

## *Exploring Possibilities*

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*July 25, 2004*

When you meditate, you're exploring. You're not trying to program the mind in line with somebody else's notions of what it has to do. You're exploring possibilities. Can you stay with the breath? How long can you stay with the breath? Can you make yourself stay with the breath longer than you might have thought possible? Where are the little gaps where mindfulness lapses? Can you bridge those gaps? Can you relate to the breath in a friendly way? These are the questions you set up, and then you explore. This is important to remember: that even though the Buddha has explored this territory himself and all the noble disciples have explored it – they've sent back reports on what can be found here – still for each of us it's a process of exploration. We're testing the Buddha's teachings. Is it possible, as he said, to find true happiness, a happiness that doesn't change?

As we explore, all the answers we arrive at then become questions we use to keep the mind pointed in the right direction. As you sit and meditate, you often come up with interesting insights, uncover things about the mind that you never noticed before, possibilities that you had never realized were possible. Often a weight is lifted off the mind. But sometimes your tendency is to focus on the world outside. You suddenly see the world in a new way: "The world is perfect as it is." Or, "The world is illusory." Those aren't the insights the Buddha focused on. He focused more on what it's possible for the mind to do. Can it operate in a way that it doesn't create suffering for itself?

As you meditate you begin to catch sight of little moments in the mind where things seem a lot less weighty than they did before. You feel less burdened by different concerns, long-term or short-term. But it's important in each case to turn around and look: What did you just learn about how the mind can function? How was it functioning in the past? How about the new way of functioning you've suddenly discovered? How is it better?

Sometimes it may be a general psychological issue. People who have problems with guilt and blame suddenly find a moment without that guilt and blame. It's possible to look at the world without the guilt and blame. That's an important insight, just to remind yourself that it's possible. You don't have to carry these things around. But as to what the insight says about the world – Is the world perfect as it is? Are you perfect as you are? – that's a more controversial issue.

And it's not what the Buddha said to focus on. Focus on the fact that it's possible for you not to be carrying this weight around continually. The next time

you detect it coming up, remember that you have the choice of putting it down. Just the realization that you've been able to do it once: That's liberating. It expands the range of your imagination. Remind yourself that there is that possibility.

Sometimes the insights are related more directly to the meditation itself. It's possible to relate to the breath in a particular way. It's possible to relate to your feelings in a particular way. In other words, you don't have to identify with them. You begin to see them. Awareness really is separate from these things. It doesn't have to take on—lay claim—to these things as being yours. That opens up a possibility in the mind. You see that, for a moment, the mind was totally without any sense of identification with these things. It's possible.

Many of the possibilities we uncover in the mind are skills we've already mastered in other areas, just that we haven't applied them consistently. There have been many times when feelings have come up in the mind and we don't identify with them, but we don't notice the fact. What meditation does is to help us notice that we can apply that skill in areas where we hadn't applied it before. So when a particular state of mindful alertness or concentration arises in the mind, it's important that you try to maintain it in all sorts of different situations, for this helps you gain just that sort of insight: realizing that the habits you've found useful in one area of your life can be used in other areas as well.

After all, you don't go around holding on to all your cravings all of the time; you have to let go of one craving in order to pick up another one. The habit of letting go of craving is something we all have developed unconsciously. The problem is that when we let go of one craving it's usually because another, more compelling, one has come along. We let go of one craving only to pick up another. But we do have the ability to let go of a craving. The drawback is that we do it unconsciously and as part of another process, the process of picking up something else. What the Buddha teaches is a new process: that you can let go, let go, let go, without picking up anything else. If something is causing you suffering, if something is causing you pain, you can let it go. It might still be hanging around, but you're not holding onto it. That makes all the difference in the world.

It's like living near fire. As long as you're not grasping the fire, you're okay. You don't have to drive fire out of the world. If you tried to, of course, it would be impossible. And even if you could, you'd create all sorts of hardships for yourself when you want to cook food. All you have to do is let go of it and you're okay. You don't have to grab hold. Our problem is that we learn how to let go of one fire but we find other kinds of fire and hold on to those. And we think that somehow it's different. "These are the fires you have to hold on to. That other fire you could let go of because it's unimportant. But these ones are more important." Or, "It's there in the mind, so you have to grab on, because you have to hold on to everything that comes into the mind."

An important part of insight is realizing that you don't have to hold on. Things can be there in the mind and you don't have to lay claim to them, you don't have to let yourself be influenced by them. It's possible. And you try to apply that possibility to other areas of your life that you wouldn't have thought of before. But as you try to develop these good habits, expand their range, you still run into old bad habits that you've carried around for who know how long. Just focusing on the breath, if you try it continually, you run into all the issues that you're used to creating around any activity, any job any responsibility. They're going to come in to mess up your focus, to push and pull and mess up the breath.

Which is why this is such a good place to take the mind. After all, the breath is going to come in, it's going to go out, all on its own. You don't have to do the pushing in, the pulling out. When you realize that, you begin to see the pushing and pulling habits you picked up from other jobs, other responsibilities, that are totally irrelevant here and actually get in the way. When you see clearly how they get in the way, remember that, because they often get in the way in other activities in life as well. In this way the breath is a good testing ground for learning about the habits of your mind.

Years back, when I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, he said, "Your only responsibility in all your activities is to stay with the breath." He meant it in a way to unload my mind, to clear away thoughts of other responsibilities. What it did of course was to make the breath seem suddenly onerous. It was a weight. It was a responsibility, something I had to worry about all the time. But then as I worked with it, one of the big lessons came in learning how to be with that responsibility and not make it a weight, not make it a burden. After all, why should the breath be a burden? It's what you do to stay alive. It's the basic process, the basic force that keeps you alive.

