

# Impossible Things

*November, 2002 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

There's a character in *Through the Looking Glass* who says that he likes to think about two or three impossible things every morning before breakfast. It helps air out his mind. That's a good strategy for us as meditators — think about a couple of impossible things every day: that you're going to master the concentration, you're going to taste the Deathless.

Of course these things, strictly speaking, are not impossible, but a lot of voices in our minds seem to insist that they are. So it's good to think about impossibilities every now and again to change the tone of the conversation.

Remind yourself that your life isn't already written in stone, that you're not a slave to fate or a little nameless cog in the big machine. You're actually a doer, a mover, a shaper. You can shape your life in the direction you want it to go.

The Buddha said that there are four types of action in the world: things we like to do that give good results, things we don't like to do that give bad results, things we like to do that give bad results, and things we don't like to do that give good results. The first two are no-brainers. Without even thinking, you do the things that you like to do and give good results. There's no conflict in the mind. The same holds true for things you don't like to do that give bad results. You don't want to do them. There's no discussion. The committee is unanimous.

The difficult actions are the ones you like to do but give bad results and the ones you don't like to do but give good results. The Buddha had an interesting comment on these two. He said they're a measure of a person's wisdom and discernment. He didn't say they're a measure of your willpower. You need to use discernment to do the things you don't like to do but give good results and to not do the things you like to do but give bad results. The discernment lies not only in seeing the connection between cause and effect in each case, but also in outmaneuvering the committee members who just want to do what they want to do regardless. It learns to see through the blockades that the mind puts up for itself, the difficulties it creates for itself, and figures out how to get past them.

One of the biggest difficulties we create for ourselves is our self-image. We notice that it's difficult to do things that are good for us and easy to do things that are not good for us, and we come to think that our nature is to be lazy, or that the lazy side of the mind is our true self, because the other side obviously takes effort. The lazy side of the mind is the one that just goes with the flow, so that must be who we truly are. That's what we think, but that kind of thinking is really self-destructive.

We may remember the times when we've done the right thing — when we've meditated, followed the precepts, lived in line with the Dhamma — but all we can think about is how much effort it took. So we say, "That must not truly be me. That must be somebody else. I must be the person who does things that are easy, I must be lazy, I must have very poor willpower." That kind of attitude is a huge misunderstanding. The things that are difficult are hard for everybody. Rather than creating a self-image about it, though, wise people just think, "How can I maneuver around this laziness? How can I maneuver around this negative attitude?" They experiment and try different approaches until they find what works.

This is what you have to try to do in your meditation. If you find yourself up against that kind of obstacle, learn to take your self-image apart. Realize that your self is not a given, the image itself is not a given. It's a pattern, it's a habit, this kind of self-imaging you have. If it gets in the way of what you really want, then no matter how much it screams that "this is your true self," you have to question it. You have to take it apart. Don't believe it.

No matter how much the mind may say it doesn't want to struggle, that's just one part of the mind. There's another part that does want to attempt the struggle, does want to have the strength, does want to see things through. The lazy side has sabotaged that by saying, "That's not really me." Well, who is this lazy side? Why would you want to identify with it? You have the choice.

Try to find the holes in its arguments, learn how to take things apart. You have to learn to deconstruct the negative habits in the mind. The first step is to question their truth, their validity. After all, the Buddha said that the mind can be trained, and that happiness comes from the training. If people couldn't change, there'd be no point in teaching the Dhamma. There'd be no point in trying to practice. The truth of the matter, though, is that we all have the potential for change. Each moment is a new moment, a moment with an element of freedom.

Then there's the part of the mind that says, "Okay, you can choose to do the right thing right now, but it's not going to last very long." You have to question that, too. The best way to question it is to choose to do the right thing for at least the next moment and the next moment and the next moment and then say, "See? I can do it." The negative side will come up with all kinds of other arguments, but you have to be determined not to listen to them, not to believe them. Try to figure out ways to undercut the part of the mind that does believe them.

It's kind of like internal politics. There are certain voices that come screaming at you all the time, and you've learned to give in to them, sometimes simply because of their force. If you stop and really look at them, though, you see that there's not much there that you'd really like to give in to. So you have to create other voices in the mind. The path is something you create, after all. It's something you put together. In technical terms it's *sankhata dhamma*, something you put together.

The question is not whether you naturally like it or not. That's one of the main, common misunderstandings in American Buddhism right now: this sense that you can choose whichever path you like and it won't matter because all the paths come out the same in the end. Well, there are paths that work, and there are paths that don't. A path you happen to like isn't necessarily going to take you where you really want to go.

So there has to be an element of struggle. There has to be an element of putting something new together, of not falling back into old ways. When you stop to think of it, when you fall into old ways there's an element of construction, you're creating that old sense of self over and over every time you give in to it. Is that the kind of self you want to create? You have the option to create something else.

For many of us, we don't like the responsibility because if we're responsible that means we're going to be responsible for our mistakes. So you have to ask, "Well, so what?" Everybody makes mistakes. Even the Buddha made mistakes before he became the Buddha. This is where we're all coming from.

This is why *sanghanussati*, recollection of the Sangha, is such a useful contemplation. Sometimes it's hard to compare yourself to the Buddha, but you can compare yourself to members of the noble Sangha. People who followed the Buddha's teachings were of all kinds. There were lepers, poor people, rich people, all kinds of people. One famous pair was Mahapandaka

and Culapandaka. They were brothers. Mahapandaka was the older brother; Culapandaka, the younger brother. Mahapandaka was very smart, Culapandaka was very dumb, yet both of them became arahants. There are all kinds of people in the noble Sangha. Everyone in the noble Sangha has been where you are now, in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of their minds. What made the difference is that they finally decided that they were going to use those strengths to overcome those weaknesses. And the first step was simply thinking that it could be done. If they could do it, so can you. It may seem impossible, but you can get used to thinking impossible things.

After all, the Buddha was told that it was impossible, the idea that there could be a Deathless, that there could be something better than what he already had. There he was: wealthy, educated, good looking, powerful. He had all the sensual objects and pleasures that anyone could imagine, and he still wasn't satisfied. His family and friends said, "Don't kid yourself. The Deathless isn't possible. This is as good as it gets."

He said, "Well, if this is as good as it gets, then life is pretty miserable, because it's all going to fall apart someday." So he set out to find the impossible — and he found it. We may not feel up to comparing ourselves to the Buddha, but there are lots of noble disciples who must have felt at some point that true happiness must be an impossibility, that for them to change must be an impossible thing. But then one day they decided to do the impossible. That's how they ended up being members of the noble Sangha. The point being, of course, that what we think is impossible is not necessarily impossible. We've just allowed ourselves to be limited.

When I first ordained, I found that the scariest part of being ordained was that so much more was demanded of me. When you live in normal society, people's expectations, people's standards, are not all that high. It's not all that difficult to live up to them. But suddenly when there's the possibility of working for the Deathless, it seems overwhelming. There's part of the mind that wants to run back to the shelter of what seems easier to handle. But of course what's easier to handle also brings on more suffering.

As the Buddha said, "Lay life is hard. Life as a renunciate is hard." But at least life as a renunciate takes you someplace really worth going to. When you finally make up your mind that you're really going to train yourself, it makes that goal less of an impossibility.

So try to overcome that barrier in your mind that deep down someplace says, "I can't do this." Question it. Why would you want to believe that? Who in

your mind is saying that? It's the part of the mind that doesn't want to make an effort. Do you want to identify with that part of the mind? You can if you want to, but you don't have to. You have the opportunity of identifying with better voices in the mind. It's your choice. No matter how impossible it may seem, it is your choice.