

Skills for Awakening

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We often come to the meditation to gain a sense of peace and calm, to find some rest. And it is important that we gain these things from the meditation: We learn how to breathe in a way that calms the body, calms the mind; we think in ways that calm the body, calm the mind. And these are skills we can develop to benefit the mind. But they're not the whole story. In spite of what you may have heard, we cannot relax our way to awakening or decree that awakening means being perfectly happy right as we are.

When you look at the Buddha's similes for people who practice, or at the similes given by the great ajaans, you never find the image of someone relaxing his or her way to awakening, or just sitting back and saying, "I'll be okay the way I am right where I am." The similes all have to do with people who are searching, people developing skills, warriors going into battle: people who have a goal and who will do everything they can to reach that goal.

The people searching are searching either to get away from suffering or to get toward something that they can use to assuage their suffering. As the Buddha said, all our searches begin from suffering. From pain. We get mystified by pain. You can imagine being a little child with no knowledge of language, so that nobody can explain things to you. You encounter pain and you don't understand it. All you know is that you want to get away from it or get rid of it. As the Buddha said, your response is twofold: bewilderment and then a search for someone who might help get you past this pain. In the beginning, the "someone" is your parents. But you find that there are pains that your parents can't assuage, so you go looking for other people.

So we're always looking for something. As the Buddha said, for most of us, life is a search. The only people for whom it's *not* a search are people who are already awakened. Everybody else is looking for something.

The search that's most worthwhile to conduct, he said, is a noble search, one that looks for a way out of pain and suffering, and ends up finding a happiness that's reliable, harmless, and will not change—a happiness free from birth, aging, illness, and death. That's the kind of search that's really worth it. And it requires that you develop skills and do battle with your unskillful tendencies.

So it's good to think about where, as a meditator, you're similar to a person developing a skill and where you're similar to a warrior. And the list of qualities comes down to the factors for awakening.

In both cases, you have to be mindful. In the case of the person developing a skill, you have to remember the lessons you've learned from others and from what you've done in the past so that you can compare them with what you're doing right now as you develop your skill.

Then you use the factor the Buddha called analysis of qualities, where you actually examine what you're doing and make comparisons: Is this as good as you can do it, or could it be better? If it's not as good as you can do it, what are you doing wrong? You look at your own physical motions. Say, you're making an object, like a pot. You look at the motions of your hands and your body as you try to shape the pot. But you also look at the attitude of the mind. Where is your mind right now? Is it on what you're doing or is it wandering off someplace else? If you're a person developing a skill, you have to be right there.

Years back, I was visiting a huge pottery shed in Thailand and I watched a potter throw a pot on a wheel. I mentioned to him, "You must have good concentration in order to keep that up." And he said, "Yes, your mind has to be set straight." In other words, you've got to be steadily right there. Then you have to be able to notice when your hand has moved off in the wrong direction, and to figure out what you need to do in order to bring it back.

This is where analysis of qualities moves into persistence. You've got to keep at it and keep at it. You can't be mindful and alert and concentrated just for a few moments and then start thinking about other things, hoping that your hands will be able to do things on their own. You've got to be right there on top of what you're doing.

Then, as the Buddha said, when you develop the quality of being really persistent at being skillful, there arises a rapture not-of-the-flesh—in other words, the happiness that comes from doing something well. This is not the happiness of gaining a thing or a pleasant sensation. It's the deeper happiness that comes from knowing you've mastered something.

And then to support all this, you need the qualities of calm, concentration, and equanimity. Calm keeps you balanced and at ease so that you can stick with your craft easily for long periods of time. Concentration keeps you focused on what you're doing. Equanimity is needed to observe things carefully so that you can make clear and accurate judgments.

Here, as we meditate, we're observing the mind as we're trying to get it calm and still, because when it gets still, you see things more clearly. But we don't simply stop with the calm and the stillness. When you look at the list of the factors for awakening, they move from mindfulness and the discernment in analysis of qualities on through concentration and equanimity—but they don't

stop there. You have to take the equanimity and the concentration and turn them around to look at what you're doing—Where are you causing yourself unnecessary suffering?—in the same way that a potter has to keep looking to see what he's doing well, what he's not doing well. He has to have a certain equanimity about when things are working and when they're not.

If you don't have equanimity and steadiness of mind, then when things are not working, you get upset. It gets in the way of solving the problem. And sometimes it even gets in the way of being willing to recognize the problem.

The same list of qualities apply to a warrior: The warrior has to be mindful to remember what he's learned both in school—if he went to warrior school—and what he's learned from his own battles in the past. And, like the skilled potter, he has to have some ability to analyze his own actions, as well as the actions of the enemy, to see what he needs to do. This requires some ingenuity.

As we've heard many times, armies usually prepare for war by preparing for the last war. That's how we live our lives even in peacetime. But, of course, new things come up in each new war. It's only the people who've developed their ingenuity who are able to solve the new problems as they arise. This also applies to you as a meditator. New things will come up. Not every defilement or distraction that comes into the mind is explained in the texts or the Dhamma talks you've heard. You've got to figure out: Where exactly is the allure of this particular instance of greed, aversion, or delusion?

You may not be able to foresee the particulars of a particular defilement, but you *can* learn the basic principles of how to approach a problem skillfully. You look for the allure. And you look for the drawbacks. You look to see, when something comes up in the mind, why you go for it. And then you look at the results, to see the harm they cause. If you're being very honest with yourself, this is where, again, the qualities of calm and equanimity come together with persistence.

