

People Suffer from Their Thinking

July 4, 2006

A passage in the teachings of Ajaan Dun describes an incident when a woman came to him and just poured out her soul about the problems in her family—worried about her son, worried about this, worried about that—and so he tried to console her as best he could. After she left, he commented to one of his students, “People these days suffer because of their thinking.” It’s interesting the way he said that—“people these days”—as if people didn’t suffer from their thinking in the past. Maybe he meant that prior to that time, Thailand was poor and most people were just worried about eating, surviving. Now that people have become wealthier, food is easier to get, jobs are easier to get, their thinking takes over and that makes them suffer.

This is certainly true in spades about people in the modern world because so much in the modern world teaches us harmful ways of thinking. The mass media are predicated on the idea that you are lacking and you need what we’ve got to sell. That’s the message they’re constantly trying to get through to you. And when you’re exposed to that message long enough, you start believing it.

The first step in the cure is to get away from the media, so that the message isn’t being drummed into you all the time. But even then, once you’ve been used to thinking in those terms, it’s hard to get them out of your system. This is why we have to train the mind. There are basically two ways of approaching the problem. One is to stop thinking, and the other is to learn to think in different ways, ways that are actually helpful to you to put an end to suffering rather than piling on more suffering.

As a meditator, you’ve got to learn how to use both approaches, learning to let the mind rest so that it doesn’t have to be occupied with thoughts all the time; and then, when the time comes when you really do have to think, learning how to think in ways that are helpful rather than harmful. And even when you’re trying to get the mind to be still, it requires a certain amount of thought beforehand. You’ve got to convince yourself this is a worthwhile activity, sitting here focusing on your breath. Then you have to think about letting the breath be comfortable, trying not to force the breath too much, just noticing what kind of rhythm of breathing feels good right now. This requires some thought, but it’s constructive thought. It’s okay to think and pose questions around this issue, because that kind of thinking and questioning gets you more absorbed in the breath.

It’s not a matter of forcing the mind to stay with the breath no matter what. If you put too much force on the mind like that, it’s going to rebel. It’s like trying to hold a beach ball under water. As soon as your grip loosens up a bit, the ball goes shooting up out of the water. What you’ve got to learn is how to get the mind interested in the breath. Realize that this energy in the body that goes along with the breathing is an important factor in keeping the body healthy: not just alive but healthy as well. If the energy flows smoothly, if all the nerves in the body get bathed in the breath, that’s going to be good for the body. When the body is more comfortable, it’s easier to settle down and stay right here. It feels good. There’s a sense of fullness, a sense of ease that you can develop just by thinking of the

energy flowing through the body all the time. As soon as the breath starts coming in, the energy is already flowing through all the nerves. As soon as it goes out, it's dispersing out through all the pores of the body. Thinking in this way helps the mind to settle down and gives it a place to rest when it doesn't have to think.

But there may be a part of your mind saying: "What are you doing? This is a waste of time. You've got all these other issues you've got to worry about." And sometimes you can say, "No I'm sorry, this is not the time for that," and it'll stop. Other times though, you've got to reason with the mind. This is why we have the chants before the meditation. This is why the Buddha gave so many discourses to help you see that it really is important to train the mind, that this is the most important thing you can do in life. As for all the other issues you might carry around, you've got to learn how to look at those from a distant perspective. All too often we're much too close to the issues in our lives, dealing with issues in our family, issues at work, our own frustration with ourselves, and we get our nose right into it. When you get too entangled in these issues, it's hard to get a perspective.

So the purpose of the Dhamma is to help give you a perspective that will help you step back and look at these issues in the long-term. Get a better sense of what's really important in life and what's not important in life. The Buddha talks about four Guardian Meditations. These are things to think about if you have trouble getting the mind to settle down. There are four topics in all: the Buddha, goodwill, the foulness of the body, and mindfulness of death.

There are different ways you can think about the Buddha. If you find that the mind needs some consoling and reassuring—in other words, it needs some gentle treatment—just think about the fact that the Buddha proved with his life that it is possible for human beings to find true happiness. That's the basic message his life sends. And it's an important message. Because for most of us, we look at human life and what is it? People get born, they go through all this trouble to get an education. Some people get married, have kids. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't. Then what happens? They get old. Their body stops functioning. And sometimes death and illness don't happen quickly. There are these long lingering illnesses and then they die. And you wonder, "What is that all about?" All that needless suffering. You look around and that seems to be everyone's life.

The Buddha's life story is very different. He found that it's possible through your own efforts to attain a happiness that's not affected by aging, illness, and death. In other words, there is a part of the mind that lies beyond these things. You can look at aging, illness, and death as little issues. It also helps to look at a lot of the other issues in your daily life, to see them as little things as well—and to remind you it is possible to find true happiness. It may take a long time, but that possibility is there. Things are not hopeless.

That's one way of thinking about the Buddha. Now if you find that you're getting lazy in your practice, the other way you can think about the Buddha is to remind yourself that the Buddha was here 2600 years ago teaching this lesson. You were probably here someplace too. Why didn't you take the lesson to heart back then? Why are you still hanging around now? How much longer is it going to take you? It's very rare that we have Buddhas in this world. The texts talk

about how many thousands of years it's going to be before the next Buddha appears. And in the meantime his teachings are going to be forgotten. What are you going to do then? When you think in this way, it gives a little more oomph to your practice, more encouragement to put more effort in.

