize that this is not just "probably." You realize it's confirmed. You find something that is totally reliable, totally beyond conditions, and it's found through this process of developing skillful conditions. The path doesn't cause that result. It opens us to it. It's already there.

But we have to work to find it. Ajaan Lee's simile is of salt water. There is fresh water in the salt water, he says, but the salt isn't going to settle out on its own. You have to work to distill it, but it's good work—the same sort of work that's involved in generosity and virtue, giving and being restrained. You give your attention. You give your full energy to the practice. You restrain the mind from wandering off. These are lessons we learn in practicing generosity and virtue. As we meditate, we dig deeper into them. Even the Buddha's more abstract teachings on not-self and emptiness grow out of the insights we gain from generosity and virtue, learning about the happiness that comes from letting go, the happiness that comes from not laying claim to things.

So make sure in your practice that you don't lose sight of the basics, because they have lots of implications and lots of lessons, including this very unusual lesson that the control we want in our lives doesn't come from trying to control events outside. It comes from trying to control the heart, control our intentions, and doing things that are generous and harmless. It's not the control of the control freak. It's the sense of well-being that comes from developing a good heart.