

## *Cutting New Paths in the Mind*

*October 10, 2011*

When we're taught to meditate, there's so much emphasis placed on being in the present moment, not wandering off to the past and not wandering off to the future that we tend to neglect a very important part of right effort, which is to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. To prevent these things, we have to anticipate them. We have to recognize that there are certain patterns of behavior that we tend to fall into, ways in which we're really quick to stab ourselves: thoughts of shame, thoughts of inadequacy, fear, feeling threatened very easily... there are lots of ways in which we bring unnecessary suffering onto ourselves, and they tend to be very quick. They're like paths in the mind over which we've walked back and forth many, many times. There's nothing in the way, we've killed all the grass, we've cut back all the bushes, because we've been back and forth so many times that now we can just run right down those paths, find the arrows at the end of the path and stick ourselves with them.

When you recognize you have these patterns, you have to learn how to anticipate them counteract them, so that they don't arise—or if they do arise, you can let go of them quickly. That's what this aspect of right effort is all about. And it does require planning, thinking about past and future. You want to be able to observe the mind: What kind of thoughts has it engaged in that bring on that ability to stab yourself? What's the line of thought, what's the reasoning, what's the agenda behind those patterns of thinking? Then, very deliberately, sit down and think in other ways, learn how to counteract whatever the reasoning there may be behind them so that in the future you don't fall into those patterns.

To do that, you need to break these things down into manageable bits.

Last night I heard someone talking about how she'd been on a retreat and had been dealing with the large archetypes in her mind. Perhaps the retreatants had been told that they were dealing with archetypes so that they could have a sense that they were doing important work. But when you think of patterns in your mind as being archetypes—i.e., parts of the collective unconscious, things that are built into the human mind—it makes these things loom really large, much larger than you. And that makes it very easy to be overcome by them.

So remember: These are not archetypes, they're patterns. They may be patterns you may have in common with lots of other people, but they're simply a series of a habits, and you want to learn how to recognize them as specific habits, specific choices that you make. When you cut them down to size this way, then they're

more manageable. You can take them out one by one by one. But if you let them remain archetypes... I've heard that Jung had images of archetypes carved into stone and placed around his house. And that's a good symbol for what a lot of people do with their patterns of behavior: They carve them into stone, and they can never get rid of them that way. But if you realize that they're a series of choices and patterns of behavior—these pathways in the mind that you've been running up and down, up and down, up and down—it means you can choose other paths, paths that don't lead to a briar patch, don't lead to lots of thorns and arrows. Cut other paths across them and very deliberately think in other ways.

At first it may seem awkward, but as you learn to think in opposite ways, after a while those opposite ways seem more and more natural. For instance, you realize that you've done something wrong, you've hurt somebody, and there's a sense of shame, a sense of embarrassment. Okay, recognizing that it was a mistake is an important skill you have to develop, you have to maintain, but burning yourself up around it is not going to brand it into your mind. What often happens is that when those thoughts become very painful, you try to deny them. You try to bury them away. The more painful they are, the more they get buried—and of course the more they get buried, the harder they are to deal with. They don't really help you. You want your memory of your mistakes to be near at hand but not so painful that you can't pick it up.

So just make a mental note, "That was a mistake; I shouldn't have done it that way," and then sit down very deliberately and think about what an alternate way of handling the situation might have been. And that way, the shame becomes a useful quality of mind. It's no longer an unskillful quality. It's part of your skillful process of learning.

So in each case, you recognize that you've got these habits, so you've got to sit down and deliberately counteract them. Otherwise, they turn into something way too big, way too contentious. They're the kind of thinking that the Buddha calls *papañca*, where you identify yourself, "I am this kind of person. I am the thinker, and the thinker has these habits, and the thinker has these needs." As soon as you take on that identity of being a being, then you have to feed. Your sense of identity has to be fed with certain thoughts, certain ideas. And it just grows bigger and bigger and bigger. And it's going to conflict with other people's sense of their identity and their food sources. And these things just get too big to deal with.

This kind of thinking is called objectification. You turn yourself into a particular type of object. You're this being, with these habits, these archetypes established within you. Sometimes *papañca* is translated as "proliferation," where your thinking multiplies and runs riot, but it's not really the *amount* of thinking

that's causing the problem, it's the *type* of thinking, the type of thinking that makes you bigger and more solid than you have to be. You become a being with all these needs that need to be fulfilled.

So the Buddha's approach is to learn to take all this apart. Remember those questions that he said don't deserve asking, or don't deserve attention: "Who am I? What am I? Am I good? Am I bad?" Get the sense of identity out of the way, and simply look at, "What kind of habit is this? Is this a useful habit? Do I really want it?" You may know very well that you don't want it, but it keeps coming back, coming back, so you say, "I've got to face it and deal with it." Deal with it as a habit." And learn how to question it. If you can't come up with good arguments against following that kind of habit, or falling in line with the reasoning that drives that habit, at least learn to put question marks in, when it says, "This is this and that's that." Ask yourself: "Is that really true?" It's so easy to make yourself miserable over what you perceive that someone has said or done, or what someone represents, and then only to find out later that what you perceived wasn't the case at all.

So learn how to insert some question marks in the rush of those thoughts. Break them up a little bit so that when the impulse comes to follow your old habits, you've got some alternative ways of thinking, alternative ways of breathing, alternative ways of picturing the whole situation to yourself. And alternative ways of relating to these patterns: Instead of thinking of them as being large archetypes, or part of your identity, they're simply a series of habits.

And you can create new habits. It's like finding that the paths you've been following through the forest lead only to traps that are filled with spikes and snakes. Well, you can find other habits, you can cut other paths through the forest, that lead to better places: to springs, meadows, and lakes. It takes time. Sometimes you've got to cut through a lot of brush, but once you've made that first foray into the new path, then it's simply a matter of going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth over and over it again. Ideally, you get a path out of the forest. Or at the very least if you're going to stay in the forest, you know the good places to go. You know where the water is, you know where shelter is, you know where the good medicinal and edible plants are, and try to blaze a path to those areas.

So you're cutting your old habits down to size by cutting new paths through the forest. This is an important aspect of right effort, so that you don't keep stabbing yourself in the way you used to, or if you do find you're stabbing yourself, you can quit more quickly. You don't have to keep indulging in old habits.

That's one of the ways in which your right effort becomes all-around. Then you're not stuck with just one technique, the way the British were stuck in World War II. They thought the Japanese were going to attack Singapore from the sea, so they pointed all their cannons out toward the sea, and had them set in concrete. And sure enough, the Japanese came down the Malay peninsula, and the cannons were useless.

So don't let yourself be stuck with cannons pointing in just one direction. You've got four directions that you've got to watch out for: learning how to prevent unskillful habits or unskillful qualities from arising, and if they have arisen, learning how to abandon them; learning how to give rise to skillful qualities, and how to develop and nurture skillful qualities when they have arisen. You want your right efforts to be all-around, because only that way can they give you all-around protection