

A Mirror for the Mind

April 1, 2020

When I was in Brazil, one of the people on the retreat asked a question. Actually, it was less a question than a statement. She had been told that when we meditate, we should meditate with our eyes half-open because the purpose of the meditation was to help with our work in the world, and because the work of the world is done with your eyes open, you should meditate with your eyes at least half-open.

I had no problem with meditating with eyes half-open. It's a practical issue. The Buddha himself, when he gave meditation instructions, said nothing about whether your eyes should be opened or closed. So it's a matter of personal choice. If you find that meditating with your eyes closed puts you to sleep, keep them open. Simply make sure that you don't stare. Keep your focus gentle, fuzzy. If, however, having your eyes open is distracting, keep them closed. You make your choice based on what works.

The point that I did have a problem with was the idea that we're meditating for the sake of the work of the world. We're not training the mind for the sake of the world. We're training the mind for the sake of the mind.

So as you sit here right now, put all your other concerns aside—because the big issue is not the world outside. The big issue is your mind, and you now have the time to focus total attention on the mind. There's nowhere else you have to go, nothing else you have to think about. The mind at this moment doesn't have to be a servant to anybody. All too often we have to serve the needs of the body, serve the needs of our social responsibilities, but right now you can put those aside. The only issue in the body right now is how it feels from within. And you want to inhabit it from within. Give the mind a good place to stay right here so that it's not wandering around outside like an orphan. It's got a home, a comfortable home, and it's in charge.

When the Buddha says that there's no one in charge, he's talking about the world. This is especially clear right now. There's so much ignorance going around: people not knowing what to do, nobody really in charge. What that means is that you can put your mind in charge of your mind. You have that choice. If we lived in a world where someone had set the purpose for the world, we'd have to sacrifice our happiness for that purpose. But there's no one in charge. So you're free to decide what you want to do right now.

When you look into it, you see that the big problem in the mind is: Why is it that we start out with the desire for happiness, then it seems to go underground, and when it comes out in our actions, it's creating pain, creating suffering. What happened in between? Why the ignorance? Part of the

ignorance, of course, is that our attention is directed outside. If you want to have it rightly directed, turn the arrow around. Bring it inside.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha's basic image for the practice is of a mirror. At the very beginning of his teachings to Rahula, introducing the practice as a whole, he asked Rahula, "What is the purpose of a mirror?" Rahula answered, "For reflection." "In the same way," the Buddha said, "you should reflect on your bodily deeds, your verbal deeds, and your mental deeds." You look inside, and you do that by looking at your actions. Right now, your actions are limited to the mind. In other words, you're not saying anything right now, and the body's doing nothing aside from fidgeting a little bit. Otherwise, there's nothing outside. It's just mental action that you're focusing on.

So what are your mental acts? In terms of mindfulness, you've got mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. In terms of concentration, your acts are directed thought and evaluation, plus the effort to bring that directed thought and evaluation to one object. So keep your eye on those activities. Direct your thoughts to the breath. Evaluate the breath. Be mindful of the breath. Be alert to the breath. Be ardent in trying to create a sense of well-being, a sense of solidity, a sense of stillness right here. Why? Because you want to see things clearly. You don't want the mirror to be obscured.

There's that Zen story where a poem begins by saying that we're trying to clean the dust off the mirror—the mirror being the mind—and then someone comes along and says, "Actually, there is no mirror at all. So where is the dust going to collect? What is there to clear off?" It's a clever story, but that's not what the mirror is. The mirror is not the mind itself, the mirror is in its actions. Because the mind does act. It's a proactive thing. It's not simply sitting here passive. It's going out and looking for things. So you direct it to look for things that are right here, right now, so that you can see it close-up, in action.

As you're doing this, you'll see a little bit of greed slipping into your actions, or a little bit of anger or fear. Other things slip in. But if you're looking carefully, you'll see them, and that's the important thing: You want to see these things because they're the factors that obscure the course of how you start out with an intention for well-being and then end up with something that's not well-being. This is where the big ignorance lies: in how the mind is acting and how it doesn't understand its actions.

So our goal is to understand our actions so that we can stop creating suffering. This is what we mean when we say that we train the mind for the sake of the mind. If our actions are done in ignorance, they lead to suffering; if they're done in knowledge, they become a path to the end of suffering. And that goal—the end of suffering—is worthy in and of itself.

The Buddha does praise people who work for their own good *and* for the good of others. He said they're better than people who work only for their own good. But then people work only for their own good, he said, are better than people who neglect their own good and try to work for the good of others. In his way of seeing things, working for your own good means practicing; working for the good of others means getting them to practice. It's not the case that you can go out and save them from their suffering. You can help them with their external circumstances so that they experience less pain and disappointment in life—up to some extent. But the question of whether they're going to suffer from even a comfortable life, that's up to them. You can give them advice on how not to create suffering, but they have to follow the advice, and that's their choice. And if you haven't followed the advice yourself, it's not going to have much impact. It's not going to have much power.

So everything reverts right here. Your attention is always directed back inside. That's what the mirror is for, to watch your actions inside, to clean up your actions inside.

The Buddha has another image of a mirror: A young man or young woman—fond of adornment, fond of beauty—looking in the mirror and seeing a blemish, immediately will wipe the blemish away. That's why we're looking in the mirror. If there's a blemish in our actions, it's a sign of a blemish in the mind. Clear away the blemish in the action, and the mind will be clear. When it looks for happiness, it'll act in a way that does lead to happiness. When that problem has been solved, you've accomplished a lot right there. It's enough in and of itself. Anything more, anything else you give to the world, is totally a free gift.

As the Buddha said, those who've attained full awakening are totally without debt. They have no obligations to the world at all. Even the Buddha himself—after gaining his awakening, after all those many, many eons of developing the perfections for the sake of full Buddhahood—still had the choice. He could have decided not to teach. But he freely chose to teach. That decision to teach was a free gift, above and beyond what he had to do.

So our main duty is our own minds. We train the mind for the sake of the mind. We're generous, we're virtuous, and we meditate for the sake of the mind. Anything beyond that is a free gift. There are no obligations, because you've taken care of a human being's main duty to comprehend stress, abandon its cause, and develop the path so that you can realize its cessation. It's at that point that the job is done. Anything beyond that is not a job. It's not a duty. It's a gift.