

Reflect

June 4, 2020

I was reading a piece recently in which the writer was showing some scorn for what she took to be the traditional account of the Buddha's awakening. He's reared in comfort as a child of privilege and he comes away from his practice with the truth that there is suffering. Now, if that's all he had to say on the topic of suffering, that might have been deserving of scorn. But he had a lot more to say. In particular, he said suffering—the noble truth of suffering—is that suffering is clinging, clinging to the five aggregates, and that clinging is something you do. And this is nothing obvious.

We tend to think that we suffer because of things outside, the actions of other people or pains in the body. But the Buddha's saying, "No, the real suffering that weighs down the mind is the way we cling to things, and particularly the way we cling to the aggregates." The aggregates are our tools of processing experience. So we cling to certain ways of processing our experiences, and that's why we suffer.

We also discover that we do that because of our craving. But craving is something we can abandon, which means that we can put an end to suffering. And, of course, then there's a path. The path puts us in a position where we can really comprehend our craving, and see where we're doing things wrong.

So the whole practice is a matter of reflecting on your actions. The Buddha gives you three things to do: virtue, concentration, and discernment. Virtue gets you started by reflecting on your outside actions. You start thinking about the unskillful things you ordinarily might do and feel perfectly justified. Sometimes you feel that killing animals is justified. Sometimes you feel that lying is justified. There are even times when people can take something without its being given, and can justify that. But the Buddha's saying, "No, you've got to reflect on your actions." The impulse to break the precepts is something you have to hold in check. You have to keep those precepts in mind, and be alert to what you're actually doing to make sure that your actions follow the precepts. This gives you training in mindfulness and alertness, which are the skills you're going to need for concentration.

When you practice concentration, you have to keep one object in mind, like the breath. And then you have to observe how it's going. Is it comfortable? Is it not? How can you breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness inside? How can you maximize that sense of fullness? You have to watch yourself in action. Remember the Buddha's analogy when he first taught

Rahula. The first image he gave him was of a mirror. You look into your actions as you'd look into a mirror, to reflect on the purity of your mind. In the same way, virtue is a mirror. Concentration is a mirror. And ultimately, of course, discernment is a mirror. It teaches you how to relate to your thoughts, both the thoughts that occur in the context of the concentration, and those that occur outside.

You want to be able to step back and not get taken up by what you think is true. Simply see, when you think something is true: How is the mind reacting to it? What is the mind's intention behind that claim of truth? And what holds on to that particular truth? What does holding on to it do to the mind? What does it inspire you to do? You have to learn how to be reflective in this way. Otherwise, the insights that come during concentration can lead you astray.

I know several of Ajaan Fuang's students who tended to develop psychic abilities while they were meditating, and they didn't reflect. They just believed everything that came in. It's like believing everything that comes in on your TV. They didn't reflect. I know one case where a woman was convinced that one of the monks at the monastery was having an affair. Every time she claimed to have seen him with a particular nun, there were lots of witnesses who knew that the nun wasn't there. Or if the nun *was* there, he wasn't there. But she could not be swayed from her conviction that there was something going on, and that she'd actually seen these things. That's a case of not being reflective at all, because what it came down to was that she wanted to get rid of the monk. So whatever comes up in the meditation, you've got to reflect, "What in the mind leads to this conclusion? And if I accept this conclusion, where is it going to lead me?"

Think of the Buddha getting on the right path. He came to realize that the austerities were not working. He decided to divide his thoughts into two sorts: Those that were motivated by sensuality, ill will, and cruelty were on one side. Those that were motivated by renunciation, non-ill will, and non-cruelty were on the other side. He looked simply at what motivated a thought—and the reason the motivation was important was because that was going to bend the mind, as he said, to do certain things.

So you've got to look when a thought comes up: How are you breathing around the thought? That's form. How are you feeling about the thought? That's feeling. What are the perceptions that go into it? What are the ways you're talking to yourself about it? In other words, all the aggregates are right there. You want to see how you're clinging to them, and how you're creating suffering.

Now, when we're talking about suffering coming from within, it's not as if we're letting everybody else outside off the hook. After all, they have their karma.

If they really do have bad intentions, that's going to be their karma. But our purpose here is not to settle affairs outside. It's to look at how we're weighing our own minds down, because that's the only way out. Otherwise, we stay entangled in the affairs of the world, and those affairs have no end. We have to learn how to pull out, step back from our thoughts, to step back from our convictions, and look at them to see where they're coming from, and where they're going.

There are certain things that you do hold on to as part of the path because they do take you to a good place. But you have to sort them out. Which thoughts coming up in the mind are motivated by your defilements? Which ones are motivated by lack of defilement? That's the work of discernment—to see which is which.

This requires a lot of us. I know all too many people who believe that whatever comes up in the meditative mind must be accepted, must be true. I know a lot of other people who believe that whatever comes up in their mind is just totally motivated by defilement. Neither case is true. Lots of different things are going on in the mind. You have to learn how to sort things out as to what's skillful and what's not. This is the work of that factor of awakening called analysis of qualities.

So discernment does require work. It does require us to be discerning, to see the distinction between what's skillful and what's not, and particularly to be very sensitive to what we're actually doing. Upasika Kee Nanayon would say that when an insight comes up in the meditation, always wait to see what happens right after the insight. What mental state follows on it? That's where the real insight's going to be. You look at your thoughts not so much in terms of their content. For the time being, as you're meditating, ask yourself, "What do they do? How do they perform?" Remember, this is a teaching on karma.

Remember the Buddha's awakening, those first two knowledges he attained: One was knowledge of past lifetimes, the other was knowledge of all beings in the universe dying and being reborn in line with their karma. Those were not the complete awakening. The complete awakening came when he looked at his mind as it responded to those knowledges. What was going on in his mind? He saw that wherever there was clinging and craving, there was going to be suffering, even around knowledge like that.

So step back. Look at the processes of the mind, because that's where the real issues are, where the causes of suffering are, and where the suffering is. But the potential for putting an end to suffering also comes from watching these things, seeing them in action, and becoming very discerning in how you shape your experience, how you react to your thoughts.

So reflect. Remember: This practice is a mirror. It's not for looking outside. It's for looking at yourself and trying to be very precise in figuring out which things going on in the mind are part of the path, and which things are off the path. That's what the Buddha discovered. No one else had discovered it before him. It's up to us to take his discovery and make the best use of it.