

## *Perplexity*

*May 21, 2016*

A brahman once came to see the Buddha and asked him, “Please do away with my perplexity.”

And the Buddha said, “Nobody can do away with anyone else’s perplexity.”

Sounds kind of discouraging. I mean, you come to the Buddha hoping to have things cleared up. You would get them cleared up, but that wouldn’t solve the problem in your heart totally. You’d have to take those teachings and put them into practice. It’s only when you test things for yourself that your perplexity ends.

The Buddha tells you how: the things you have to assume; the techniques you try. Even when you believe in what he has to say, that doesn’t end your perplexity. It’s only when you put these things into practice that you see, “Okay, this works, this works, this works.” And you’ve developed your own abilities to judge things properly.

In other words, you have to get the mind to a point where it really can trust its evaluation of what works. That’s when the perplexity is done.

To overcome your doubt, overcome your uncertainty, the Buddha said to pay attention to what he called dark and bright in the mind, what’s skillful and unskillful. Pay appropriate attention to these things.

In other words, when a mind state comes up, you can’t go by your likes or dislikes. And you can’t just watch them come and go. You have look to see: When they come, what comes along with them? When they go, what do they do? What impact do they have before they go?

The Buddha himself said he got on the right path when he divided his thoughts into two sorts: those that were skillful and those that were not. Once he noticed that a line of thinking was going to lead to harm either for himself or for other people, he would abandon it. And notice that: *harm*. It’s not a question of whether it hurts their feelings or whether they like it or not. The issue is: Do these thoughts actually lead to harm?

A lot of times when, say, your sensual desires are going to get other people involved in sensual misconduct, that’s for their harm. Or when your passion or aversion are *intended* to give rise to passion or aversion in other people, that’s causing harm to yourself and to others.

But if you notice that your thinking would lead to harm, then you have to keep it in check. You can’t just watch things come and go. Watching things like that come and go: They call it “bare attention,” but it’s actually, in the Buddha’s

terms, inappropriate attention. Your attention is inappropriate when you don't have the purpose of figuring out whether something is skillful or not, something that's got to be developed or abandoned.

Appropriate attention is basically the seeing things in terms of the four noble truths and figuring out what the duty is in regard to them. When stress or suffering comes, that's to be comprehended. You've got to look and see: What is actually the suffering there in the mind? You have to ferret it out.

As the Buddha said, it's something that's not obvious: clinging to the five aggregates. If you go out to ask the average person on the street, "What's suffering?"—it's very rare that you'd find someone who would answer, "the five clinging-aggregates." They'd have all kinds of other ideas. To comprehend suffering, you have to really look carefully at it to see that this is what lies at the essence of the suffering in the mind: that clinging. All too often we see the suffering but we don't see the clinging.

So that's something you have to look for, to comprehend. Once you see it, you have to figure out what's causing it. Then you let the cause go so that you can realize the cessation of suffering. And to do this, you've got to develop certain qualities of the path.

That's called looking at things with appropriate attention.

So when something unskillful arises in the mind, the appropriate thing to do is to figure out how to let go of it, how to abandon it.

As the Buddha said, when unskillful thoughts came into his mind, he would hold them in check, in the same way that a cowherd watches his cows during the rainy season. That's when rice is growing in the fields and your cows are going to be tempted to go into the fields and eat the rice. If they do, you're going to get into trouble, so you've got to do everything you can to keep them out of the rice. As the Buddha says, you check them and you hit them and you poke them.

It's the same with unskillful thoughts. First of all, you've got to recognize them and then figure out, "Okay, I can't just sit here wallowing in these thoughts. I've got to figure out some way of stop them."

And you can't use just plain willpower. You've got to develop all the factors of the path, from right view all the way down through right concentration.

As for skillful thoughts, you encourage them. As the Buddha noticed, you can think some skillful things that are not involved in any sensual desire, not involved in ill will, not involved in harmfulness. But even then, sitting and thinking them for a long period of time can tire you out. So it's even more skillful to bring the mind to concentration.

So we do this. Even though it hasn't been proven to us beyond a doubt that

this is going to work, still it makes sense. And we've had some taste that some of these things seem to work. So let's pursue them.

Take it for granted that doubts are going to be present in your practice all the way up to stream-entry. In fact, that's the point where your doubts and your perplexity are gone. But as the Buddha said, he can't take you to that point. You've got to do the work. And you've got to take on all the working hypotheses that help to see if they really do work.

