Understanding Ignorance

August, 2002

Buddha once said that you can’t find a starting point for ignorance, tracing back through how many aeons and aeons. Even a Buddha can’t trace back, see where it started. And as he pointed out, ignorance is a form of our big problem, which is why he doesn’t try to have us trace things back to a first cause, someplace back in time. Unfortunately, we don’t have to. If you want to understand ignorance, you look right here. There’s plenty of it right in your mind right now, acting right now. The whole purpose of the meditation is to study our own minds, to see how ignorance acts. We tend to forget this. We start thinking that we’re seeing and learning other things in the meditation. This is why so many people come up with all these metaphysical theories about where things come from or what the structure of reality is like out there. But the Buddha said you can’t find those things out until you know your own mind. By the time you know your own mind, those other issues really don’t matter anymore. So keep your mind to yourself. You’re here to learn about the aggregates. You’re here to learn about how clinging gets related to the aggregates. Now you can cut out the craving and ignorance that cause that clinging, so there’s no suffering. That’s what it’s all about. What are we ignorant of? The texts say we’re ignorant of the four noble truths. But it comes down to being ignorant of your mind. Because what are the four noble truths about? They’re about actions and their results, skillful and unskillful actions, pleasant and unpleasant results. So we’re ignorant of the mind’s own actions, what it’s doing right now. We can get into these wonderful states and say, “Gee, the mind isn’t doing anything at all.” Well, it’s doing something. It’s just doing it in your blind spot. Some states come as a result of things we did in the past. Some things are a result of what we’re doing right now. When the Buddha boiled down the essence of what he gained in his awakening, it’s called this-that conditionality. When there’s this, there’s that. From the arising of this, there’s the arising of that. When there’s not this, there’s not that. From the cessation of this, comes the cessation of that. It sounds awfully abstract, and it is. But it has a very important application to what we’re doing right now. Because while you’re sitting here meditating, sometimes the results you get come from the past actions, and some of them come from present actions. Our problem is that we’re very rarely really aware of the connection. When you experience something, instead of just tracing back to see what happened, what was done, what was the action, what was the action, we just sit there and either like the pleasant result or push away the bad result. So there are new actions, the liking and pushing away, and we don’t even see them as actions. They’re just so ingrained into our minds that we can’t conceive of experiencing anything without them. It’s one way of interpreting that old question about the sound of one hand clapping. What’s it like to experience something without the liking and the disliking to clap back? We can hardly say, because the liking and disliking are so built into us that we don’t even see them. So this is the challenge we have as we meditate, is to really be very clear about what we’re doing and how what we’re doing is related to different experiences. What experiences come from what actions? What you’re doing right now with the breath, what’s the result? It’s so easy that when you’re getting the breath to go smoothly in the body, you jump on the pleasant sensations, or you jump on the unusual sensations that come up, and you don’t even see it as jumping. The important thing is to see what you’re doing. It’s to stay with the doing, the focusing on the breath, the adjusting of the breath. As pleasant and unpleasant results come, you notice them, but you don’t leave the breath. Try to stay more and more up on precisely what you’re doing right now in the Absolute Present. This is the ability to make choices in the Absolute Present and to see the Absolute Present. That’s the spot in the mind where things break through. For there to be that kind of breakthrough requires a lot of groundwork. It requires patience, because there are so many subtle other things that can get in the way, so that you don’t see what you’re doing. You don’t see what your actions are. You don’t see what the results are. There’s a muddle. Sometimes the mind actively covers up what it’s doing, covers up its intentions, covers up its preconceived notions. It’s all there in the background. It’s so nicely dovetailed with the background that you hardly see it. So to see the things, you have to be patient. You have to watch and watch again and again and again, because so often when one level of delusion goes away, another more subtle one comes in its place. So again, the trick, as I said the other day, is not to have everything figured out beforehand, but just be very careful. Watch. Watch. Don’t be quick to jump to conclusions. When something comes up, just watch it very carefully. It’s the care of your attention, the care of your gaze, that allows you to see things you didn’t see before. So this is why we focus on the breath. It’s a good way of practicing very careful watching, very sensitive watching. It requires all your powers of attention, all your powers of concentration. But given the fact that ignorance has been around for so long, how can you expect anything less? If it were easy to see through, everybody would have gone off to Nirvana a long time ago. So expect that there are going to be twists and turns. Just be very patient about labeling things, labeling states in the mind. In other words, watch, watch, watch. Even if you have a tentative label for something, always keep a little question mark behind it. That will enable you to see through it when things get more firmly settled in the mind. This is your safety clause. It’s your escape clause in meditation. Back when I was a layperson in Thailand, I learned Thai boxing for a while. The very first step they teach you is how to retreat, how to back off. Before you kick, before you use your knee, before you use your elbow, the first thing you’ve got to learn how to do is how to back off. It’s the same in the meditation. That attitude of backing off and just watching is very important. There’s that story that Ajahn Mahaprabhu tells. After Ajahn Mahan’s death, he was upset for a while, wondering what he was going to do now that he didn’t have his teacher. Then he wrote, “Oh, take the teachings that he repeated over and over again as your lessons. That way you still have your teacher with you.” And what was the lesson that Ajahn Mahan kept stressing over and over again? Whatever comes up in the mind, if you’re not sure about what’s going on, just stay with a sense of knowing. In other words, don’t place any labels on it. Don’t jump to any conclusions. Just watch. Be with a watcher. And no matter what comes up in the mind, you can come out okay. That’s the first step in mind boxing, is learning how to step back and watch, to catch your blind spots, to expand your range of awareness, to ultimately cover everything that’s going on right now, both actions and results. It’s that type of awareness that can really open things up in the mind. you

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