The Hall of Mirrors

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Jung Lee, when talking about the deluded mind, the ignorant mind, the greedy mind, often compares it to an animal encountering a mirror. The animal doesn’t know that it’s a mirror, so it understands that what it sees in the mirror is another animal. In this case, it’s a monkey. The monkey sees another monkey in the mirror and plays with the monkey, but doesn’t gain anything out of it. A bird sees another bird in a mirror. The bird may have a little berry in its mouth. It sees the berry in the other bird’s mouth and it wants to get that, so it drops the one in its own mouth. Of course, it doesn’t get the one that’s in the reflection’s mouth. In other words, what he’s saying is that a lot of what we see in life is simply a reflection of the mind, but we’ve mistaken it for something else. We don’t understand where it came from, and so we go chasing after things that are simply the mind’s own creations. So we’ve got to catch the mind in the act of creating things. This is why we meditate. We’re creating a state in the mind. Now, this takes some skill, and in the course of creating it, you learn a lot about the mind right there, where it tends to be overly controlling, where it tends to be operating under wrong presuppositions. If you’re sensitive, you’ll notice there’ll be a sense of strain or stress. There’ll be a sense of tightness that comes with the way you say, “Try to control the breath. Try to clamp down on the mind.” When John Fuhrman would give meditations and instructions, it would almost be the second or third sentence. He would say, “Don’t try to put yourself into a trance. Don’t try to hypnotize yourself. Otherwise, don’t force the mind into some preconceived notion of what good, solid concentration should be.” Simply allow it to stay with the breath you send. Try to use as gentle a touch as possible. If you’re going to change the breath, just think. You don’t have to exert pressure on it. As we were saying today, the things you can exert pressure on in the body are the liquid parts of the body. The breath, though, just slips out, slips through. It’s like the breeze going through a screen. The screen can’t catch the breeze. Where are the borders of a breeze that you could catch hold of? It’s the same with the breath. The breath doesn’t have any borders that you can catch hold of, and yet we try to do that. So try to give as much freedom as you can to the breath. In the course of creating this state of mind, you learn an awful lot about the process of creation. You learn about your own particular habits. Different people approach this in different ways. Some people are more controlling than others. And everybody comes to the breath with lots of different preconceived notions about what the breath is. Or when you’re focusing on something, how you have to focus in order to stay with something. These are old habits we’ve picked up a long time ago, and it’s up to you to observe. The breath is a good mirror. It’s a good mirror in this sense. It’s a good mirror for reflecting the mind, if you give it a chance. It’s important that you learn how to read yourself and remind yourself. As problems come up in the breath, they’re usually reflections of what’s going on in the mind. After everything you’ve experienced, the Buddha said, is a reflection of intention, either past intentions or present intentions. That’s the mirror effect. So try to loosen up your intentions a little bit. Loosen up your perceptions. Think outside the box so you don’t simply fall into the old hall of mirrors that you’ve been living in for so long. If you make another comparison, it’s like trying to detect very faint infrared radiation from out in space, from the earth. The problem is the earth emits a lot of heat as well. So the heat of the earth is bound to get in the way of the much fainter information coming from way out there. So essentially what the Buddha is telling you is, “Well, let’s look at this. Let’s look at the radiation that’s given off by the earth to hell with outer space. Look at the process, i.e., look at the process of how you create something with the mind.” The idea of a mind-state where you are just a blank slate receiving information from outside without any coloration at all, that’s really difficult. It’s impossible, because every moment where you’re aware of things has an element of intention as well. Some people would say, “Well, that means everything is just totally random and subjective.” But the Buddha said, “Well, there are patterns to how you create things.” That’s what’s interesting. Once you’ve created a state of mind, once you can actually get a state of concentration created, it’s an ideal place to observe the process of creation of the mind. After all, the Noble Eightfold Path is something that’s fabricated. In fact, you take all the various fabrications of the mind and you try to turn them into a path so then you can observe them. You see how even when the mind gets shaped into something really good, there’s still an element of stress, there’s still an element of inconstancy. It’s still not totally under your control. This is why an important part of the meditation is that phrase in the description of right mindfulness, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, you’re not playing with the monkeys out there. You’re not trying to steal berries away from the birds. You’re trying to understand this process. What does it mean to look into a mirror? In what ways do you look into the mirror that causes suffering? In what ways don’t cause suffering? That’s something you can really observe right here as it’s happening in your mind. So do your best to follow the path. Be generous. Observe the precepts, because these are good fabrications of the mind. They create a good environment for the practice of watching the mind, because you’re creating good mind states to watch. Then, when you meditate, try to create a good mind state, a good attitude toward the breath, a good relationship with the breath. Then watch those things to see exactly how even the best attitudes and even the best relationships still have their limitations. That’s how you can untangle yourself from the process of fabrication altogether. You totally leave all the mirrors. You found something better. In the meantime, try your best to create these calm states in the mind. Maintain them. Then, as you get better at maintaining them, you’ll begin to catch little interesting things about this process of fabrication out of the corner of your mind. That’s the way insight comes about. It doesn’t come about through a lot of reading, a lot of memorizing. It comes about by learning how to observe what you’re doing as you’re doing it, learning to observe the results as they come. It’s a very simple principle. It’s learning how to apply that to the subtleties of the mind. That’s where it gets hard. But the practice is this same principle all the way through. When you’re watching your actions, you’re watching where things come from, where those reflections come from. So instead of getting deluded by the reflection, you understand the process of how they’re made. It’s in that understanding that allows real liberation.

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