

Courage

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It's good to think of the Buddha and the courage that he brought to his practice. It may stir up some courage in ours. There was no guarantee that he was going to gain awakening. When he left his home, he was going against all the conventions of his time. He'd just had a son. He was expected to stay and—at the very least—see the son up to adulthood, but he left. He was expected to carry on the family line, but he left. And you can imagine that, if he had actually brought up the prospect of leaving and trying to find a deathless happiness, people would all say, "Oh, that's impossible. Nobody has been able to do it. What makes you think you can?" He had been brought up in a very refined, very lavish household. They were pretty sure that he didn't have what it would take, or even if it was possible for anyone at all, to find such a happiness. India had many stories of hermits who had gone out, tried to gain awakening, and failed one way or another.

And yet the Buddha decided that whether people agreed with what he did or not, it didn't matter. What mattered was that he devote his life to something really worthwhile. If he were to devote his life to power—well, power goes. If he were to devote his life to sensual pleasures, they'd go as well. Even devoting himself to his family: We all know what happens to families. They break apart. The people you raise may die before you do, they may die after, but everybody is going to die at some point. You wonder what's going to be left. We have that book in our library called *The Past from Above*. It shows all these amazing buildings—amazing in the sense that they must have forced a *lot* of labor to erect these things in the past. And now what's left? Just some stones in the desert.

So the Buddha wanted to find something really worthwhile—something not subject to aging, illness, or death. That's a very courageous goal, a very courageous idea even, just to think about it. Of course, he wasn't facing just the opposition of the people outside him, as he told Mara when Mara came to tempt him to stop his practice. He realized that Mara's armies were not forces outside; they were the defilements in his own heart. It's not the case that the Buddha was totally pure from the beginning of his practice. He had greed, aversion, and delusion just like us. He had impatience. His practice had its ups and downs. But he didn't let the downs get him down, even after six years of austerities, when he had pushed the limits of what a human being can do in terms of denying himself any kind of pleasure at all.

At that point, he looked pretty hopeless. He'd seen that sensual pleasure didn't offer anything of lasting value. Now it turned out that self-affliction, which seemed to be the only other alternative, didn't offer anything either. Some people might have given up there. Or at the very least, they might have said, "Well, I've achieved the ultimate self-affliction, I'll just keep this up." They'd be ashamed to throw away what they've invested so much time in. But he realized that it wasn't working. There had to be another way. And so he kept looking for another way—and then he finally came across the middle way.

Notice here that courage doesn't necessarily mean stubbornness. It means facing down difficulties, not letting yourself get waylaid, not letting yourself get discouraged by those difficulties. When the Buddha met up with pain, it took a lot of courage to deal with all that pain. He was able to stir up within himself the conviction that even though there is pain in the practice, you can't let that push you off track.

The same goes for mental pain—the aversion, the emotional difficulties that we all face in the practice, especially when you find yourself running up against some pretty strong defilements and they seem just totally stubborn, unwilling to give way. They seem to have taken a part of your own mind. It's part of your own mind that's saying, "Nope, nope, nope, I don't want to push this hard." That's when you need to have the courage to let that go, saying, "No, I can't identify with that." Even though it's been a part of you for who knows how long—the greed, the aversion, the delusion, the lust, the whatever—you've just got to say, "No, I cannot identify with that any longer. I've to drop it."

Just like the man who had to saw off his arm because it was trapped under a boulder. He realized that the only way he was going to survive was to sacrifice the arm. There *are* sacrifices that we have to make in the practice. This is where a lot of the courage comes in. We have to sacrifice our comfort, sacrifice a lot of our ideas, things that we've held dear to ourselves for so long, things that we've identified with for so long. There comes a point where you have to say, "You have to make a choice." And part of us wants to hold back, saying, "Can I have both?" And the courage lies in learning to say No. It's an either/or proposition here.

Have you had enough of wandering around under the influence of your greed, aversion, and delusion? Or would you like some more? One of the big problems in the practice is being unwilling to admit that there are choices we have to make like that; we always want to muddle through with the both/and. We want things to be a certain way. And even though they're not going to be that way, we keep pushing and pushing and pushing. That's not courage; that's stubbornness. And it's important to know the difference between the two.

The courage comes in realizing that you've met up with an either/or and you've got to choose. For once, why don't you choose the skillful side? The way to give energy to that courage is to remind yourself that these are tradeoffs: that even though some of the choices we have to make may be hard, may require putting ourselves out on a limb, still we do have the example of the Buddha who showed that he benefitted from sacrificing those things. It wasn't like he was born ready to make sacrifices. As he himself once said, when he realized that he'd have to give up his sensual passions in order to get the mind into concentration, his heart didn't leap up at the idea. But still, when he realized that there were advantages to be gained from giving up those passions, he put them aside.

So we have his example. He didn't have that example. He was feeling his way with no guarantees. And here we have 2,500 years of examples of people who have gained awakening. Of course, for us the only proof will be what was the proof for them: that you find it within. But there are examples suggesting that this is possible. There are advantages to letting go of the things that we hold to very tightly. So we have this opportunity now. We don't know how much longer we're going to have it.

The Buddha himself admitted that the life of his Dhamma was going to be limited. There will come a time when people will have forgotten it, and the name "Buddha" will just be a memory. There are parts of the world now where you can't even learn about Buddhism—it's forbidden by other religions that have moved in. It's interesting how the Buddha image is what precedes Buddhism, and it's the last evidence of Buddhism's having been someplace. When Buddhism first went into China, it was known as the religion of images. That's what people thought of when they thought of Buddhism—the Buddha image. You wanted to have a Buddha image at your house—it was nice. Either they felt that it had magical properties or it was just very peaceful to look at. Then there was a period in Chinese history where everything was forgotten, everything was blotted out. All they had were the images in the hills. The same in other countries.

Here it's pretty similar. People who don't think of themselves as Buddhists might still like to have a Buddha image around in the house or in the garden someplace, because it's peaceful. And maybe someday that's all that's going to be left of Buddhism here in the West—a few leftover Buddha images, suggesting that there is some possibility of peace. But who knows what people are going to read into that smile, read into those closed eyes.

Right now we have a lot of information. We have a lot of examples as well—it's not just words. There are examples of the great ajaans, the men and women who have gained awakening. And in every case, they said that there were difficulties, but ultimately they bit the bullet when they had to choose between just giving up or sitting through pain, say; sacrificing the prospects of some physical pleasures; sacrificing the prospect of certain relationships. They put their lives on the line: That's the phrase that Ajaan Fuang used one time. He said that the people went out into the forest put their lives on the line. That's how they found the Dhamma.

So when you meet up with difficulties, remind yourself of that. It's not that they were special, amazing human beings, made out of titanium, who didn't feel pain. They felt pain. Their minds were conflicted, just like yours. But there came a point where they had to make a choice and they *realized* they had to make the choice—and they made it.

So try to show some courage in your practice, and you'll find that you'll be repaid many times over.