

## *Reflections*

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There are several passages where the Buddha compares the practice to looking at yourself in a mirror. From the very beginning, when he teaches Rahula—when Rahula was about seven years old—he says, just in the same way that you would look into the mirror to reflect on your face to examine what's there, to see if there are any blemishes, any smudges of dirt you have to clean off of it, in the same way, you reflect on your actions.

First you look at your intentions before you act. What do you expect as a result of this action? If you expect any harm, either to yourself or to others, you don't do it. Act only on the intentions where you believe that there will be no harm done.

While you're doing the action, continue to reflect: What are the actual results that are coming out? Some of the results come right away. You put your finger in a fire, you don't have to wait till the next lifetime to see the results. It burns right here and now.

If you see that your actions are causing harm, you stop. If you don't see any harm go ahead, continue with what you're doing.

Then, when the action is done, you reflect again: What were the long-term consequences of the action? If you see that there was any harm done, go talk it over with someone else who's more advanced on the path, to get some ideas about how to avoid that mistake. Then resolve not to repeat that mistake.

If you don't see any harm, take joy in the fact that you're progressing in the path, and continue training.

So, the Buddha's getting Rahula started with this principle: You've got to reflect on your actions. Whether they're thoughts, words, or deeds, you've got to think about the consequences. After all, that's how the Buddha himself got on the right path. He divided his thoughts into two types based on the consequences they would lead to. And he could tell that the consequences had a lot to do with the state of mind that was motivating them. So the reflection turns inward, to the mind.

For a lot of us our mirrors are pretty muddy. In those days, if people couldn't find a mirror, they'd look at their reflection in the water. And as the Buddha says if you have any of what he calls the hindrances in your mind, you're not going to see your mind clearly. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration: to get rid of those hindrances.

The first one is sensual desire, sitting here thinking about sensual pleasures— about the food you might want to eat, or the other pleasures you might want to enjoy. The Buddha says that's like looking at your reflection in a bowl of water that's been filled with dye: red, green, blue, whatever. You're not going to see yourself as you really are. Your thoughts are colored by your desires.

The second hindrance is ill will. You're thinking about how you'd like to see somebody get punished; you'd like to see somebody get theirs. That, he says, is like looking at your reflection in a bowl of water that's boiling. You're not going to see much of anything.

The third hindrance: sloth and torpor. You're sitting here and you're feeling drowsy and lazy, and you're drifting off to sleep. You're certainly not going to see your mind clearly. That, he says, is like looking at your reflection in a bowl of water that's got a lot of sludge and algae in it.

The fourth hindrance, restlessness and anxiety, is like looking at your reflection in a bowl of water that the wind is blowing over it, making ripples and waves. Your reflection gets distorted, little bits and pieces here and there.

Then finally, doubt: doubt about the teaching, doubt about your own ability to follow through with it. That's like looking at your reflection in a bowl of water that's in the dark. You won't see much of anything at all.

These are the qualities you've got to get out of your mind. Sometimes in the texts they say that first you get the hindrances out of your mind and then you feel joyful and at ease, and the mind settles down. Other times, it's in the process of getting the mind to settle down that you can fight them off. You give yourself one place to focus, one topic to focus on, like the breath. If any disturbances that come up, anything that would pull you away from the breath, you recognize, "Okay, that's got to be a hindrance of some kind." If you let it take over, you're not going to be able to see your mind clearly.

So whatever comes up that pulls you away from the breath, recognize it as something you don't want right now. There will be part of the mind that says, "Hey, I've got a whole hour here, I can just take five minutes to think about what I want... ten minutes, fifteen minutes, whatever." You find of course, that what's originally planned as a short excursion becomes a long-term trip. It eats up the whole time.

You can tell yourself: "I've thought thoughts like this before in the past. What we're trying to do here is something different, we're trying to *train* the mind, develop some new skills inside. As for the skill of thinking, I learned how to think a long time ago. But the skill of getting the mind to settle down, that's something different. That's a good skill to master."

You keep reminding yourself: You're here to train the mind. And you want to observe it. The Buddha carries the image of a reflection in a different direction when he talks about reflecting on your concentration. He says, you try to get the mind to settle in. You're thinking about the breath, you're evaluating the breath: Is the breath comfortable, is it not? If it's not comfortable, what can you do to make it more comfortable? And when it is comfortable, how do you maintain it? When you've maintained it, how do you let it spread?