You keep at this. But notice, the equanimity of a warrior is not the equanimity that says, "I'll just put up with whatever. If I lose, that's okay. If I win, that's okay." You have to want to win—really want to win. Remember the desire that underlies the search for victory. Equanimity is for the instances where, if you do lose a battle, you can't let yourself get upset. You just prepare for the next battle. What you want is the equanimity that persists, that doesn't give up, and that also works together with a sense of well-being when you've won a war or when you've done something well. This, in the factors for awakening, would be called rapture or *pīti*, a word that also means refreshment. It's basically an energizing quality that comes when you've mastered a skill or won a battle.

You also need the ability to keep the mind calm in the midst of all the things that are coming at you. Imagine what it's like to be in a battle. Arrows are flying. People are yelling all sorts of insults and threats at you. In one of the images in the Canon, the Buddha says you've got to be like an elephant in battle: Horrifying sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations are going to come at it in the course of the battle, but the elephant can't lose heart, can't let himself be affected by them. As a meditator—both as you're living in daily life and as you're meeting up with difficulties in your meditation—you can't let yourself get discouraged. You've got to maintain your calm and concentrate on what really needs to be done.

So when you think about these analogies—the skilled craftsman, the warrior—it helps you to understand what the Buddha's talking about when he talks about mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity: all the factors for awakening. You're not just simply being calm and equanimous, telling yourself that the mind is a lot calmer when it isn't trying than when it is trying. That doesn't get anywhere. When you're working on your concentration, you have to really want to get the mind concentrated. You have to want to do the path for it to work.

The people who tell you that the desire for awakening is the one thing that's going to keep you from being awakened are people who don't know how to handle their desires. As the Buddha said, all phenomena, or *dhammas*, are rooted in desire and that includes the path to awakening.

Awakening itself is not rooted in desire. It's not a thing. Nibbana isn't even a phenomenon, according to the Buddha. But the path *is* a phenomenon and it has to be based on desire. This means that you have to learn how to train your desires so that, instead of getting in the way, they inform and nurture your mindfulness, your analysis of qualities, persistence, and concentration. And they have to inform even your calm and equanimity. You do this by approaching the path as a craftsman searching to master a skill or as a warrior in search of victory.

The knowledge we gain along the path is not the kind of knowledge we can get from books. Books are helpful. They give us pointers. They tell us where to look, what questions to ask. But *we're* the ones who have to find the answers, using our own ingenuity, so that in the search for awakening we really do find what we're looking for: something that is timeless, deathless, something that doesn't disappoint and doesn't cause harm.

So think of these analogies and practice in line with them. Do what you can to be up for the challenge of the practice, because there are a lot of things in the mind that won't be willing to go away nicely once you've decided you want to find

awakening. They want to hold on. And where do they come from? They come from your own actions. This is what makes it difficult, because sometimes you feel that you're getting rid of part of yourself, like cutting off your own arm. You're passing judgment on part of yourself. But that's what the analysis of qualities is all about: passing judgment wisely.

You're passing judgment on your past actions and sometimes your present habits. But you have to pass judgment in a mature way. As you practice, you'll be seeing certain desires that you used to go for, that you really identified with, and you'll have to see them as enemies. And as the *ajans* say, there are two ways of dealing with enemies. One is to fight them off and chase them out; the other is to try to convert them. But even when you convert them, you've got to be very mindful and very alert and very heedful. Otherwise, when they get their chance, they'll try to turn around and convert *you*. So it's not an easy task. It requires all your ingenuity in finding ways of giving yourself strength—and getting the mind concentrated and calm is one of those ways.

In one of the Buddha's analogies, he describes the practice as being like defending a frontier fortress. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper who makes sure the wrong people don't come into the fortress. Then there are the soldiers of right effort, to fight the enemy; and the plastered wall of discernment, which provides the enemy with no footholds. And you've got concentration, which provides food for the soldiers and the gatekeeper: the food of rapture and calm. And the equanimity is there in the concentration, too, to help you see things clearly: not just to stay where you are, but to see clearly what needs to be done, what has to be accepted, what does not have to be accepted in defending the fortress. When you've got all these qualities working together, you can protect the fortress, and you have the strength and the nourishment to keep at it successfully.

So this is what the concentration is for. It's not just resting for the sake of resting. It's resting for the sake of strength. It's resting for the sake of the tasks that need to be done. One of the forest *ajans* made a comparison: When you get the mind into calm and concentration, he said, it's like piling up all the materials you're going to need to build a house. But then if you just stay right there, you'll simply have a pile of materials. It won't give you the shelter you need. The next step is to build the house so that you can get some real use out of it. Building the house stands for using your concentration to gain discernment.

This means that we practice concentration, we get the mind calm, we focus on the present moment as nourishment, as strength, as materials that we then fashion with our skills, so that we can find the object of our search—and find an object at the end of the search that really puts an end to searches. That's the point where

the craftsman can put down his or her tools. As a warrior, you can put down your weapons because you've found a victory that exceeds all your possible desires.

So we don't deny that we have desires. We simply learn how to train them to be mindful and wise, and to approach our happiness as something that requires a skill to master. When we see the path as a question of mastering skills, that's when we really understand it and we can carry through with it, realizing that sometimes it'll involve battles. We make the path our own and give ourselves the chance to emerge victorious.