

Comfortable With the Truth

September 9, 2005

Our mental vision is often like our physical vision: Our eyes point out, and we tend to focus our mind on things outside as well. Especially when things are not going well: We look outside for somebody, something to blame for the problem. And yet if you had to have the whole world straightened out in order to be happy, it'd never happen. You'd die first. And as it turns out, that's not where the real problem is anyhow. The problem is inside.

As the Buddha said, we suffer because of craving and ignorance. And one of the major issues in ignorance is not seeing where we're causing ourselves suffering. When they talk about ignorance of the four noble truths, that's precisely what they mean: We don't see our own craving, we don't see our own ignorance in action, and so we keep doing things to cause suffering and we don't realize what we're doing. Or when we happen to do things right and we're *not* causing ourselves suffering, we haven't figured it out why that's happening. We don't see the connections.

This ignorance is not all that mysterious. As the Buddha pointed out in his instructions to Rahula, the most basic lesson in the Dhamma: One, he said be truthful, and then two, look at your intentions, look at your actions, look at the results of your actions. Precisely areas where we don't like to look.

It's a lot easier to lay the blame on other people than it is to say, "Well, maybe something's wrong with my motivation, something's wrong with my intentions"—partly because, as children, we were taught to lie about our intentions to get away from being punished, "I didn't *mean* to do it. I didn't *think* that would happen." Many times you *did* mean to do it, many times you *did* think it would happen, but you couldn't tell that to your parents. Otherwise, you'd get punished. Or we deny that some harm happened because of our own actions, again for fear of punishment. This gets internalized so that even when there's nobody's standing over us to punish us, we learn not to look at our own intentions, we learn not to look at the results of our actions.

As a result, huge areas inside the mind become unknown territory, big blank spaces. And it's precisely those areas though that we need to know about if we're going to gain any headway in putting an end to suffering.

So overcoming ignorance is not a question of learning about emptiness or Buddha nature or anything abstract like that. It's just looking to see, "Okay, what am I intending here right now? What's my motivation?"—looking again and

again and again each time—preferably before you act, so that you can check yourself in time. Then look to see what’s happening as a result of your action.

An important way to approach this investigation is to have the right attitude toward your mistakes. Often we don’t like to admit mistakes, and that just buries them deeper and deeper in ignorance. But the Buddha, when he was teaching Rahula, taught that you should be open about your mistakes, even to tell them to other people you trust. Not to get yourself all tied up in remorse, because that just makes the problem worse. When you get tied up in remorse, it lowers your energy level, lowers your self-esteem and it gets harder and harder to decide to do the right thing.

When the Buddha talks about shame over the mistakes you’ve made, it’s not that you should have a low opinion of yourself. Actually, you should have a high opinion of yourself, that you’re a better person than that, you’re not the sort of person who normally does that kind of thing or wants to continue doing that kind of thing. And you’re honest enough to want to look for help.

That’s why it’s best to be open with people you trust. This is why the monks confess their offenses to one another. This is why the practice is not a solitary affair. You want to learn from the wisdom of others. And the best way to do that is to be open. Then you take what you’ve learned from your own experience and from the wisdom of others, and try, try again. Keep trying. Because if you don’t keep trying, then things start backsliding. And this large area of ignorance in the mind just stays blank and in the dark.

So this is *the* basic principle in Dhamma practice: keep looking inside for what’s wrong. This doesn’t mean there’s nothing wrong outside. There are plenty of things wrong outside. But if you focus on them all the time, you miss the areas that you’re actually responsible for, which are: What are your intentions? How do you choose which ones to act on? You want to be transparent to yourself in this way.

Otherwise, if you keep looking outside, as Ajaan Lee says, “You never see the Dhamma, all you see is the world.” Seeing the Dhamma comes from looking inside. It all depends on the directions in which your mental eyes are focused.

So this is why we meditate: to get more and more sensitive to our intentions and their results. Very simple. Focus on the breath, see how long you can stay with the breath, see what other things come up to push you off the breath. Then learn to be quick to come back, and learn to get quicker so that you don’t get pushed off.

Usually in the beginning this is one of the most disconcerting parts of the meditation: to see how hard it is to stay focused on something simple like this. But it's an important lesson. There are lots of currents flowing through the mind.

The Buddha calls them *asavas* or fermentations, effluents, things that come flowing out, and if we're not careful they become floods overwhelming the mind. You're sitting here telling yourself you're focusing on the breath and all of a sudden you're far away someplace else. The mind's been carried away by the flow and now it's flooded. But fortunately it doesn't have to stay that way. You can pick yourself out of the flood, come back. Keep at this until you find that you can catch these outflows when they're still small and turn off the spigot.

Staying here with the breath puts you in the right place to see your intentions, and also gives you the strength to withstand intentions that you might ordinarily give in to as you develop more and more well-being as you stay here. The compulsion to go after a particular idea or a particular thought—or particular sight, smell, taste, tactile sensation, whatever—gets a lot weaker when you have a good comfortable place to stay.

It's like the difference of having a good home to stay in as opposed to a really harsh and punishing home or a narrow, miserable home. The kids from the miserable homes are the ones out on the streets. The ones with good homes tend to stay home more. And it's the same with the mind. You create a good space inside the mind where you can stay right here, right now. It's easier to stay here, you're more inclined to stay here, and you see more and more what's going on in the mind. If you discover people dealing in drugs in its back rooms, at least now you know. As you get well enough established here, you can expel them from the back rooms. That way, this home in the mind really does become more and more like a home, and less and less like a bus station. In other words, you have control about who comes in, who goes out, what happens inside the home.

And you get more and more confident in being truthful with yourself. The sense of well-being you develop makes it more and more amenable, nicer to keep focused inside. In the past when you focused inside, all you saw was a mess and so you didn't want to look there. But now you look inside and can see that you've got a nicer and nicer place to stay, a nicer and nicer mind to look at.

This gets your inner eyes focused in the right direction, because if you really want to see the Dhamma, this is where you have to look.