

## *Delusion*

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Of the three roots of unskillful behavior, delusion is the hardest to recognize. When you're angry, you usually know when you're angry; when you're feeling passion or greed, you know you're feeling those things; but when you're deluded, by definition you don't know. You think you know. It's not as if you live in a fog and have no idea of anything at all—you can have lots of knowledge of all kinds of things, but it might be the wrong kind of knowledge, or you're asking the wrong kinds of questions. This is why it's important to learn how to develop discernment.

The Buddha talks about three ways of developing discernment. The first is listening, the second is thinking, and the third is developing.

Listening means finding people who are wise and listening to what they have to say, and also listening to their examples—in other words, try to notice how they do things. You'll notice, when you listen to them, that one of the big issues for them is what's skillful and what's not. Just learning how to focus on that issue right there is really important. We're concerned with our actions—where the actions come from, where they go—and one of the ways that the Buddha's teaching is really distinctive is that it's focused on seeing *everything* in terms of cause and effect, action and result.

Even our beliefs about things—what we are, what the world is outside: The Buddha recommends that you look at them as beliefs, as actions. In other words, the focus is not so much on the thing but more on what your belief about the thing will lead you to do, and what the results of that kind of action will be. If you have certain beliefs about what you are, it'll have an impact on your actions.

Even something as simple as the breath: As you're sitting right here with the breath, you have certain beliefs about the breath. For me, one of the most liberating lessons in meditation was reading Ajaan Lee's description of the breath and realizing it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it's the flow of energy throughout the body. Having that concept really helped a lot. Prior to that time, I'd be focusing right at the nose and would get headaches every time I meditated.

So it's useful to read up on what's skillful and what's not, and on how to work with the mind and how to work with skillful actions in general, because it gives you a body of concepts to work with.

For example, mindfulness: It's very important to learn that mindfulness doesn't just mean just being aware of something or having a receptive attitude where you're just accepting of things. It means keeping something in mind.

You're here trying to focus on your actions and you want to remember what you've learned in the past about skillful actions and unskillful actions—either through your reading or your thinking or trying to develop skillful actions—so that you can apply that knowledge to what you're doing right now. If mindfulness were just acceptance, what would you need to read? You'd just learn how to accept, accept, accept, and that would be it. But there's more going on here. Some actions are to be developed, others are to be comprehended, and others are to be abandoned. You want to know which.

Having the right vocabulary is very helpful. When they train people to be professional tasters, some of the training, of course, involves just tasting different kinds of food, but an important part of the training is also learning a *vocabulary*, so that you can have a very precise set of things to notice and a precise set of words to help you notice those things. A lot of the Buddha's teachings on, say, the aggregates, the establishings of mindfulness, or his various lists of the qualities that are important to develop: These alert you to things going on in your mind that you might not have noticed before.

This is one of the reasons why it's useful to study, to read up on what the Buddha has to say, particularly about the wings to awakening, which he said were his central teachings. You'll notice that the wings contain a lot about action, a lot about qualities of the mind. That helps give some focus to your discernment. It helps clear away some of the fog of delusion.

The next step is to think about these things—to see what seems reasonable, what doesn't seem reasonable. And again, when you're dealing with an example and you know the person, you can think about that person's actions, think about that person's words. Where do they fit, where do they not fit? You want to hang around people who are skillful in the way they talk, act, and think; but you also have to realize that nobody's perfect. So you have to learn how to use your powers of observation to see what's useful to pick up from this person and what's not. Where are the person's activities in line with what he or she says, and where are they not?

The third way of developing discernment, to clear away more delusion, is to actually try to develop that person's admirable qualities in yourself. This is one of the themes you see again and again in the forest tradition—that it's through right effort that our wisdom really develops. Ajahn Maha Boowa's example is of someone who's learned military science. You can learn all kinds of things in the classroom, you can have diagrams on the blackboard, and have read up on all the different military campaigns in the past, but when you actually get into a battle it's a very different experience. Whether you're going to get out alive is going to depend not only on what you've learned from the books but also on your own ingenuity, because you'll come up with problems you didn't think of before and you'll find that your perspective is very different.