We were talking today about rebirth. The Buddha didn't say that he could prove it to anybody. But he did say many, many times that if you take the teaching on rebirth together with karma as a hypothesis, you're going to be a lot more likely to be careful about your actions and be more motivated to look carefully at your actions. Because it's only in looking at your own actions that your perplexity's going to be gone.

So the teachings that encourage you to take your actions seriously: Those are the ones that you take on. You say, "I'm going to test these, see what they do for my mind." See what they do for the level of pleasure and pain, the level of suffering or well-being that you're going to be experiencing.

At the same time, you develop the discernment that allows you to catch yourself when you're lying to yourself. This is one of *the* big problems in ending your perplexity: figuring out, when is the mind lying to you?

Our problem is that all too often we like the lies. Look at political campaigns. Politicians have learned that you can lie to people and they're perfectly happy to be lied to as long as the lie feeds some other agenda they've got. Or you can look at relationships. A lot of times relationships are built on lies, and people will turn a blind eye to them.

Years back, when I was going on almsround in Thailand, there was a period when a particular song was very popular, and you heard it almost every day. In one of the lines, the singer said, "No matter how far away that star is, if you want it, I'll go and get it and place it in your hand": an obvious lie, and yet it's the kind of thing people like to hear.

And it's not just between people. The mind lies to itself. This is why, in the Buddha's very first instructions to his son, he told him, "There's no quality of a contemplative in someone who tells a deliberate lie."

If you find it easy to lie to other people, you're going to lie to yourself. So truthfulness is where the practice begins, and you have to muster as much of your truthfulness as you can as you practice.

Then, as your mindfulness develops and your discernment develops, you'll catch yourself lying to yourself on more and more subtle things. That's when you

really begin to see the power of the path.

So perplexity is not something that someone else can clear up for you. You can listen to a Dhamma talk, and some issues may get cleared up. You can begin to see, okay, this is how this makes sense, or how that makes sense, or how this connects with that, or how you might be able to get around this particular problem. But you still don't know for sure until you actually do it.

The Buddha says that one of the rewards of listening to the Dhamma is that you clear up your doubts. But that's only if you're actually doing in your mind what the talk is telling you to do. If it's just words coming in and you don't act on the words, they're going to stay just words. No matter how true they may be, they're still just words as far as you're concerned until you actually put them into practice.

So try to see what works and what doesn't—and to see what it means for something to work and not to work. How well do things have to work before they really count as working? The Buddha's idea of "what works" is a lot higher than most people's. So your question is, do you want to raise your standards to his? He sets out the path with a lot of clarity. But it's still not clear in your mind until you've actually put it into the test.

I've been reading about people saying that when the Buddha first started teaching, his teachings were quite vague. He didn't want to be too precise because the truth that he had awakened to was not easily put into words, so he left things vague. And if we want to be in line with his original teachings, we have to let the teachings be vague as well.

Well, that's not helpful at all. One of the primary features of the Buddhist tradition is a point that the Buddha made one time: He said it's the difference between an assembly that's trained in cross-questioning and an assembly that's trained in bombast. The one trained in bombast is where the teacher just says lovely things that may be vague but the teacher doesn't allow you to ask what they mean and you're not supposed to ask what they mean. Just enjoy the beauty of the words and let yourself feel inspired to interpret them any way you like.

Whereas the assembly trained in cross-questioning is encouraged to ask, "Okay, what does this mean? What does that mean? How far does the meaning of this go? How should I take this?" The teacher is there to clear things up as much as possible so you can get an idea, "This is how you test the teachings. This is what the teachings are proposing, this is how you test them." The more clarity you can get from the teacher that way, the more you have something to put your hands on so that you can actually test it.

So the Buddha was not the sort of person just to leave things vague. There were

times when he spoke cryptically, but that was to make you think. But he was always open to questioning.

Even at the last night of his life, before he gave his final teaching, he asked, “Are there any questions?” He said that three or four times just to make sure. He was that earnest in wanting things to be as clear as possible, so that when you were testing something, you knew what you were testing. But as for your own perplexity about it, “Does this really work?”—that’s up to you to find out.

So try to develop in your mind the qualities that allow you to test things and come out with a reliable judgment.

That’s a lot of what the meditation is all about. Many of us come to the meditation just so that we can have a place to relax and put down our burdens—and that is an important part of concentration, but there’s more. Once the mind is rested, you realize it still has work to do.

And this is where the work lies, in learning how to check where you’re still uncertain about what really is skillful in life.

It’s not easy work, but it’s good work. Because the mind that results—the mind with no perplexity—is a mind with no suffering.