So, you can think about the Buddha either in a way that's consoling or in a way that lights a fire under you. Look at your state of mind and see which way of thinking about the Buddha is helpful right now and then apply that. One of the big tragedies of human life is that we have this power to think and yet for the most part the mind seems to have a mind of its own. A useless topic can absorb you and obsess you and it seems like it's got hold of you and won't let you go. Actually that's not what's happening. The thought isn't holding onto you. You're holding onto the thinking, even the thinking that seems to be the most frustrating and maddening. One part of the mind actually gets some pleasure out of it, otherwise it wouldn't hold on—the sense that it *has* to do this kind of thinking or *has* to browbeat itself or whatever. You've got to learn how to question that: "What pleasure am I getting out of this thinking that's driving me crazy? In what sense do I feel I have to do it? Is there going to be a reward for me if I do this obsessive thinking?" Look into that. And when you can catch sight of something of that sort happening, then it's a lot easier to let go.

The other three Guardian Meditations operate in a similar manner. You can think about them in ways that are consoling or in ways that give you more of a push. For instance, thoughts of goodwill: It's good to think thoughts of wishing happiness for everybody, starting with yourself and then spreading it around, because that kind of thought holds no harm. It reminds you that you don't gain any advantage from anybody else's suffering, so why would you want to wish suffering on anyone else? This helps give you a larger perspective on the issues of life. Particularly if there's a cycle of revenge someplace in your life, this helps pull you out. Helps you step back. Of course the more stringent side of metta is that if you really do wish yourself happiness, what are you doing? Why are you living this way? Why do you do these things? Why do you say these things? Why do you think these things? If you were really serious about your happiness, you'd change the way you live. In this way, thoughts of goodwill can act as a carrot or a stick, depending on what you need.

The third Guardian meditation: the foulness of the body. You can think about that in a consoling way or a more stringent way. The consoling way is to remind yourself that many of the heavy issues in life are based on meeting the needs of the body. But look at the body. What is it? Just a few organs that are going to function together for a while and then fall apart. And a lot of these heavy issues around the body are really not all that important. Why make the body such a big deal?

As for the stringent side, when you see that you're really attached to the body, ask yourself: Well, what is it here in the body that's really worth being proud about? The Buddha once said, after cataloging all the different things that the body does, all the stuff inside the body, and then what happens to the body as it ages and dies, "Whoever would think of exalting himself or disparaging others on the basis of this body: What is that if not blindness?" In other words, your body may be stronger, more fit, more beautiful, whatever, but so what? It's still made of disgusting things and oozes disgusting things, and is subject to all sorts of

diseases. It dies. So what's so great about that?

Recollection of death functions in two ways as well. The consoling side is that whatever the issues you have in life, there will come a time when they don't matter anymore. You pass away, the other people pass away, everything's all going to be forgotten. So the issues that loom so large in your life right now: You can look at them as something a lot smaller. They're not so overwhelming. On the other hand, you can use thoughts about death to realize you don't know when you're going to die. The Buddha has his disciples reflect every evening at sunset: This may be the last sunset you'll ever see. Are you ready to go? The answer is usually No. Then the question is, how can you best prepare your mind? The best thing you can do is to train the mind to have more mindfulness, more discernment, more alertness, so that if death does come, the mind doesn't have to suffer. He has you think the same way every morning at sunrise: This may be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go? No. If not, then train your mind. It's not the case that when death comes we have no way of helping the situation. The body may die, but the mind doesn't have to suffer with the body's death if you're mindful enough, if you have enough concentration, if you have enough alertness and discernment. So work on building these qualities now, while you can.

These are some of the ways in which thinking can actually help you. It gives you the right attitude. The question is learning how to apply these different topics in a way that's appropriate for your needs right now. That requires learning how to look at your own mind to see what it needs. A good rule of thumb is usually to start with the more consoling side and see if that works, if it gives you the energy you need to practice. If the consoling side doesn't work, you can use the more stringent side, to see if *that* works. Once you see that the mind is willing to drop all of its outside concerns and settle down, then you can drop that thinking and just be with the stillness.

A lot of the meditation goes back and forth between being still and thinking, investigating and then being still again, investigating, being still again. The more solid your concentration, then the more subtle your thinking can be, the more subtle your powers of observation and analysis in the present moment can be. Meditation practice is not just a matter of forcing the mind to be still. You've got to learn how to reason with it so that it can let go at least enough to allow the mind to settle down for a while. Once it's settled down for a while, then you can reason with it again so that it can let go even more, of more subtle things, the things you missed when the mind was bouncing all over the place like a ping-pong ball. Now that it's more still, you can begin to see more subtle attachments. Learn how to investigate them. Then when you let go of those, the mind will be still on an even deeper level. Learn how to pursue it back and forth like this. Thinking and being still. Thinking and being still. So these two processes can help each other along.

When you understand the meditation in this way, the results go a lot deeper. And they really do help you find the happiness the Buddha found, the happiness that isn't dependent on anything all, but just simply is. It's there. The potential is already there in the mind. The issue is simply learning how to use the faculties in the mind—its ability to be still, its ability to investigate, its ability to think—in a way that really is helpful rather than the normal everyday way we use them, which just piles more suffering on top of suffering.

So look at your mind right now and see what it needs. Does it need consoling, does it need the stick rather than the carrot, or is it ready just to settle down? Learn to observe your mind then provide it what it needs.