

# *To Escape the Prison of Time*

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My background in school was in intellectual history—what’s sometimes called the history of ideas. And one of the basic premises of intellectual history is that if you want to understand a person’s thought, you have to know when he or she lived, and what the other people of the time were thinking.

The underlying premise there, of course, is that each person is a prisoner of his or her own time. It was a rare individual who could think outside the box. Sometimes the box would change just a little bit, and then the new box would become the prison for the people of the next generation.

But somehow the practice of intellectual history itself seemed to be standing outside of time. In other words, they’d figured out all the other times, but somehow it was more objective, and wasn’t subject to its own rules.

When I met Ajaan Fuang, that got all overturned. I began to realize that I was a prisoner of my own time. It took a while though.

When I first went to Thailand and learned about Buddhism, people were telling me that the Buddha taught the truth about this, the truth about that, but my background kept telling me, “Well, he saw the truth through the lens of his own time. He might have some useful insights for us now, but we’d have to bring him up to date.”

But as I said, meeting Ajaan Fuang turned that over. I saw now that I was a prisoner of my own time, and the Buddha was the one who’d stepped out of time. After all, in his awakening, he did step outside of space and time. He saw that there was a happiness that existed outside of space and time, but it could be attained by the actions we do in space and time.

The event of his awakening was *the* primary event in world history, and the insights he gained are always valid. As he said at one point, the knowledge he gained in his awakening was like the leaves in a forest, but what he taught was a handful of leaves. He taught that handful of leaves because it would be of use to people to put an end to their own suffering. He parts he didn’t teach wouldn’t have been useful that way.

There’s one passage where he talks about the many powers he gained through his awakening, but there are three in particular that he kept repeating over and over again in many passages in the Canon: One was knowledge of previous lifetimes. The second was knowledge of how beings, after their death, are reborn in line with their karma. And the third was the knowledge of how to put an end to the effluents, in other words, the currents of defilement that come flowing out of the mind and that lead to more becoming and more suffering. Those are the three knowledges that he found most useful to tell. Then, of course after gaining those knowledges, he gained awakening to nibbāna, which is something deathless.

Those are all the premises we need. You might think of them as premises for skillful action.

This is why faith in the Buddha's awakening, or conviction in the Buddha's awakening is so important. We don't like the word *faith*—it's become the f-word in modern Buddhism—but there are certain things we have to believe if we want to find true happiness.

One is that our course through life doesn't begin with this particular birth or end with the death of this body; it's been ongoing for a long time, and it's going to continue to be ongoing unless we put a stop to it. This means that when we plan an action, we have to consider the very long-term consequences, not only in this lifetime, but also into future ones. From the second knowledge, we have the principle that how we are reborn is going to be determined by our actions, which are intentions—which in turn are determined by our views. And our views, of course, are going to be determined by the extent to which we have respect for the noble ones.

We give them trust because the basic principle they teach is that actions based on greed, aversion, and delusion are going to lead to suffering. Actions based on an absence of those things are going to lead in the direction of happiness. So we have to look at the intentions in our minds, and the motivations for why we're acting. That's where we'll find what makes a difference between a course of action that leads to suffering and a course of action that leads away from suffering.

And finally, from the third knowledge, there's the principle that if we focus on the problem of suffering and its cause, and if we learn the path of action that can put an end to its cause, we'll find true happiness. And a large part of that path of action is right view. When the Buddha gave the most succinct statement of his awakening, it was the principle of causality: When this is that is, from the arising of this, comes the arising of that. When this isn't that isn't, from the passing away of this comes the passing away of that. That's the principle of causality underlying right view.

Actually, it's two principles of causation interacting: one in which causes and their effects arise at the same time and disappear at the same time; and another in which there's causality over time—something you do now will lead to a result later on.

The experience of the present moment is a combination of those two. If you think about those principles, you realize that they open the way for freedom of choice. If everything were determined by your past actions, you'd have no freedom, but there is something in the present moment that allows you to come up with something *now*, that will have an effect *now*... and on into the future.

Now, because there's a pattern to what is skillful and unskillful, but there's also room to adjust the forces of cause and effect, you have principle that provides the possibility for learning skills. After all, if there were no pattern, then what you learned today wouldn't help you at all tomorrow. If the pattern were ironclad—in other words, totally predetermined—you'd have no choice to even try to develop a skill. But here there's a pattern with room for

choice, which opens the possibility for developing the path as a skill—it's something we can *choose* to do.

So these are all basic premises that we need for having trust in the fact that our actions will make a difference, and that we can learn skills that will give better and better results.

This is what the Buddha brought back from stepping outside of time. And the best results of acting on his premises are that your actions take you to a threshold, beyond which you're outside of time, too. So you can use actions within time to get out of time, which is where the best happiness is—because any happiness that's in time is going to disappear as time changes.