Those are good things to think about because they help get the mind more and more snugly associated with its object. Then, he says, as the mind settles in like that, you step back

from it a bit. The image he gives is of a person sitting reflecting on someone who's lying down, or a person standing reflecting on someone who's sitting.

You need to be able to observe the mind to understand: What's going on in the process of concentration? What are you doing? The first question you have is: Is there still some disturbance here? There are many levels of concentration, some less disturbed than others. Those are the ones you're aiming for. If you see that there is a disturbance, you try to drop whatever's causing it.

The Buddha says it's usually connected to a perception of some kind. There are different ways of perceiving the breath, some of which allow the mind to settle down more fully than others. Thinking of the breath as a whole-body process—your whole nervous system is involved—changes the way you relate to the feelings of the breath coming in, breath going out. You don't have to pull the breath in through the nose.

Think of the whole body absorbing the breath from the outside, letting it go out, letting it come in, letting it go out. Hold that perception in mind. Think of your body as being like a big sponge, and the breath can come in and out freely from all directions, through all the pores, nourishing you, cooling you, like the water filling a sponge. And then watch.

When the mind settles down as much as you can get it to be still, try to maintain that. Whatever comes up in the mind, be alert to it. Hopefully, you've been developing this habit all along—of being able to observe what you're doing while you're doing it so that you can pass judgment on it and do it better.

You have to take the attitude of a craftsman. You're working on a piece of furniture, planing the wood, and you have to be very careful to watch. Make sure that you don't put any gashes in the wood. You want to make the plane run smoothly.

In the same way, you're going to have to learn how to observe the mind. And the most important part is when the mind latches on to something, holds on to something, clings to something. The Buddha says that's suffering.

Now, usually, we cling to things we want to cling to—and we think it's good. So you have to realize that your perceptions are really skewed. In some cases, it's like those bowls of water for the hindrances. In other instances, the defilements go deeper. And it's not the case that you can trust everything that comes up in a concentrated mind. That, too, requires reflection.

Ajaan Mun, who was the founder of the tradition that we practice here, meditated a lot alone in the forest, and he tended to have a lot of visions in his meditations. He realized pretty quickly that if he believed everything in his visions, he was going to go crazy. Sometimes he had visions of the Buddha coming to teach; sometimes he had visions of devas coming to teach. He realized that *who* was coming to teach didn't matter. What mattered was *what*: the Dhamma they were teaching. He had to reflect on it: Was it in line with what he already knew of the Dhamma? If not, he should let it go. If it was, that still wasn't a guarantee that it was right. He'd have to test it.

Of course, to test it meant that he had to be a reliable examiner. That's one of the reasons why we get the mind into concentration, so that we can notice things that are going on. But we also have to be honest, and concentration doesn't automatically make us honest.

That training that the Buddha recommended for his son very early on: You recognize a mistake, you go talk it over with someone else. You don't hide it. A lot of us have not learned that lesson. We make a mistake and we hide it. After hiding it from other people, we start hiding it from ourselves. We can compartmentalize things pretty quickly.

In fact, people who are good at compartmentalizing things tend to be very good at a certain kind of concentration where they block things out. So just getting the mind still is not enough. Learning to reflect is not enough. It's got to have that quality of honesty as well. After all, what you're looking for in the meditation is awakening, and awakening is basically awakening to your own stupidity. You've been doing things that you shouldn't have been doing. You should have known better. Then you finally realize that this is why you're suffering: You like doing them, but they cause what is actually suffering.

So you're going to have to change your attitude, change your allegiance inside. And that takes a lot of honesty to realize, "Okay, I've been wrong. This has been a mistake." Not everyone can do that.

But you're not concerned with everyone, you're concerned with your own mind—how honest *you* are. That's something you can develop over time. After all, you realize you may not like to see certain things you've been doing wrong because it's bad for your self-image, but then you have to question yourself, "Okay, what is this self-image that you're trying so hard to maintain? Why is it so easily threatened?"

Part of the way around that is to get a sense of real well-being in the concentration. Put yourself in a better humor so that you can look at your mistakes and be a little more willing to admit that, "Yeah, they *are* mistakes." That's going to be your salvation right there.

So it's a matter of committing yourself to the practice and reflecting on it—and learning how to *honestly* commit yourself, and *honestly* reflect. Your own honesty is what guarantees the truth of what you're going to know.

As Ajaan Lee likes to say, "If you want to know the truth, you have to *be* true." This is why the Dhamma is so special: Only people who are true can know its truth. If you decide you're going to be true, you're on the right track.