

Your Mind is Lying to You

September 15, 2010

There's a *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon where Calvin's sitting on a sled at the top of the hill and he's thinking, "Go ahead, go down the hill, you won't run into that boulder, you won't run into that stream, it's not too steep." And in the last panel he turns and says to the reader, "My brain is trying to kill me."

And that's one of the main problems in life: Your mind is trying to kill you. If not kill you physically, it's trying to kill your goodness, kill your possibility for really getting anywhere in the practice. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how when he was a young monk he was afraid to go out and practice for fear that it would be wasted energy. There was a belief in those days that the time for jhana had passed, the time for nirvana had passed, and he was afraid any effort in that direction would be wasted. He got over the fear by realizing that whatever the Buddha taught was not meant to be an executioner of your happiness. Whatever's required of the path, whether it's easy, whether it's difficult: It's all good.

And it's not that progress happens only when the path is easy or only when you're enjoying it. There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about how some things are good in the present, good in the future; good in the present, bad in the future; bad in the present, good in the future; bad in the present and bad in the future. The one that's bad in the present but good in the future, he says, is the case where a person is practicing the Dhamma, leading the holy life, thoroughly miserable, tears running down his cheeks, but he's willing to stick with it.

In cases like that, the mind has lots of ways of pulling you away, and you have to watch out for them, learn how to catch the mind when it's lying to you. Sometimes it comes as psychotherapy, saying, "Forcing yourself is bad for you, you know. It's unhealthy," and all the jargon that therapists have cooked up to keep people from exerting themselves, to keep them happy with a life that really is not worth being happy with.

Like the therapist I was talking to up in Vancouver last year: He was working in a storefront that offers psychological counseling to drug addicts. And he was telling me that for years they had trouble just getting people to come in off the street for free therapy. They found the one approach that worked to at least pull the people into the storefront was to help them work on their self-esteem. But the problem was that they ended up with clients who had high self-esteem but were still on drugs. They were perfectly okay now with taking drugs; they didn't feel bad about themselves for taking drugs. And the therapist was beginning to realize that this was not an advance. It was actually a setback.

There's a lot of that in psychotherapy. Therapists will tell you that there are a lot of fellow therapists who are afraid they're going to lose their clients, so they tell the clients whatever they think the clients want to hear. And because psychotherapy claims to be a science, it begins to sound scientific. So we have to watch out for that.

People even use the Dhamma as a way of lying to themselves, using the wrong Dhamma at the wrong time. There's a classic case of that in the four-volume novel, *Joseph and His Brothers*. Joseph has been working as a slave in charge of Potiphar's house, and Potiphar's wife has been trying to seduce him for an entire volume of the novel. And you think he's been able to steer clear of her, but then one day the whole family goes out for a holiday that requires everybody to go over to the west side of the river for ceremonies at the tombs. When they come back home, there's going to be a big dinner. And Potiphar's wife lets it be known that she's not feeling well, so she's going to stay home alone in the house. At first, Joseph goes over with the group to the west side of the river but then he starts telling himself, "Gee, as a responsible steward here I really ought to go check the arrangements back at the house." This is followed with a long series of little maxims that he repeats

to himself to convince himself that that's his duty to go back. So, as a fool, he ends up going back and Potiphar's wife attacks him physically. He's able to get away but she has his cloak in her hand: the evidence that he tried to rape her. It's because of that that he has to go into prison—all out of a false sense of duty.

So you have to watch out for the voice in the mind that says, "Well, you'd really be better off, you've got this duty, you've got that duty." But is it genuinely your duty? That's one of the most seductive ways the mind has of lying to itself.

This is why, when you meditate, you have to learn how to say No to every thought that comes up. It's your first line of defense. That means not just putting it aside but questioning it. "Is that really true? Is that so? Is that so?" you could ask. And then watch. Try to keep the mind in position with the breath or just with the sense of the body in the present moment, staying outside of your thought-worlds. And remember the old principle, Don't believe everything you think. Because it's very rarely that we fall for just raw desire. Desires have their reasons.

