

## *Looking in the Dhamma Mirror*

*June 9, 2014*

Sometimes after I've given a Dhamma talk, a person will come up and say, "I wish so and so had been here to hear this." And the thought that immediately comes up in my own mind is, "Well, did *you* hear this?" We're here to train ourselves. The Dhamma is a mirror for us to look at ourselves at. The Buddha uses this image twice in the Canon. In one case, you're like a young man or woman fond of adornment looking in a mirror, checking your appearance. You see a blemish, so you want to get rid of the blemish. If there's no blemish, you can take satisfaction that you look good.

Of course, here we're not concerned about looking good in physical terms. Our mirror here is our actions. That's the image the Buddha gives to Rahula. In other words, think about your actions through your body, your words, your thoughts: How would they look if you looked at them in a mirror? What shape would they have? How many blemishes would they have? And what could you do to get rid of the blemishes? That's what we're here for.

Our problem, of course, is that our eyes point out. They don't point in very much. So we're seeing other people's actions. But we can use their actions usefully as a mirror, too. If you see someone do something that's really ugly to look at, you can ask yourself, "Do I do that?" If you see them doing something that's really admirable, you can ask yourself, "Could I do that?" In other words, keep referring things back to your own thoughts, words and deeds – straightening them out – and using the Buddha's standards. It's all too easy when you're looking in the mirror to say, "Okay. I look okay for today." The question should be, "Whose standards are you using?"

There was a comic strip that was famous in Thailand years back, and it's still famous now. It's a Japanese comic strip, Doremon. And there's one of the episodes in which Nobita, who's very plain looking, switches bodies with Shisuka, the girl he hopes someday to marry. She looks at herself in the mirror with this new body, and she says, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself to go around like this?" You can imagine how he feels. We're used to looking at our face and seeing it every day, every day, and it becomes perfectly okay, perfectly normal. But there are people who would be ashamed to go around with your face. Of course, in terms of external looks, there's something wrong with those people. But try to think of your actions in the same way. And then it's a different story.

If the Buddha looked in his actions and saw the kind of actions that you do, what would he think? What would he do? He gives standards, so you know. They start with the precepts. Take right action, for example: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex. I've been talking recently to people who were surprised to learn that there are moral absolutes in the Buddha's teachings. Everyone seems to think that moral absolutes are blind and simplistic. Well, the Buddha wants

things to be kept simple because our mind is so complex, and if you start trying to introduce complexities into these issues, all kinds of defilements can sneak into the corners, into the seams. You can give yourself reasons for killing. You can give yourself reasons for stealing. You can give yourself reasons for illicit sex.

We have the spectacle now of a famous Buddhist monk saying that there are times when killing is okay. Well, you look at his reasons, and you begin to wonder what kind of defilements he's hiding through his reasonable-sounding rhetoric. The same goes with all the other precepts: the precept against lying, or harsh speech. Lying is the big one. There are times the Buddha says that harsh speech is okay, but lying – no. In fact, of all the precepts, that's the one he takes most seriously. And, of course, there's the precept against taking intoxicants. These are clear-cut standards. They're the standards against which you measure actions as you look in the mirror.

The Buddha's descriptions of concentration are also meant as a mirror for you to look at your mind. See how it measures up. There are only four jhanas. Ajaan Lee has a great comment on this. He says, "There are only four jhanas. Yet there are people out there who take charge of corporations and farms: thousands of acres, lots of people. And here we only have four jhanas to look after, and we still can't figure them out. Aren't you embarrassed?"

So these are standards against which we can measure our thoughts, words, and deeds to see where we're lacking, to see where we have blemishes, to see what needs to be fixed. That's what we should busy ourselves doing: looking at our thoughts, words, and deeds, not going around looking at other people and trying to get them to fit into our standards that we picked up from the Buddha.

This is one of the reasons why people don't like moral absolutes: There are always other people trying to impose them on them. But here we're not trying to impose them on anybody else. We're offering them as a training. We train by this and we learn that we benefit from it. If anyone else seems inclined to do the same, we're happy to encourage them.

So make sure your standards are clean, clear-cut, and that you really are diligent in looking at yourself in the mirror, this mirror of Dhamma. Don't let yourself get away with dressing shabbily or not combing your hair, or not taking care of those blemishes. In other words, if you see something in your actions that's not up to standard, do what you can immediately—the same with your words, the same with the state of your mind. We don't have much time.

In particular, we don't have a lot of time to go around looking at other people—aside from what I just said, which is to look at them as examples. Are they a good example? Okay, what can you do to live up to that good example? If they're not a good example, ask yourself, "Do I have that in me, too?" When each of us is looking after his or her own appearance in the Dhamma mirror, there's not much conflict, not much reason for conflict, because after all, where does conflict come from? It comes from a kind of thinking that the Buddha called *papañca*, objectification.

Sometimes you hear *papañca* explained as meaning thoughts proliferating to the point where they go out of control, but that's not what the Buddha's talking about. *Papañca* our way of looking at things where we define ourselves, "I'm this this way and I'm that that way," in order to maintain the identity that we take on as the thinker of these thoughts. Part of that identity requires that we lay claim to part of the world, so that we can draw sustenance from it. Well, other people claim their part of the world, and all too often our claims overlap. We find other people in our world, we want them to fit into our ideas of what the world should be, and that creates all the trouble we see all around us.

So to start getting rid of that kind of thinking, you look inside to see where these troublemaking thoughts come from, because they cause trouble not only for other people, but a lot of trouble inside, so much so that a lot of people don't even want to look at themselves in the Dhamma mirror. But we're not like that.

We want our appearance and our thoughts, words, and deeds to be really worth looking at, something we can take pride in. Pride is not always an unskillful emotion. It's one of the motivations the Buddha recommends for getting on the path, for engaging in right effort—the pride of a craftsman, the pride of someone who has mastered a skill—so that when you look at your skill, that's the mirror you're looking into. You say to yourself, "Okay, do this well," and then you continue with the training so you look better and better and better in the Dhamma mirror.