

**A Buddhist Perspective on Energy Bending,  
Strength, and the Power of Aang's Spirit**

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When Aang exits the Avatar State after besting Fire Lord Ozai (now the Phoenix King) in battle, Ozai hurls a critical accusation: “Even with all the power in the world, you are still weak!” Ozai’s accusation frames power as a tool for domination, and strength as a willingness to dominate at any cost. From Ozai’s perspective, Aang has all the power in the world because the Avatar State enables Aang to conquer any foe, but Aang is weak because, when exiting the Avatar State, he shows an unwillingness to defeat the Fire Nation by killing his enemy. Because he views Aang as weak, Ozai is confident that Aang cannot use his power to win. Ozai thus moves to attack once more.

Aang is unwilling to kill Ozai in order to secure peace. But this unwillingness allows Aang to find a winning strategy that does not reproduce Ozai’s violence. Aang’s alternative involves making his spirit vulnerable to Ozai’s. Binding Ozai in place with earth, Aang places one hand on Ozai’s

forehead, another on his chest. When their spirits mingle, Ozai's energy begins to consume Aang's. Aang is very nearly corrupted by Ozai. But Aang prevails. Energy erupts from Aang's eyes and proceeds to engulf Ozai. Aang secures peace, not by killing his enemy, but by removing the firebending ability that made Ozai fearsome and powerful.

During Aang's intermingling with Fire Lord Ozai, the voice of a Lion Turtle hints at the reason why Aang prevails. "In the era before the Avatar, we bent not the elements but the energy within ourselves. To bend another's energy, your own spirit must be unbendable or you will be corrupted and destroyed." The Lion Turtle's remark indicates that Aang's alternative strategy involves bending Ozai's energy, and that Aang is victorious because his spirit is unbendable while Ozai's presumably is bendable. This raises several questions.

1. What is it for a spirit to be unbendable?
2. What is it to bend another's energy?
3. Does Aang's ability to bend Ozai's spirit refute Ozai's accusation that Aang is weak?
4. What does Aang's ability indicate about what it means to be powerful?

The Lion Turtle's remark directly motivates the first two questions. Aang's final confrontation with Ozai motivates the other two. As we shall see, none of the

answers are obvious, but Buddhism can help us understand the answers and the story.

### **Powerful Vulnerability**

Ozai's conception of power and strength offers one approach to answering these questions. On his conception, bending another's energy is a matter of dominating their spirit in order to manipulate their powers, and someone's spirit is unbendable whenever it is capable of resisting any such manipulation by others. So Aang defeats Ozai by dominating Ozai's spirit, and Aang's spirit is unbendable because the power of the Avatar allows Aang to resist Ozai's energy. Moreover, on this conception, Aang is clever but not weak. Aang is willing to do whatever it takes to dominate Ozai, but his cleverness allows him to find a non-lethal strategy for doing so. This cleverness, together with the superior power of the Avatar, allows Aang to bend Ozai's spirit. Power, so understood, coincides with strength, and Aang is powerful by virtue of having a stronger spirit than Ozai.

    Tempting as these answers might be, they do not sit well with the narrative arc of Aang's journey. The preceding answers valorize resistance to opposition and domination over others. But Aang's journey involves letting go rather than dominating, learning acceptance rather than mastering resistance. Moreover, Aang is not willing to do whatever it takes to dominate Ozai. Aang exits the Avatar State during his battle with Ozai precisely because he is

unwilling to win by killing. Moreover, Aang is not willing to dominate Ozai at all. The mingling of Aang's and Ozai's spirits indicates that Aang's alternative strategy involves opening himself to Ozai's corruption. This vulnerability precludes domination, because dominating another involves confronting them while defending against openings through which they might attack. (Consider, by analogy, strategies for domination in chess or boxing that involve giving opponents an opening to attack in order to induce them to unbalance or overextend themselves.)

Better answers to the preceding questions derive from teachings of Buddhism. On this alternative, Buddhist-inspired approach, bending another's energy is a matter of merging with their spirit in order to manipulate their powers, and someone's spirit is unbendable when it is thoroughly vulnerable to others, lacking all resistance to being manipulated by others. So Aang defeats Ozai, not through domination or resistance, but through making his spirit entirely vulnerable to Ozai. This vulnerability is the vehicle through which Aang merges his spirit with Ozai's, and this merging allows Aang to control Ozai's powers as if they are his own. Moreover, on this alternative approach, Aang's weakness is precisely the quality that secures victory over Ozai. Aang's vulnerability makes him weak (by Ozai's standard), but it also makes Aang's spirit unbendable and allows him to take away Ozai's capacity for firebending. Power, so understood, coincides with the capacity to realize one's own goals,

and Aang is powerful by virtue of having the capacity to make himself more vulnerable than anyone else. Or so we shall argue.