After all, where's the body that you were twenty years ago, ten years ago? Where are your feelings? You may have memories of the past, but they're very much subject to change, and can often be unreliable. You look within time and you can find very little solidity, very little opportunity to settle in and say, "Okay, this is a good safe place." If you're really serious about happiness, the only happiness that's really going to be satisfactory will have to be a happiness that's outside of space and time.

So these are the Buddha's premises on the nature and the power of action. Now, he never said he could prove them to you, aside from getting you to follow his teachings and proving them for yourself. In the very beginning, he said, it's like a gamble, but it's a good bet. He listed to a whole series of practices about which he said that if you take them on and it turns out that he was wrong, at the very least, you still lead a blameless life.

Like developing the four brahmaviharas: You develop goodwill for all, compassion for all, empathetic joy, equanimity—all around. When you do, your actions are bound to be more skillful, less harmful. And if it turns out there is no rebirth, or actions don't have consequences, at the very least you can be honorable in your intentions.

For instance, say you believe in the principle of the power of action, that you have choices: You reflect that if you believed that you *didn't* have any choices, that belief would close the door to the possibility of any path of practice. If you accept as a working hypothesis that your actions will make a difference, that opens possibilities. So if your basic premises for your actions require that you place bets as to what would be the most fruitful premises, it's good to gamble on the ones that open more possibilities—because you don't want to close honorable opportunities off simply because you don't know.

So the possibility of stepping outside of becoming, putting an end to becoming and going beyond it: That's something you take on as a working hypothesis. In other words, you place your bets on the idea that a deathless happiness is possible. That's a safer hypothesis than saying it's not possible. If you believe it's not possible, then you're never going to do the actions that might possibly take you there. Now, if it turns out that it's not true, still you've lived an honorable life. So even at the very beginning, it's a good bet.

But it doesn't stay just a bet. Some people say, "Well, here the Buddha himself is saying he doesn't really know." He's not saying that at all. He's saying that people who approach the path

have to decide whether they're going to gamble on the path or not—because action is a gamble. There's so much we don't know. But here the Buddha is offering a possibility that your thoughts, your words, and your deeds have the potential to lead to something beyond them. And then you follow the path and, as he said, the point at which you step outside of time yourself: That's when you've proven for yourself that what the Buddha said was true.

From that point on you have what he calls *verified confidence* in his awakening. You have a witness—your own experience. And you realize that what he said about suffering coming from within was true. This knowledge is implicit in the principle of the Dhamma eye: “Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.” Now, notice this statement is not saying, “Everything that arises is going to cease or pass away.” “Subject to origination” means *caused*, and when the Buddha uses the word “origination,” it's almost always in the context of things that are caused from within the mind.

What's radical about the experience of the deathless is that you begin to see that even your experience of the six senses is originated. In other words, there are conditions that flow from within that determine how you're going to see and hear and smell and taste and touch and think about things. When those internal causes are ended, your connection with the world of the senses ends as well. At least it stops for the time being, and that's what opens the possibility for an experience of the deathless.

It's from that experience that even that thought, *all that is subject to origination*, would naturally occur as a valid realization. In other words, you're not just making a vague generalization about things in general. You've seen something that's *not* subject to origination and is also not subject to cessation. You realize that it's radically different from everything else you've ever experienced. Everything else you've experienced prior to that falls into *whatever is subject to origination*.

As for your verified confidence in the Buddha, you realize that your experience of time didn't start with the date of your birth, but that it stretches for a long time before then. You may not have specific memories of previous lifetimes, but you get a new perspective on time by stepping out of it. And then you realize that, yes, it was your actions, the choices you've made—that allowed you to step out in this way. Which is why your virtues now become virtues pleasing to the noble ones. They're solid, they're sure, but at the same time you don't create a sense of pride around them. As the Buddha says, you don't “make yourself” out of the virtues. You use them as tools to reach full awakening.

And then there's the fact that there is an awareness that's there even as the aggregates fall away. After all, the aggregates are, as the Buddha said, “near and far, past, present, and future.” In other words, they're in the coordinates of space and time, but there's still an awareness even after those coordinates fade away. So there's no reason why you'd ever want to identify with the aggregates, or build an identity around them ever again.

So it's in this way that you're freed from certain fetters, even with just the first taste of the deathless.

What's especially good is that you're freed of your doubt. You've seen for yourself that what the Buddha said is true. You realize that his awakening really was *the* main event in world history, and that the knowledge he shared based on his awakening is knowledge worth taking to heart, worth having faith in, worth testing to see if what he said was really true. If you're still at the very beginning where you don't know, at the very least you look at the path and can see that it's an honorable path. It allows you to hold yourself pure at least in terms of your intentions—and that's a lot to begin with right there.

This is why he said the path is “admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end.” It starts by your dedicating yourself to the purity of your intentions, and it leads to something that goes beyond intentions—something that's really worth experiencing for yourself.

So. Faith in the Buddha, conviction in the Buddha's awakening, is a really good investment: It pays off in more ways than you can imagine.