Ignorance & Deception

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The Buddha said several times that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. You have to keep that in mind as you’re practicing this teaching. Everything is aimed at that one big topic or those two topics. And to put an end to suffering, you have to understand where it comes from, the two main causes are craving and ignorance. The ignorance here is not so much being ignorant of particular teachings, but the mind is being ignorant of itself. It doesn’t know what it’s doing. This is the problem we have to tackle. You tackle it in several ways. Why doesn’t the mind know what it’s doing? Well, a lot of times it hides things from itself. This is why, when the Buddha was teaching his son, Rahula, one of the very first teachings he gave to Rahula was teaching on honesty—not only telling the truth to other people, but also learning how to tell the truth to yourself, being clear to yourself about what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, what’s the results are going to be, and then, when you’ve done something, looking at what the results actually were and tallying them against your original plan. One of the important things the Buddha found is that if you act in an unfair or dishonest way with people, if you harm them in unfair ways, you have a lot of problems dealing with the truth. There’s a passage in the Dhamma where he says that people who are glorying in their power or hungry for power, if they harm people in unfair ways, will find it harder and harder to, on the one hand, accept the truth, and they’ll find it harder to look into lies to see exactly what’s a lie and what’s not a lie. They tend to not touch those issues, because deep down inside they know they don’t want to touch them. They’ve got some sensitive issues inside with their own dishonesty. So this is what the precepts are designed for, to put the mind in a position where it can really be honest with itself. That’s why the number one precept is against killing. You find that if you’ve taken life, even of little things, it tends to create a kind of dishonesty inside the mind. This is also why of all the precepts, the one the Buddha stressed the most was the one against lying. He singled it out at one point. He said, “If you’re careless in this one thing, you can’t really be trusted with anything else.” So keep this in mind as you’re thinking about the precepts, as you’re thinking about how to apply them in your life, that that’s the main purpose of the precepts. It’s impossible to be totally pure in all of our actions. This is one of the problems of living in a conditioned world. It’s one of the reasons why we want to get out of the conditioned world. The precepts are designed specifically to train the mind so it can learn to be truthful with itself. The same goes with concentration practice. You make up your mind you’re going to stay with one object, and then you want to be true to that determination. The more you can stick with one object, the more you can be true to that determination, the more you see. The stronger the mind comes, the more it sees its motions. The mind has this funny way of clouding itself out. Or, as the Chan-li says, it passes out, goes unconscious for a moment, then wakes up and finds itself someplace else. That’s how it moves from one thought world into another one. That right there is a lot of ignorance. It doesn’t know what to do. It does this for the same reason that when they put on a play, when they’re going to change the scenery, they close the curtains. If you could see the old scenery being moved away and the new scenery being put in place, it would destroy some of the illusion that they’re trying to create. What we’re trying to do here in the meditation is learn how to see through those illusions. So try to catch the mind as it’s playing this kind of shell game, with itself, or this sleight of hand with itself. You’re here with a breath, coming in, going out, and there’s a moment where the mind actually decides whether it’s going to stay or whether it wants to move on. And as soon as it’s made that decision, it tries to hide that decision from itself. This is where the blanking out starts. So you want to look for that decision. Most of us don’t even know that we make these decisions. The mind seems to go on its own, but there is an element of choice. So look for it as you’re riding the breath in, riding the breath out. All of a sudden, there’s maybe a moment of boredom or a moment of deciding you’ve had enough of this, you want something else. And then reaffirm your decision that you’re going to stay here with a breath no matter what. You’re not going to fall for whatever that thought is that’s going to pull you away. And it’s because you’re able to deal with these sleights of hand in the mind that you actually begin to see things better in the mind. Once you see through this particular trick that the mind has, you start seeing through a lot of the other tricks that the mind has as well. You’re quicker to be up on things in the mind, and the insights you’re going to gain are a lot more solid because they can withstand this particular sleight of hand. So this is how we come to see the truth about the mind, is to learn how to see through the mind’s tricks, the curtains it puts up, the walls it puts up inside. We try to arrange our lives in such a way that we live a life where it’s easier to be truthful with yourself, to minimize regret, to minimize denial on the outside level, so that you can minimize denial on the inside level as well. Even the little moments when the mind pretends that it hasn’t made a choice to leave the meditation object, you want to see right through that. That’s a lot of what the vipassana or the clear seeing is in the mind, is seeing those movements, seeing the choices, seeing the results that come about, and being perfectly frank with yourself about what’s happening. Again, the concentration helps here as you gain a greater sense of well-being from being in the path. It’s easier to see through these things and not get upset, not get frustrated, and not get really down on yourself. You’ve got this sense of well-being, you’ve got this sense of solidity inside, so that seeing some of your old habits, you don’t feel so invested in them. You can see them for what they are. You realize, “Okay, when I do this, it actually does create suffering.” Maybe not strong suffering, but at least it creates some stress. And you’re in a good enough mood that you can admit it in a good-natured way. It’s like trying to tell someone else something you know that the person doesn’t want to hear. Usually, it’s wise to find a time when the person is well-fed, well-rested, in a good mood, and then you can talk about these things. The person is hungry, tired. Now you want to sort things out. That’s a bad time to do it, because they’ll just lash right back. They’re already feeling weak, they’re already feeling exasperated, or whatever. This is just one more thing. It’s the straw that breaks the camel’s back. It’s the same with the mind. If you’re going to point out some of the mind’s dishonesties, point out some of its foolish habits, it’s best to do it when the mind is in a good mood, when it doesn’t feel so invested in those habits. This is how you put the mind into a state where it’s willing to hear the things it doesn’t want to hear. It’s willing to admit the things it ordinarily wouldn’t want to admit. This is one of the problems that a lot of times the Dhamma is taught here in the West. Teachers get put in a position where they’re afraid to tell people what they don’t want to hear. As a result, really important parts of the Dhamma just get clipped off, clipped off, clipped off, until there’s hardly anything left. A lot of what we need to learn is precisely what we don’t want to hear. When you realize that and realize that it’s really to your advantage to hear these things and to admit the truth of these things, then you do your best to put yourself in a position where you’re willing to, and it doesn’t hurt, where you actually become eager to find things about the way the mind fools itself and get a certain satisfaction about seeing through these old habits, because you really realize, after all, that it really does put the mind in a much better place. Less suffering, less stress, less dishonesty, and less anger and jealousy inside. So feed the mind well. Let it rest in the concentration. So on the one hand, it’s in a position to see clearly through the mind’s tricks, and part of the concentration is just learning that, seeing through that particular trick of how the mind slips off. And at the same time, it’s also in a position where it’s in a good enough mood to admit what it’s been doing and is willing to let go. So this quality of truthfulness is very important. The Buddha once said, “Bring me a person who’s no deceiver and I’ll teach that person the Dhamma.” That was his prerequisite for who he would want to teach. That gives you an idea of how precious the Dhamma is. Only people who are true will understand it. So make yourself a person who’s true. We all have our ways of lying to ourselves, but here’s a technique, here’s a training that allows us to see through that. So the mind can be true to itself all the way through. When the mind is true in this way, it has no problem with the truth. Because there’s nothing inside that’s going to be threatened by it.

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