### **Unbendable Spirit**

When speaking with Aang, the Lion Turtle offers some cryptic wisdom about what it is for a spirit to be unbendable. “The true mind can weather all the lies and illusions without being lost. The true heart can tough the poison of hatred without being harmed” (“Sozin's Comet, Part 2: The Old Masters”). According to the Lion Turtle, having an unbendable spirit requires having a true mind and a true heart. But the Lion Turtle does not explain what it is for a mind or a heart to be true.

Buddhist teachings address both requirements. Briefly, according to these teachings, a true heart is one free from emotional hindrance, and a true mind is one free from delusion. Emotional hindrance and delusion foster what Buddhists refer to as *duḥkha*, a condition of suffering and dissatisfaction with the way things are. Freedom from emotional hindrance and delusion, by contrast, promotes encountering pain and failure – as well as pleasure and success – calmly and fearlessly. When Aang defeats Ozai, he embodies this fearless calm. His spirit is unbendable, not because his Avatar powers allow him to dominate Ozai, but because he lets go of his emotional muck and embraces his role as the Avatar.

Buddhist teachings identify five fundamental hindrances that foster *duḥkha*. Each hindrance is a kind of emotional muck that encourages domination of others and sustains resistance to the way things are. The *Discourse on Worthy Deeds*, the sixty-first discourse in the fourth book of the *Numerical Discourses (Aṅguttara Nikāya)*, presents these hindrances as impediments to wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

And what is accomplishment in wisdom? If one dwells with a heart overcome by longing and unrighteous greed, one does what should be avoided and neglects one's duties, so that one's fame and happiness are spoiled. If one dwells with a heart overcome by ill-will ... by dullness and drowsiness ... by restlessness and remorse ... by doubt, one does what should be avoided and neglects one's duties, so that one's fame and happiness are spoiled.

When ... a noble disciple has understood thus: "Longing and unrighteous greed are a defilement of the mind," he abandons them.

When he has understood thus: "Ill will ... dullness and drowsiness ...

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<sup>1</sup> The *Numerical Discourses* are one of several collections of canonical scriptures in the Buddhist tradition, composed as early as the first century BCE but preserved through oral tradition for several centuries prior.

restlessness and remorse ... doubt [are defilements] of the mind,” he abandons [them].

When ... a noble disciple has understood thus ... and abandoned [them], he is then called a noble disciple of great wisdom, of wide wisdom, one who sees the range, one accomplished in wisdom. This is called accomplishment in wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

Aang struggles with all five hindrances, but he ultimately overcomes them and has a true heart.

The first hindrance concerns sensory desire, longing for pleasure through the bodily senses. Aang struggles with this hindrance as a young child. He enjoys fruit pies, airball, and comradery with his friends, and he flees his responsibilities as the Avatar, in part, from a desire to retain these pleasures. He overcomes his grief at the loss of these pleasures when clearing his fourth chakra with Guru Pathik, and he overcomes his resistance to being the Avatar when he clears his fifth chakra (“The Guru”).

The second hindrance is ill will. Ill will involves aversion, wanting to reject what one has. It can manifest as anger, bitterness, hostility, or resentment. Aang’s struggles with ill will center upon change and loss. He

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<sup>2</sup> *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikku Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 450.

shows anger when he discovers the destruction of the Southern Air Temple (“The Southern Air Temple”). He is similarly hostile when he witnesses a mechanic destroy a statue at the Northern Air Temple in order to make room for a bathhouse. Aang’s loss of Appa in the desert also prompts several bouts of anger, as when Aang yells at Toph for not preventing Appa’s kidnapping. While traveling through the desert, he lashes out at Katara after extracting water from a desert cloud. When confronting sandbenders he suspects of stealing Appa, Aang destroys several of their sailers and, entering the Avatar State, generates a massive sandstorm. Insofar as Aang’s anger arises from grieving about change and attachment to that which is lost, Aang overcomes ill will arising from change when clearing his fourth chakra with Guru Pathik, and he overcomes most of his ill will arising from attachment – everything except his attachment to Katara – when working on his seventh chakra (“Bitter Work”).