That was a good lesson in seeing how the mind can create problems out of even the simplest things, things that are in its own interest. Learning how to be with the breath comfortably, learning how to breathe comfortably: You can make that a big issue, a big weight. But if you step back a little bit, you realize how ridiculous that is. And that ability – to step back and look at things and say, "Wait a minute, this isn't right. You're creating unnecessary problems for yourself" – is what opens you to new possibilities. Seeing that your old, unskillful habits are unnecessary is what allows you to let them go.

And noticing *how* you let them go is important as well, because then you can take that insight and you apply it to other areas where you're making yourself miserable for no good reason at all. You realize that it's possible to let go. Even though there are problems in the world, there are issues in the world, things you've got to be responsible for, still you don't have to weigh yourself down with them all the time. It's possible. This is what the insights are all about. You see possibilities in the mind, possibilities for letting go of old habits that create suffering.

So when anything new comes up in the mind, keep reflecting back on that question: What does this new mind state show about the mind's possibilities? What does it show about how the mind can relate to things in a way that involves less suffering? Keep your questions directed in this area and you'll learn useful things.

We were talking today about the insight of seeing the world as perfect just as it is. That's directing your attention in the wrong direction. You're not supposed to think about the world as being perfect or imperfect. Instead, turn around and ask, "What did that just teach you about the mind?" It may have shown you how you've made the imperfection of the world into a burden. Do you feel personally responsible for it? Do you carry guilt around about it? Is it possible not to carry that guilt and still function skillfully, helpfully, in the world? That's the important question of the insight, because it then becomes a skill you can apply to other things.

If your attention gets directed out to the world, as to whether the world is perfect or not, you can argue for days and days and days and get nowhere at all. People in a comfortable position might say that it's perfect; people starving in Africa would say that it's not. But if you look at the insight as an opportunity to see that you've developed a new skill in the mind, you can drop the way of thinking that wants to pass judgment on the world. Then you can remember the new skill and apply it to how you function in other areas as well.

This is why Ajaan Fuang was not interested in hearing about your meditation experiences unless you could keep them going for a while. If you asked him about a meditative state, he'd ask, "Are you in there right now?" And you'd say, "Well, no." Then he'd say, "Go back and work on it." In other words, when you've gained a state of concentration, gained an insight into the workings of the mind, see if you can maintain it as a skill. Whatever you've learned, look at it as a skill that has shown you a new possibility in the mind. Then see how much you can apply that skill to other areas. That's the test of your insight. Some skills are universally applicable. Others are useful only for specific problems. You learn about your new skill by trying to apply it to everything and then seeing, "Well, it doesn't work here, it doesn't work here, but it *does* work here." As I said, many of the skills you learn in the process of meditation are things that you've already been able to do in other areas. It's simply a question of learning how to apply them right here, in the context of the mind's quest for true happiness, in this area where you can really watch things carefully as they happen in the present moment.

So we're here to explore possibilities in the mind. Remember the Buddha's own quest began with a desire that all of his friends told him was an impossibility: the desire for a true happiness that doesn't change. His friends all said, "Don't even bother. It's impossible. Nobody has ever attempted anything like this. All the great people of the past have satisfied themselves with the ordinary everyday pleasures." And Prince Siddhartha's response was, "In that

case, they're not so great. They're not worthy of respect." He was determined to find if this was possible: a true happiness where there was no suffering at all, the total end of suffering. And he explored and explored and explored and found that it *was* possible.

We're now in a world where we've heard that that possibility is there. It's been attempted, and reliable people claim that it works, that they've found a true happiness. So we can follow their teachings. But it's interesting: In following their teachings, they never ask us to follow them simply by rote or accept them without proof. They ask us to explore as well, because it's only through exploration that you're going to learn these things for yourself. They teach us how to explore our own minds. That's what the Buddha's instructions are all about. He says, "Try this, try that. Here's a range of useful tools. See what insights you gain into your own minds. Look for the workings of the mind that cause unnecessary suffering."

So as we practice, it's not an issue of being obedient or not. It's a question of looking into our own minds, using the tools the Buddha gave us to explore the possibilities that are here. That way we'll be able to prove for ourselves if it's really possible. Can you live without suffering? Can the mind function without causing suffering? Can you be more skillful in how you fashion your experience in the present moment? Can you get to the point where you don't fashion anything? Is that a possibility? The only way you can answer that question is to keep exploring on your own. It requires work and dedication, but the payoff is great even if you don't get all the way to full Awakening. You find that you do learn ways of causing less and less and less suffering for yourself all the time. That, in and of itself, is worth it. The insights you gain, if they're genuine, carry their own reward.

I've mentioned several times that Ajaan Fuang never certified whether you had attained a particular level of concentration or a particular level of insight. He had lots of reasons for doing this, but one is that if the insight really is genuine, it's its own reward. You don't need to be patted on the back. You know for yourself that there's less suffering. You see something in the mind that you didn't see before and as a result you've learned a new skill. You've unburdened the mind. It doesn't suffer in the way it used to. That's of great worth in and of itself.

So keep looking into the possibilities. Always be open to the idea that things you thought were impossible, burdens you thought could never be laid down – in fact they seemed such a permanent part of the mind that you didn't even realize that you've been carrying them around – *can* be laid down. Explore that possibility. That's what the meditation is all about.