

Overcoming Delusion

February 8, 2008

Meditation is part of a larger practice, which is to be skillful in everything we do and say and think. As we sit here meditating, there's no question about what we're doing or saying, it's mostly about what we're thinking, trying to train the mind to develop good qualities, so that its thoughts are skillful, i.e. appropriate: thinking when it's appropriate to think and not thinking when you don't have to.

And a large part of the meditation is recognizing the qualities of mind that get in the way of being skillful. There are basically three: greed, aversion, delusion. And of the three, delusion is the hardest, because by definition you don't know when you're deluded. It's not that you don't know anything at all. You have your ideas, but the ideas go against what's actually happening.

Fortunately, the problem isn't that we're deluded, say, about the cosmological constant or the meaning of pi. We're deluded about our own actions. We don't see our own intentions for what they are and we don't see the results of our actions. We have the wrong ideas about what we're doing or the wrong ideas about what's coming about as a result—sometimes even denying that the results of our actions actually do come from our own actions.

As the Buddha said, there are basically two ways around this. One is hearing the words of someone else, i.e.. someone who knows. And the other is our own appropriate attention: learning how to look at our actions and their results in a useful way. That's the only thing that can break through our ignorance. Because the whole problem with an unskillful action is that even though it's causing suffering, it's causing stress, it's causing harm in one way or another, we don't see it. Either we don't see the connection—we know that we're suffering but we don't know why. Or we accept the level of suffering and say, "Well, that's the way things have to be."

So, the way out often starts with the voice of another person, one, pointing out the connection, and two, saying things don't have to be that way. That's one way of getting around this filter we have in our minds that filters out what's actually happening.

Now sometimes these mental filters are useful. If we didn't have filters in the mind, we'd be overwhelmed with sensory impressions: all the data coming in from all the little nerve ends in our body. It'd be just too much. The brain would break down. It wouldn't be able manage or cope. So it requires a certain level of filtering.

This evening for instance, there was a weather forecast saying that on Sunday the wind chill factor in the mountains and in the deserts was going to be between 100 and 120 below zero. That was a computer saying that, and someplace in its calculations there had been a mistake. They were saying the temperatures were going to be in the 40's at night with light winds, and it's hard to imagine light winds that would have a wind chill factor that cold. So when you listen to a weather forecast like that, you know it's crazy, there's a mistake someplace. That's another way in which filters are useful, for filtering out the crazy stuff.

But they can still get in the way. You probably know the story of the ozone hole. For years the satellites were giving the information saying Yes there was this huge hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica. But the computer programs that were reading the information had been programmed to reject any data like that. As a result, for several years nobody realized what was happening. So although filters can be useful, they can also get in the way. They can be a cause for delusion.

What you need is the right filter. And that's what the Buddha provided in his teachings on the four noble truths. These are the categories of what he called appropriate attention: Look at things in terms of cause and effect, skillful and unskillful. Judge them by the level of stress or harm or suffering that they cause. That's how you want to look at things. Look at your own actions, look all the way even to the way you breathe.

The basic insight here is that the Buddha's pointing our attention to a fruitful place to look. Because for most of us, we don't look in these places. As a friend once said, "Albert Einstein was a genius but he never thought of looking at his own breath or thinking that by following the breath it would take him to a useful place, that it would be a useful activity."

So as the Buddha said, it's only because he had found this path and pointed it out to us that we would even think of looking here. This is why he said that friendship with admirable people is the whole of the practice, because it gets you started thinking. It suggests possibilities that you might not otherwise have thought of: where to look, what you might possibly see, and how best to judge things.

That's why we need the voice of another person, so that we can develop that quality of appropriate attention within ourselves, looking at our actions and learning to anticipate the results and then checking them out. When you actually do follow with the action, do you get the results you anticipated? If you anticipate that it's going to cause harm, you don't do it. But if you find that you thought it wasn't going to cause harm and it actually did cause harm, make up your mind not to repeat that mistake, and talk it over with somebody else you respect.

And notice, we're working here on our actions. It's not a course in self-improvement. It's a course in action-improvement. Selves are hard to improve. Actions are easy to change. So that's the tack the Buddha has you take.

And the principle works here with the breath. What kind of breathing would feel best right now? Experiment to find out. As you try to stay with the breath, you get more and more sensitive to the mind and sensitive to what's going on in the body. You begin to see there are potentials for cause and effect here, and sometimes they get clearer and clearer if you're looking in the right place and if you have your mind open to looking for the connections.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha taught us to look for suffering and stress, so that we can begin to see that the way we've been doing things is harmful, is stressful. There's something wrong but it can be changed. Otherwise, there's an inertia to delusion. We've been doing things all along, everything seems basically, okay, so we'll just keep on doing them that way. On a gross level we may notice that we make certain mistakes and we learn not to make those mistakes again. But sometimes the lessons we learn get all mixed up.

And this is what a lot of psychotherapy is about: going back and trying to figure out what lessons you learned when you were a kid that were based on faulty information or misunderstanding and yet you've somehow carried those same ideas into your adulthood. The reason you undergo this kind of therapy is because you see there's suffering in your life. So it's the suffering that suggests there may be another way to do things.

But then you've got the problem that there are some sufferings and some levels of stress that you've learned to accept. This again is why you need the voice of another to point out, "It doesn't have to be that way." This is large part of what the Buddha's teachings do for us: They suggest possibilities that we might otherwise not have thought of.

Or else we're too satisfied with the status quo. This can actually become a major problem in the practice, especially when you start developing a sense of ease, concentration, spaciousness in the mind. You might get to a point where you say, "This is good enough," or "This is as good as it can get." You see this all over the place. People saying, "Well, if there's any stress left in this particular state of mind, it just has to be that way. Learn how to accept it." And then people get stuck there. "This is the suffering," they say, "of having a body and mind. What do you want? Do you want not to have a body and mind?" They're unwilling to consider the possibility that maybe there's something better to be found and more to do to find it.

If you're willing to listen, though, you hear that it's possible for there to be no suffering, no stress in the mind, at all. You have to be willing to consider the possibility that maybe there's something beyond whatever level of concentration you may have attained.

So the path depends on this combination of two factors: the voice of another person and your own appropriate attention. You run up against some suffering and stress, you finally decide something needs to be done. You look for somebody who might be able to suggest a way out of it. When you find wise advice, you apply it and find that you're not suffering in that way anymore.

It's not always the case that people will listen to that other voice. You know the analogy of the different horses. There's the wise, alert, and heedful horse: All you have to do is tell it what to do and whisper the word "whip" and it'll do what you want. Then there's the horse who actually has to see the whip before it'll do what you want. Then there's the horse that has to feel the whip in its skin. Then there's the horse that has to feel the whip digging into its flesh a little bit. And then there's the horse that won't do what you want until you dig the whip into the bone.

In other words, as they say in AA, some people really have to hit rock-bottom before they're willing to change. But not everybody has to be that way. Some people are heedful. They sense that there's suffering, and that there must be something that can be done about it. Instead of blaming it on the stars or on the economy or on their parents or whatever, they look to see what they're doing, what they might change. So it behooves us to be the heedful kind of horse, to realize that we are causing ourselves suffering and that we can learn how to overcome that suffering by looking more carefully at what we're doing and at the results. And keep in mind the Buddha's standard, that it is possible for the mind ultimately to be totally unconditioned by anything at all, totally free of suffering, totally free of stress.

So when we can combine what we hear from the Buddha with our own appropriate attention, it's not impossible that delusion can be recognized and overcome.