

Don't Believe Everything You Feel

April 30, 2015

We're in the middle of a heat wave. It seems that no matter what you do in the course of the day, you feel drained by evening. It takes a fair amount of effort simply to come here and meditate. And when you're feeling weakened by the temperature and tired from your work, your defenses are down, and feelings become very prominent.

We talk a lot in the meditation about not believing your thoughts. The same principle applies to your feelings, and they're even harder not to believe, because feelings have gotten into the body. They are thoughts that have provoked reactions in the breath that can lead to a lot of discomfort, tension, or exhaustion, depending on how you breathe around a particular emotional issue. Those feelings seem a lot more believable, even when they're crazy, because they're in the body. You feel like they're surrounding you.

We tend to take our feelings and our moods as a given. Thoughts can come and go, but moods seem to last for a long time. They therefore seem more real. But you have to remember that they, too, are fabrications. They've been put together and they can be taken apart, and other moods and thoughts can be put in their place. When you don't feel like doing this work, remember Ajaan Chah's statement that the practice is the sort of thing that you do when you feel like doing it and when you don't feel like doing it. Why is that? Because it's a duty.

Now, you might ask, "Who's imposed this duty?" Nobody's imposed the duty, but your own suffering is what pushes you.

The duties that the Buddha assigns, of course, are the duties in the four noble truths—and they're duties in your favor. It's not that he's some god who has come down and simply ordained that this must be that way and that must be this way. Instead, the Buddha as an expert discovered the best way to treat suffering: comprehending your suffering and attacking it at its cause. Part of that includes seeing the suffering come, seeing it go, so that you see what comes with it; what goes with it: in other words, what's causing it. Once you find the cause, you can abandon it. This requires that you develop the path, and that way, you realize cessation.

Now these are duties in your favor. They're for the sake of your happiness. So no one's imposing them on you. It's simply that you realize the reality of suffering, and the question is, do you want to sit with it continually? Do you want to keep on causing more and more suffering for yourself and others, or have you had enough?

There's an article I read years back about the ways people use to deny blame for harming other people. To begin with, they deny that they did anything at all. They weren't responsible for what happened, or if they were responsible, it didn't really do any harm, or the person being harmed doesn't really count, or that whatever suffering there was served a higher purpose, or they turn around and they attack the accuser. When you think about it for a bit, you realize

that these are not only the ways we use to push away any blame about harming other people, but they're also ways that we use to justify harming ourselves. We say we can't do anything about it, "It's beyond me. I can't change anything. I can't be responsible. This is just the way I am." That's one way of pushing things off.

Another is, "Well, what I did really wasn't causing any harm, this suffering I've got is natural. This is normal, the way things have got to be." Some people deny their own worth, saying, "Well, maybe I don't deserve to be truly happy." There's that kind of thinking.

Sometimes we say that our suffering serves a higher purpose. I'm working on a book on Buddhist Romanticism and noticing that the Romantics and a lot of other people in the Western tradition hold to the idea that if not God, then at least the universe has a bigger purpose for which we should sacrifice our well-being. That thought keeps us tied down; prevents us from escaping; makes us feel that we're betraying some higher purpose by trying to pull out of the cycle.

In the Buddha's teachings, though, the universe doesn't really have a particular purpose. It just keeps lurching along, based on people's decisions. Nobody else hired you to be born, nobody else out there is in charge, setting out any tasks you've got to do: To think that way is really liberating.

Then there's the final approach for denying responsibility: You turn on the Buddha, turn on the teacher, saying, "I can't do this. This is unreasonable. I'm outta here."

So you have to look at the ways your mind allows itself not to practice, either just to slough off for a while or to say, "I'm done with this." Learn how to realize that no matter how strong the feeling is, if it's a voice like this, it's lying to you. After all, this is your suffering. And it does matter. And something can be done about it. Here's the path. It's all set out. And you matter. And the suffering really is harmful. It's not serving any higher purpose. And the Buddha teaching this wasn't expecting anything out of anybody. He said that the highest homage to him was to practice.

So just as we were saying not to believe your thoughts, remember - don't believe your feelings either.

Think of Ajaan Lee's analogy about the thoughts going through your head. Who knows if they're really your thoughts to begin with? Maybe they come from the creatures going through your head or your brain or some other part of your body. So learn to use the breath to clear things out in the body. And remember that the duties of the noble truths are imposed not from the outside, they're things you impose from inside.

That's one of the reasons why we have to be self-starters in the practice. The phrase we chanted just now—*chandam janeti*, generating desire to abandon what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful—is a sign of wisdom and discernment. When there are things you feel like doing that you know are going to be harmful, you're able to talk yourself out of doing them. As for things you know are good for you, but you don't want to do them, you know how

to talk yourself into doing them. You've learned how to generate that desire, either through the principle of heedfulness, the principle of compassion for yourself and other people, or the principle of healthy pride: Here you have an opportunity to master a skill—the ultimate skill. Or through a healthy sense of shame—here's the opportunity to practice. It would be a shame to throw it away.

So figure out which way you can most effectively motivate yourself to practice. Learn how to be a self-starter, because just as nobody hired us to be born, nobody's hiring us to practice. We're here voluntarily. You've got the ability to do the practice. You have to ask yourself, "Do you really want to put an end to suffering? Have you had enough, or do you want more?" The Buddha didn't promise it was going to be easy. But he did promise that if you really do the work, the results will really come.

This is what he calls "the miracle of the practice." Someone once suggested to him that he would attract more students and get the Dhamma out there more effectively if he displayed a few more miracles. But he pointed out, "There's the miracle of mind reading and there's the miracle of making things appear." And he added that when people see those things, some are going to get more and more dubious about it. "What's going on here? There's a trick." It's for that reason he didn't want to display those kinds of miracles. But he said, "There is the miracle of the teaching. It's the kind of teaching that promises the end of suffering and, if you follow it, it really delivers." There's not that much out there in the world that really delivers like that, which is why his teaching is miraculous.