

Working Hypotheses

August 16, 2023

There are a lot of ways in which the Buddha compares the activities of the mind to fire. Greed, aversion, and delusion are fires that burn away in the mind, and as we chanted just now, they set fire to our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and to the things we know through the senses. It's almost as if our minds are like flamethrowers, setting fire to everything that we fasten onto.

Then the Buddha also compares the mind in concentration to a fire, but it's a different kind of fire. The flames of greed, aversion, and delusion are like the flames of a bonfire. They flicker here, flicker there. They're so unstable, so erratic, that you can't really read by them. And they create all sorts of weird shadows, lots of false impressions. But if you can turn down the flame—think of turning down the flame on a gas stove until the flame is steady—that's the fire of the mind in concentration.

Even though the mind is still burning, it's burning in a way that gives rise to a fire that you can read by. In Pali, they have different verbs for burning, and the verb they use for the flame of an oil lamp is *jhāyati*; the burning of an oil lamp is *jhāna*, which is the name for right concentration. So you're trying to get the mind to calm down so that you can read by it, to see what's actually going on.

So try to steady the flames of your mind right now. Here it's good to know the Buddha's analysis for what happens as a fire burns. There's a fire potential. When you set fire to something, you're actually getting that potential to latch on to the fuel. So here we're latching on to the breath, and you want to stay here. You want to hold on really tight. Not all of the meditation is about letting go. There's a large part that requires development, so here we're developing a steady flame.

Now, eventually you want this steady flame to fill the whole body. Ajaan Lee notes, however, that some people find it hard to deal with the whole body all at once, so he recommends that they start with one small spot and protect that spot. It's almost as if you're trying to light a fire in the wind, and you have to protect the flame when it's still small.

So find any spot in the body that's especially sensitive to how the breathing feels. It might be in the middle of the chest, in the stomach, in the middle of the head. Focus there because

those really sensitive spots in the body—the ones that are really sensitive to the breath—tend to connect up with other sensitive parts of the body as well.

You can think of them as the crossroads in this network of breath channels through the body. If you keep the crossroads open, traffic flows well. Then, gradually, from those crossroads you begin to see where the network of roads extends—how it extends through your body. Each person's experience of the body is going to be different, so you have to explore what you've got. But try to make your focus as steady as possible, because only then can you read the mind.

In particular, you want to see what its attachments are: When the mind leaves the object of concentration, where does it go? And why? How does it go?

Sometimes it'll make a decision in a secret part of the mind, not so secret that you can't detect it, it's there, but the mind has a tendency to make these decisions and then pretend that it didn't.

It's like a dog we used to have at the monastery in Thailand. In the evening, when the monks would get together for their evening allowables, the dog would come and want some. If you didn't pay any attention to it, it would scratch your leg. If you looked down at it, it would look away as if it hadn't done anything.

That's the way the mind is with itself. It'll do something and then pretend that it didn't do it. What we're trying to do as we meditate is to see these areas of the mind that are hidden. Some of them are simply things you don't know. Other things are things that you willfully ignore. So it's not always a matter of exploring unexplored territory where you've never been before. Some of these places you've been to many, many times, but you've chosen to cover them up.

We talk about the subconscious as if it were an area in the mind where the doors are closed, but it's actually the quick decisions made by the mind that are sometimes so quick you barely notice them, and then you cover them up. So as we meditate, we're trying to create a sense of well-being in the mind, so that we're willing to look at this habit that the mind has of lying to itself. When we're in a bad mood, when we're feeling oppressed by things outside or just generally worn out, we don't want to see this habit. We try to pretend that it's not there and we resent being told that it *is* there. Of course, that means we resist looking at it ourselves. But when you can create a sense of well-being in the mind—a sense of confidence that you've got a good space here in the mind, a safe space in the mind where you can begin to open up

about things that are going on in there and not get knocked over by them—then you're more likely to see.

So work on maintaining this steady flame because this is the flame by which you can read things. As I said, it still has its attachments, and one of the last attachments we're going to let go of is this steady flame. But before you let it go, get a lot of use out of it, because there are so many interesting things you can see in the mind if you look inside.