The third hindrance is dullness and drowsiness. This manifests as depression or inertia. Aang struggles most with this hindrance when Appa goes missing. For example, when Aang, his friends, and some refugees reach the Serpent’s Pass, they find a sign that says, “Abandon hope.” Ying, one of the refugees, comments that hope is all they have. Aang’s curt reply indicates a latent depression about Appa’s absence: “The monks used to say that hope was just a distraction, so maybe we do need to abandon it ... Hope is not going to get us into Ba Sing Se, and it’s not going to help find Appa” (“The Serpent’s Pass”).

Aang responds to his hopelessness by focusing on the task at hand –

getting the refugees across the Serpent's Pass. Success in this endeavor does not resolve his hopelessness, but it does allow for a circumstance that does. After crossing the pass, Ying gives birth to a daughter, whom she names Hope. When Aang meets the baby, Ying remarks, "I want our daughter's name to be unique. I want it to mean something." Ying's gesture of hopefulness reminds Aang that he should not flee from his feelings, that his love for Appa – and for his friends – is valuable even when circumstances are bleak. "I've been going through a really hard time lately. But you've made me ... hopeful again. I thought I was trying to be strong. But really I was just running away from my feelings. Seeing this family together, so full of happiness and love, it's reminded me how I feel about Appa ... and how I feel about you [Katara, Suki, Sokka, and Toph]." The love of his (found) family allows Aang to overcome his depression, and he departs with newfound resolve to find Appa.

The fourth hindrance is restlessness and remorse. Aang's struggles with this hindrance are most apparent when he is preparing for an inevitable confrontation with Fire Lord Ozai ("Nightmares and Daydreams"). Aang can't sleep. When he does sleep, he has absurd nightmares in which he is unprepared for the confrontation. He is also restless. He trains constantly in response to worries that he won't be able to stop the Fire Lord, and he criticizes his friends for not being diligent in their own preparations. Katara eventually calls Aang's behavior to his attention. "Aang! I know you're just trying to help, but you *really* need to get a grip. You're unraveling" ("Nightmares and

Daydreams”). Aang’s friends offer well-intentioned advice – yoga, talking, screaming into a pillow, massage. The distractions don’t work. Aang’s nightmares persist. He overcomes his worry only when his friends voice their confidence in him. Katara takes the lead. “Listen, you’ve been training for this since the day we met. I’ve seen your progress. You’re smart, brave, and strong enough” (“Nightmares and Daydreams”). Sokka and Toph voice similar encouragements. When Aang falls asleep shortly thereafter, he dreams of Ozai once more – but this time it is Ozai, rather than Aang, who is unprepared.

The fifth and final hindrance is doubt. Doubt can manifest as indecision, uncertainty, lack of conviction, and lack of trust. Aang admits to Katara that his doubt is long-standing, and he suggests that doubt is what prompted him to flee from his home. “I was afraid and confused, I didn’t know what to do” (“The Storm”). But Aang most often struggles with doubt and uncertainty when trying to master his ability to bend elements other than air. For example, when learning earthbending from Toph, Aang becomes frustrated and wants to give up: “I know, I know, I know, I know! I get it, all right? I need to ace it head on like a rock, but I just can’t do it. I don’t know why, but I can’t” (“Bitter Work”). Despite these doubts, Aang eventually masters all four elements. For example, Aang overcomes doubts about earthbending while saving Sokka from an attack by a wild animal. Sokka is trapped in the ground, about to be attacked by a saber-tooth moose lion. When the moose-lion charges, Aang stands his ground in order to protect Sokka. Shortly thereafter,

Toph reminds Aang of the courage he showed. Aang's conviction in his strength then dissolves his doubt and allows him to bend a rock into a nearby canyon wall.

By overcoming his emotional hindrances, Aang comes to have a true heart. He comes to have a true mind, as well, but this achievement is more intellectual than emotional. Aang's path to having a true mind involves overcoming delusions that foster resistance to his circumstances and obligations.

Buddhist teachings identify many delusions. Paradigmatic examples include erroneous views about the sources and remedies for *duḥkha* as well as misconceptions about cause-effect relations and the ephemerality of all things. The contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh contrasts the deluded mind with true mind.