This was an old problem in ancient philosophy. Plato said that reason and desire are two totally separate functions of the mind. But then the Stoics noticed that, no, if you can reason with your desires or reason can win out over desires, you're not winning out through sheer force. If desires actually listen to reason, it means they have reasons of their own. And often they won't tell you what their real reasons are. They're like politicians. They wave a flag over here so they can do their dirty work over there. If you really love yourself, really care for yourself, really want to put an end to suffering, you have to learn to recognize the red herrings, the distractions, the good-seeming reasons that are actually going to lead you astray.

Often they're in terms of abstractions. This is one way you can recognize them. The Buddha didn't deal with abstractions. He dealt with actions, specific actions. This action: What is it going to lead to? That action: What is it going to lead to? Where does it tend? If you get pulled off into abstractions, you get pulled further and further away from the actual mental act of seeing the connection between the action and the result.

This is why a lot of meditation is a matter of staying under the radar. Abstractions are flying through the air but you stay down close to the ground. Just watch: When I think in this way, what's the tone in the body? What's the tone in the mind? Where is this leading? Which of my defilements wants me to believe this? It's like that old way of protecting yourself when you're reading magazines or newspapers: "Somebody wants me to believe this. Why?" That way, you don't get entirely pulled in by a skewed way of thinking.

This is one of the most valuable gifts of the practice: It gives you a place here with the breath where you can step back and watch your thought-worlds in terms of cause and effect. This is how the Buddha himself said he got onto the path. After realizing that jhana was one of the factors of the path, he had to work on right resolve, i.e., training his mind to see what kind of thoughts lead toward concentration and what kind of thoughts lead away from concentration. In the same way, you look at your thoughts in terms of cause and effect. To what extent are they bringing the mind to a sense of wellbeing or ease? Of course, sometimes the path to that ease is going to be hard. The Buddha never said it's going to be easy all along the way. You have to keep an eye toward the long-term results of what you're doing.

So the concentration, as you're working at it, develops a set of skills that enable you to gauge what's being said in the mind, so that you can figure out who's lying to you and who's telling the truth. Who has your best interests in mind and who doesn't? Remember that image of Ajaan Lee's, of all kinds of beings—germs and whatnot—in your bloodstream. A thought goes through your brain and maybe it's the thought of one of those little beings going through the bloodstream around your brain. Thinking in this way reminds you that you don't have to identify with everything that comes up in the mind or gets lodged in the body as an emotion.

I've been reading about the Romantics and the Transcendentalists, how they really had a strong respect for the mind's intuitions and they gave them absolute authority. That's dangerous. You can't give absolute authority to anything. You have to test everything, and test the way you test things, and in the testing you try to develop the ability to judge more and more reliably. This is why we take refuge in the Buddha to begin with,

because we need someone as an example—someone with whose example we can compare our thoughts or actions or our words until we reach the point where we really can depend on ourselves.

So if anything's pulling you away from the practice, remember: It's lying to you. And it's not going to present itself simply as raw desire. It's going to have its reasons, some of which sound very smooth and convincing. One of the skills you have to develop as a meditator is to learn how to see through that.

One of Ajaan Fuang's traits that really struck me when I first met him was how skeptical he was. He wasn't willing to jump to conclusions, either believing or not believing. He'd watch and he'd watch some more and he'd watch some more. That's how to prevent even your insights from getting hijacked by your defilements. When an insight comes in, pride can arise around it—which is why Upasika Kee Nanayon always advised that whenever an insight comes, watch to see what happens next and what happens next, and then what happens next. Ajaan Lee's test would be if you gain an insight, ask yourself: To what extent is what you just learned true? To what extent is its opposite true? It's this ability to step back and watch that's so important, so that ultimately you can see through to the truth.