It's like reading all those koans in the Zen tradition: We're sitting on the outside and we see the stupid student coming up to the master. The stupid student says something obviously stupid, the master says something very wise, and the student doesn't get it. Because we're outside of the situation, it's easier for us to get the point, because we're primed that this is a koan. But the student was living in the situation—he thought it was just an ordinary everyday situation, he wasn't alert to the fact that he was going to be stepping into a koan that day—and he really did have a blind spot. It was up to the master to see the blind spot, to try to point it out to the student in a way that the student would not have been prepared for—in other words, he didn't have his defences up.

So you can read about these things, but when you're actually *in* the situation, your perspective is different. You've got to learn how to figure out how to deal with, say, mindfulness or concentration as you're getting into them here in the mind, trying to make them grow.

With concentration, it's largely a matter of doing everything you can to get the mind to stay with the breath or whatever your one object is.

In the beginning, it's like a child learning how to walk. The child will be moving all kinds of muscles that have nothing to do with walking, and some of the muscles will actually interfere with the walking, but bit by bit the child learns how to walk and then begins to notice how to do it more efficiently. The child has other things that he or she is interested in and wants to use the walking to get there, and over time gets more efficient.

It's the same with concentration: In the beginning, we do everything. We flail around trying to get the mind into concentration, and we finally get it there, to stay with the object at least to some extent, but we may be doing it in a very inefficient way. So we have to learn to notice, "How can I keep the mind with the object and yet not create unnecessary pressure, not add unnecessary efforts? How can I do it more efficiently? How can I do it more calmly, with less energy input and with more energy coming out?"

In other words, you focus on the concentration, again, as an action. What are you planning to do? How are you doing it? What are the results? If the results aren't good, go back and look at what your plan is, look at your actions. Keep your focus here. If you see that certain perceptions are getting in the way, you can drop them or change them.

Again, that issue with the breath: If you feel that the breath can come in and out of the body only in a few narrow little holes, such as the nostrils, it's going to feel very confined. But if you can think of it coming in and out of all your pores and can hold that image in mind, the breath will be a lot more refreshing. It'll come more easily. You begin to notice how your perceptions, your beliefs about things, do shape what actually happens.

So all three of these aspects of gaining discernment—listening, i.e., listening and reading, and watching; thinking; and then developing—all work together to keep you focused on what you're doing and what you can learn so as to do it well.

There's a *Peanuts* cartoon where Lucy complains, "If you go around watching everything you say, you'll never get a lot said." Well, do you want to say a lot of things that really shouldn't have been said to begin with? The same issue comes up with the teachings to Rahula: A lot of people complain that watching your motivations and watching your actions and watching the results doesn't give you much time to learn other things. But how useful are those other things? The big issue in life is what you're *doing*. You are an active being. Your *being* is *active*. That's what you're all about. So you want to learn how to do it well. Focus on that issue. Simply keeping that issue as primary and learning how to compare what's working well with what's not: That's how you clear up a lot of delusion.

Someone gave me a gift of a photography book one time, and in it the photographer would have two pictures, very similar, of a particular scene. He was pointing out why one picture was better than the other. It was probably one of the most educational books I ever got on photography, because one picture was good but the other picture really was better, and the photographer's explanations helped you to see why. It's when you learn how to compare that your delusion goes away.

And it's the same with your meditation: Learn how to compare different ways of breathing with other ways of breathing, different perceptions with other perceptions. Learn how to compare what it's like when you keep your mind focused on one spot as opposed to another spot. Learn how to ask questions like this, using what you've learned, what you've thought about, and the ingenuity that you've had to develop as you've tried to develop these qualities. That's how you clear up your delusion.