The world of birth and death is brought about by deluded mind. Wrong impulses arise from this mind. Impulses, in turn, produce seeds that make up consciousness. The cycle of birth, old age, and death based on ignorance brings us much suffering.

There is also a world conditioned by true mind. This world has sunlight, bird song, the wind in the pine trees - just as in the world we see around us - but it does not have being and nonbeing, coming and going, same and different, birth and death. The world that has true

mind as its seed cause is the world of the Avatamsaka Sutra, where the one encompasses the all, where there can be no fear. True mind is the means for understanding birthlessness and deathlessness.<sup>3</sup>

Delusions ensnare us, making us experience the world as an aimless succession of pleasures and pains, successes and failures. The delusions also get us to experience this succession with attachment, so that our own consciousness alternates between moments of calm and moments of suffering or dissatisfaction. By contrast, the true mind frees us from the cycles of *duḥkha*, allowing us to live calmly and without fear of change or failure.

Perhaps the most fundamental delusion, according to Buddhist teaching, is that the self is separate from and independent of others. Buddhism conceptualizes the ideal person as one who is fully aware of how their existence and identity arise by virtue of their relations to others, and thereby conceptualizes those who strive for self-sufficiency and independence as delusional. Aang overcomes this delusion when conversing with Huu in the swamp, learning that “Everything is connected” (“The Swamp”). Aang reiterates this insight when training with Guru Pathik (“The Guru”). His insight

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<sup>3</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Understanding Our Mind* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2008), 190.

contrasts with Fire Lord Ozai's ambition to be a supreme ruler who controls others without those others, in turn, affecting his plans or identity.<sup>4</sup>

Aang comes to have a true mind by overcoming the delusion that he is separate from and independent of others. He comes to have a true heart by overcoming various emotional hindrances. Ultimately, his true mind allows Aang to discern a path to victory against Fire Lord Ozai that does not involve violence, and his true heart allows Aang to merge spirits with Fire Lord Ozai without being harmed by Ozai's rage and lust for power.

### **Strength and Vulnerability**

In coming to have a true heart and a true mind, Aang abandons any intention to dominate or resist the way things are. His spirit becomes unbendable, not because he is strong by Fire Lord Ozai's standards, but because he is thoroughly vulnerable. Aang's vulnerability allows Ozai's spirit to penetrate his own – and, conversely, *his* spirit to penetrate Ozai's and thereby bend Ozai's energy.

Buddhist teachings depict this kind of mutual penetration with the metaphor of Indra's net. Indra is one of the most powerful divinities in the Buddhist pantheon. He is also a paragon of generosity. His net, composed as a lattice of mirror-like jewels, represents the way in which everything is connected. Each

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<sup>4</sup> See also Chapter 27: "The Avatar Meets the Karmapa."

jewel reflects every other within itself and, in turn, appears as a reflection in every other jewel.

The reflection of one jewel in another is a metaphor for the way in which one thing penetrates into another. The mutually penetrating reflections of the jewels allow each jewel to exist in all other jewels freely and without resistance. This aspect of the metaphor is meant to depict the way in which interconnection involves different things entering into and influencing each other without resistance or domination, each vulnerable to the others and thereby also made to be what it is by those others.

Aang's final encounter with Fire Lord Ozai depicts a similar relation. When Aang connects with Ozai, his spirit enters into Ozai's, just as Ozai's spirit enters into Aang's. A willingness to be vulnerable, and the absence of a will to dominate or remain separate from Ozai, allows Aang to bend Ozai's energy and to remove his firebending.

The metaphor of Indra's net is apt for understanding Aang's relation to Ozai, because Aang's victory over Ozai resembles Indra's victory over demons. In the Story of the Eagle's Nest (*Kulāvaka-jātaka*), from a collection of tales known as the *Jātakamālā*, Indra banishes the demons of darkness from Mount Sumeru into the ocean. The demons vow to reclaim their residence in the heavens, and Indra engages them in battle at the border where ocean meets land. Indra's army retreats against the onslaught. But Indra persists. On the brink of victory, he notices that his offensive efforts are destroying trees that

shelter the hatchlings of eagles. Moved by compassion, and risking defeat by exposing himself to his enemies, Indra halts his assault, offering his life as a sacrifice to preserve the eagles. This disorients his enemy. Thinking Indra's halt signals the impending return of a strengthened army, the demons flee in terror.<sup>5</sup>

There are, of course, discrepancies between Indra's victory over the demons of darkness and Aang's victory over Fire Lord Ozai. For example, Indra confronts his enemy with an army; Aang confronts Ozai alone. Indra wins when his enemy flees; Aang, when Ozai loses his firebending ability. But the similarities are overwhelming. Both Indra and Aang refuse to win at the cost of violence to others. Both secure victory through compassionate protection rather than life-destroying conquest. Perhaps most importantly, both are fearless when risking their life for the sake of winning the right way or not at all.