All this, of course, is based on the assumption that you do have freedom of choice, and the choices made exclusively within the mind have power. This is why we meditate.

The question sometimes comes up about different teachings that the Buddha gives that are hard to prove right away, things like rebirth and karma. But you have to realize there are so many things that we simply *assume* in life so that we can function.

Some people say, "But what does rebirth have to do with me? I simply don't know, and I'll leave it at that: 'I don't know.'" Still, every time you act, you're making certain assumptions. The fact that you're sitting here meditating shows that you have some belief at least that the training of the mind is important, and it will have an impact on your life. That's quite an assumption right there. If you couldn't assume it, it would be very depressing—everything would be totally beyond your control.

A while back I was reading about a psychologist from early twentieth century, who was studying infants. He discovered that one of the things that makes infants happiest is doing something and getting a result; then doing it again, getting the same result; doing it again, getting the same result.

You've probably noticed that sometimes they'll make a noise and do it again, and then again and again and again. It can drive you crazy, but for them, it's an assertion of their agency—that they're able to make a choice and get a predictable result that they can depend on. Now, the sense of agency is something they're assuming, but it *is* what allows for happiness.

In the same way, the Buddha asks us to make certain assumptions that have to do with the choices we make in life. When you choose to do something that's going to take time, like meditation—it's going to require effort, dedication, and sacrifice—you have to calculate that it's worth it. And the question is, what goes into that calculation? What kind of results do you expect? And in what time frame?

As he says, it's good to be open to the idea that the results of your actions can lead to states of being not only in this lifetime, but also in future lifetimes. When you bring this into the

calculation, you tend to be more skillful in your decisions, you tend to be more responsible. As you assume that there's nothing you're going to get away with, you might as well do things as skillfully as you can.

That, he says, is a good pragmatic reason for at least taking on rebirth and the teachings on karma as working hypotheses. He's not asking you to swear up and down that Yes, you believe this 100%, because he knows you can't believe it 100% until you've had proof inside. And the proof comes only with the first glimpse of awakening as you step outside of space and time.

In stepping out of time, you realize that you've been through a lot longer time than just the time since the date of your birth in this lifetime. Which is why stream-entry—the arising of the Dhamma eye—is the point where your conviction in these working hypotheses is confirmed.

The Buddha doesn't ask us to believe in a lot. As he said, the things that he taught were like the handful of leaves as compared to the leaves in the forest. The leaves in the forest were all the things he came to know in the course of his awakening. But he said a lot of those things would be totally useless in the task of putting an end to suffering. He taught what was only absolutely necessary, and he saw this part of that handful—this leaf of karma, this leaf of rebirth—as necessary. So give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he knew something you don't know.

Everyone takes that passage in the Kālāma Sutta as the Buddha's permission to believe anything that you like. But that's not what he said. He said you have to test things in practice. You have to take into consideration the teachings of the wise. And even then, this was a teaching he gave to people who had not yet committed themselves to the Dhamma. Once you've committed yourself to the practice, he says one of the assumptions you make is, "The Buddha is the one who knows, not I."

Take that on as a working hypothesis and see where it leads you. It leads you to something bigger than you already are at the moment. The Dhamma is huge, and a lot of our presuppositions are based on ignorance. So it might be good to try a few assumptions that come from somebody who has found awakening—and it seems likely that he was awakened. Give him a try.

If your mind is too closed to give him a try, you're closing off a lot of possibilities. The whole issue of the possibility of awakening: That, too, is an assumption. As he says, if you assume that it's not possible, that closes the door. And you're closing it based on what? You don't really know. So why make things impossible for yourself on the basis of ignorance?

Again, give the Buddha the benefit of the doubt. You've already given him this much the

benefit of the doubt—the fact that you’re sitting here meditating, trying to steady this flame of your mind—so try to be more generous in your attitude toward his other teachings. Try them on and see how far they make you grow.