

Recognizing Fools

February 24, 2017

One of the verses we chanted just now—*Asevana ca balananam panditanañca sevana*, not associating with fools, associating with wise people—describes a form of *mangala*, which means both protection and blessing. And this is one of the ways you protect yourself and bless yourself: learning how to recognize who are the fools and who are the wise people. Because not all fools are drooling. Some of them seem very intelligent; some of them, very wise. You have to listen to what they have to say, to watch carefully how they act, and if you have some wisdom of your own, you begin to recognize who's wise and who's really a fool.

It's a bit of a double bind. As the Buddha said, can a person of integrity know of someone else if that person has integrity or not? Yes. Can a person of no integrity know? Not really. So you've got to work on your own integrity. This applies to fools and wise people outside, and to the fools and wise people inside.

One of the reasons why we meditate is to give the mind something wise to do. Get settled, get still, so that you can observe the mind more carefully. Any thoughts that don't have to do with getting the mind still, you can—for the time being—label as fools. Even relatively good thoughts about fixing potatoes for tomorrow, or making merit in one way or another: At this moment, they're not welcome. You have to learn how to recognize that they're not what's wanted in here. You want something better than tomorrow's meal.

You want the goodness of stillness. You want the goodness of a calm, mindful, alert mind. So if you find yourself slipping off into other areas, you have to remind yourself: That's not what we're here for. And try to notice what triggers those thoughts. Sometimes it has to do with issues you brought in from the day. Other times it has to do with the way the breath is working through the body. Sometimes the images that appear in the mind while you're trying to get the mind still are related to the fact that you've just released a bit of tension someplace in the body. And that tension will be related to a thought of one kind or another. Learn to notice it as it comes, but don't pick it up. As they say in Thai, don't continue weaving it. Leave its dangling ends dangling.

I think I've mentioned that years back, I was meditating one time and I noticed a tight spot in my foot. I was working with the breath in and around that spot, and finally, the spot began to unravel. And as it did, I suddenly remembered an incident from my childhood. We were playing in the barn, I jumped into a pile of hay, and there was a nail in the hay. And it went right through my foot. That tension had been in that foot ever since I was, what, six years old.

So the body carries around a lot of little images here and there, memories of this, that, or the other thing. They say that when someone's heart has been transplanted into another person, the second person actually picks up some memories of the first person. So don't be

surprised that images will come up as energy gets released in the body. The wisdom lies in realizing how not to follow them. That's the first rule of thumb as we're meditating: Anything that's not related to the breath, that's not related to getting the mind settled down with the breath, or whatever your topic is, is—for the time being—the voice of a fool.

But the concentration on its own is not enough to guarantee wisdom. There are what they call *vipassanupakilesas*, the corruptions of insight: either visions you might have or insights you may gain as you meditate, when the mind gets really still. If you latch onto them, they can actually pull you off the path. These are the fools on a subtle level. So getting the mind still doesn't guarantee anything.

Ajaan Mun, when he was teaching Ajaan Fuang, told him that when you have a vision of some kind, you have to ask yourself: What is the actual Dhamma lesson here? Once you've figured out the lesson, you have to test it. And many times, it won't pass the test. But to see that, you have to be very honest with yourself. This is where integrity comes in again.

You have to learn how to view your visions and your insights with a certain amount of detachment. This is one of the drawbacks of those biographies of the ajaans that describe the visions they had. The books tend to focus on the true visions, giving the impression that the ajaans believed everything they saw in their meditation and ran along with everything that came up in their meditation. If they'd done that, they would have gone crazy. The unfortunate thing is that we don't get to read about or learn about the times when the visions or insights were mistaken.

Ajaan Fuang told me that when he was staying with Ajaan Mun, someone who had been out meditating in the forest would come back, convinced that he was awakened, or at least had some level of awakening. And Ajaan Mun would simply have him stay there in the area. He wouldn't say Yes. He wouldn't say No. He'd just tell them to stay with him for a while. And fortunately, the monks had enough respect for Ajaan Mun, and after simply being around him, they'd begin to pick up that, no, what they had was a false awakening. That was when he could talk to them and send them back to meditate more. Those are things we rarely read about in the biographies. But they're important to remember. These things happen in the meditation.

There's that principle from the Kalama Sutta. You judge everything by putting it to the test, i.e., seeing what the results would be if you actually put an insight into action in thought, word, or deed. Sometimes just asking that question, you begin to realize they're going to be bad. Other times, you have to actually try things out. But you have to view them with a certain amount of suspicion. Otherwise, you go crazy. You go running with the fools. Just because a deva comes, or something outstanding comes that's very impressive, doesn't mean that what they have to say is true. As a friend once said, just because somebody's died doesn't mean they've gained wisdom. So you've got to be very careful about these things.

In the Canon, some devas are portrayed as wise, but others are often portrayed as not knowing all that much. There was the deva who tried to seduce a monk one time. Another deva thought of killing a monk. The monk had cut down her house, the tree she was living in, and

injured some of her children. Her first thought was, "I'll kill him." But then she thought better of it. So she went to see the Buddha. And he said, "It's a good thing that you didn't kill the monk." It shows that devas still have greed, aversion, and delusion.

Even the great Brahma has defilements. There's the story of the monk who goes to visit the great Brahma after getting visions of many levels of devas. He's been sent up the deva bureaucracy because he's got a question that nobody can answer: "Where does the physical universe end?" Finally he gets sent to the great Brahma. The great Brahma, on hearing the question, says, "I am the great Brahma, knower of all, seer of all, father of all that has been and will be." And the monk has the good sense to say, "I didn't ask if you were the great Brahma. I asked, 'Where does the physical universe end?'" The great Brahma says, "I am the great Brahma, knower of all, seer of all, father of all that has been and will be." He says that three times. Finally, he pulls the monk aside and says, "Look, I don't know. But I've got my retinue here. They adore me and think I know everything, so they'd be disappointed to learn that there was something I didn't know. So you go down and ask the question of the Buddha." So the monk goes down, asks the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "That's the wrong question. The question should be, 'Where does the physical universe have no footing?' And that's in the consciousness of the awakened one."

So you have to be very careful about insights and visions.

I was recently reading a book saying that when you see that there is no self, that's a sign that you've gained stream entry. Well, usually it's a sign that you've grabbed onto some idea and you're holding on very tight to it: the idea of there being no self, because no experience can prove that there is no self. No experience can prove that there *is* a self. The Buddha didn't answer the question of whether the self exists or not. It's a question he put aside. So that kind of "stream entry" is another case of a corruption of insight.

So just because an insight arises in the quiet mind doesn't mean that it's guaranteed to be true. You've got to watch out for the fools that come with your meditation. After all, what you're doing here is uncovering parts of your mind that have been covered up before. When the mind becomes clear, these things appear. They rise to the surface. Not everything down there in the basement is good stuff. Sometimes some good stuff has been repressed, but sometimes, just a lot of crazy garbage has been festering in the darkness. These things get lodged in your mind, just as they get lodged in your body.

So learn how to be a person of integrity. If you find that you tend to be secretive about things, that's a sign that you're headed for a fall. As the Buddha said, what he was looking for in a student was someone who was observant and honest, open, willing to admit faults. Those are the qualities of integrity. And that's the kind of integrity that protects you from fools, both inside and out.