### **Fearlessness and Power**

Sylvia Boorstein, a co-founding teacher at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, and a senior teacher at the Insight Meditation Society in

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<sup>5</sup> See Viggo Fausböll, *The Jātakamālā, Volume I*, trans. T.W. Rhys Davis (London: Trubner & Co., 1890), 284–287.

Barre, Massachusetts, tells a story from the Zen Buddhist tradition that helps to explain the source of Aang's fearlessness.

A fierce and terrifying band of samurai was riding through the countryside, bringing fear and harm wherever they went. As they were approaching one particular town, all the monks in the town's monastery fled, except for the abbot. When the band of warriors entered the monastery, they found the abbot sitting at the front of the shrine room in perfect posture. The fierce leader took out his sword and said, "Don't you know who I am? Don't you know that I'm the sort of person who could run you through with my sword without batting an eye?" The Zen master responded, "And I, sir, am the sort of man who could be run through by a sword without batting an eye."<sup>6</sup>

Boorstein's commentary on this story explains why, from a Buddhist perspective, fearlessness is a natural corollary of compassion.

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<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Boorstein, "The Gesture of Fearlessness and the Armor of Loving-Kindness," *Lion's Roar*, May 25, 2017, at <https://www.lionsroar.com/fear-and-fearlessness-what-the-buddhists-teach>.

Fearlessness ... comes from benevolence and goodwill in the face of whatever oppresses you. You are afraid, but instead of fighting what faces you, you embrace it and accept it – you develop loving-kindness as a direct antidote to fear.<sup>7</sup>

By virtue of overcoming emotional hindrance and delusion, Aang becomes a person who embraces obstacles and strives to overcome them through compassion rather than control.

Aang is not always fearless, of course. Much of his journey involves struggling with fear. This is apparent to Guru Pathik. “You've been through so much recently. Hurt and betrayed. So twisted up inside. You're still full of love. Ah. But fear has moved in where trust should be” (“Appa's Lost Days”). Aang’s central fear, perhaps, concerns his inevitable confrontation with Fire Lord Ozai. When Guru Pathik asks Aang what he is most afraid of, Ozai is one of many images Aang sees. Pathik advises Aang to surrender his fears and let them “flow down the creek” (“The Guru”). But the fear of Ozai lingers, and Aang articulates to Sokka the reason why. “He's the baddest man on the planet! I'm supposed to defeat him and save the world!” (“Nightmares and Daydreams”). Nonetheless, Aang is fearless in his final confrontation with Fire Lord Ozai. This is not because he is certain that the power of the Avatar will allow him to kill Ozai,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

but because, following Guru Pathik's advice, Aang is willing to embrace the consequences of fighting Ozai with compassion rather than violence.

By virtue of being unwilling to do whatever it takes to dominate others for the sake of peace, Aang renders himself thoroughly vulnerable to his enemies. If, as Ozai would have it, power is a tool for domination, and if strength is a willingness to dominate at any cost, Aang is powerless to achieve his goals and thereby maximally weak. But *ATLA* shows an alternative conception of power whereby Aang is more powerful than Ozai precisely because he is weak by Ozai's standards. Uncle Iroh intimates this alternative when teaching Prince Zuko about fire. "Fire is the element of power. The people of the Fire Nation have desire and will, and the energy to drive and achieve what they want" ("Bitter Work"). According to Iroh, one has power by virtue of having a desire to achieve one's goals and the energy to pursue those desires. By extension, one has more power than another by virtue of realizing one's goals better than the other. Aang's goals involve helping others, alleviating their pain, and fostering peace. His fearlessness sustains these desires, and his vulnerability gives him the energy to realize those desires. So Fire Lord Ozai's accusation against Aang, that he remains weak despite having all the power in the world, is more correct than Ozai likely intended. Aang is weak, by Ozai's standards, because his compassion subverts any desire to dominate others and win at any cost. But this weakness is precisely what gives Aang the power to defeat Ozai and secure peace.