Our Variegated Minds

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Buddha once said, “The mind is more variegated than the animal world.” When you stop to think of it, it’s saying a lot. Think of all the different kinds of fish and birds and mammals and reptiles and little animals, big animals, striped animals. spotted animals. Thousands and thousands of species. Our mind is more variegated than that. All kinds of things we can do, all kinds of things we can identify with. Guha once said he heard a teaching from Ajahn Mun, “People are all alike, but they’re not all alike.” But when he came down to it, he said, “They’re all alike.” Think about that for a bit. One way in which we are all alike is that all of us love ourselves, all of us want happiness. There’s that famous passage where King Pasenadi is in his inner chambers with Queen Mallika. Probably with some sort of romantic intention, he asks her, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Hoping, of course, that she’ll say, “Yes, Your Majesty, you.” But instead she says, “No.” “How about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” The king is forced to admit that no, there’s nobody he loves more than himself either. So then he leaves the palace and goes to see the Buddha, reports their conversation. The Buddha said, “That’s true. You can survey the whole world and you’ll never find anybody that you love more than yourself. And the same holds true for everybody else. Everyone loves themselves first and foremost.” And then the Buddha says something very interesting. He says, “As you reflect on that, never do harm to anyone else. No one else wants to be harmed, just like you don’t want to be harmed.” You can read this in two ways. One is the sense of resonance that we all resonate with, this fear of harm. But it also means that if you want any kind of lasting happiness, you can’t have your happiness depend on somebody else’s misery because they’re going to do everything they can to destroy your happiness. You have to look for happiness that doesn’t cause any harm to anyone else. So this is the point where we’re all the same. We all want happiness. Notice the Buddha never said that we’re all basically good or we’re all basically bad. Because that kind of assumption is not helpful when you’re dealing with people. You’d like to believe that everybody’s basically good, but you look at their behavior. How could the behavior of the world come from a world in which everybody’s minds are basically good, everyone’s intentions are basically good? You might say, “Well, people are warped by society.” But then again, society is created by people. What you come down to is the fact that we’re all alike, but we’re all very different. We’re different in our understandings of what happiness is. You’ve got to learn how to live with that. If you’re going to try to connect with people, you have to connect with their desire for happiness. And if you connect with good intentions, you will try to help them see more clearly where true happiness lies. Most people in the world connect with other people’s desire for happiness and try to exploit it. But then again, that doesn’t lead to any solid, lasting happiness for either side. What this means for us as meditators is that we can’t depend on the fact that our motives are all going to be good. This is another problem with the teaching that everybody’s basically good. It makes us complacent. We tend to think that once the mind is quiet, anything that comes up in that quiet mind is going to be trustworthy, it’s going to be good. But that’s not the case. All kinds of things can come up in a quiet mind. You have to test them. You have to be heedful. You have to be a little bit wary. After all, the mind is so variegated, anything could come up. But what you can do is to test it. One thing you can learn to rely on is this desire for happiness. Take it seriously. The Buddha’s whole teaching is based on this assumption that you can take this desire for happiness and develop it in such a way that it becomes skillful. You really can use your desire for happiness to attain true happiness. This kind of desire is part of the right effort. Then you try to use your understanding through right view to figure out how you can train your desires, how you can create skillful mental states. The Buddha’s teachings on fabrication are helpful here. He talks about three kinds of fabrication. There’s bodily fabrication, there’s verbal, and there’s mental. Bodily fabrication is the breath. Verbal is direct thought and evaluation. Mental is feeling and perception. These are the things we’re trying to train here as we concentrate on the breath. Take the breath as your object. There’s bodily fabrication. You direct your thoughts repeatedly to the breath and you evaluate the breathing so that it becomes more comfortable. In other words, you bring knowledge and awareness, in terms of the Four Noble Truths, to the process of breathing. That’s the verbal fabrication. Verbal fabrication is learning how to perceive the breath in such a way that it becomes more and more of a home. It leads to more reliable feelings of well-being and rapture. It’s with these building blocks that we create skillful states of mind. You can create a physical sense of well-being. You find it easier to deal with what’s coming up in your mind and how to tweak it, direct it in ways that are actually helpful rather than harmful. That’s why we spend so much time working with the breath, making it subtle, making it broad, making it suffuse the body with a sense of ease. Because the mind’s in a much better mood to do what’s skillful when it feels, in a very visceral way, good deep down inside. So even though you can’t always assume that whatever comes up in your mind is going to be coming from your basic good nature, because you can’t really assume that it’s a basically good nature you’ve got there. You’ve got all kinds of stuff in here, more than the animal kingdom. But if you create the right conditions, the more skillful mental states will become more predominant. They’ll take over. You can rely on them more and more, use them more and more, both in dealing with issues that come up in your own mind and also in dealing with other people. The more you get in touch with your desire for happiness and learn how to relate to it skillfully, how to use it skillfully, the easier it becomes to connect with other people’s desire for happiness in a skillful way. So you can get in touch with what we do have in common. And that’s for the people who never seem to want to learn from their mistakes in searching for happiness. That’s where you have to exercise a lot of equanimity. Again, this is a skillful mental state that you have to learn how to exercise when it’s necessary. This is what the Brahma Paharas are all about. It’s not just feelings of goodwill or feelings of compassion or empathetic joy or equanimity. For it really to be a Brahma Pahara, a dwelling place, a sublime attitude, a dwelling place for a Brahma, you have to be able to tap into these attitudes at any time, in any situation, wherever they’re appropriate. That takes some training. But again, we’ve got the benefits. Basic building blocks here are your breath, directed thought, evaluation, feelings, perceptions. Do you see any feelings that arise in the mind that you know are skillful? Try to take them apart in these terms. How are you breathing right now? Where are you directing your thoughts? How are you evaluating things? Are these skillful ways of thinking? Or could you replace them with other, more skillful ways of thinking? What kind of perceptions are you applying to your situation? We feed so often on the bad things that other people have done. We chew them over again and again and again. It’s helpful to reflect on an analogy the Buddha once gave. He said, “You’re like a person crossing a desert. You’re hot, tired, trembling, thirsty. You come across a print of a cow’s foot, and there’s a little puddle of water in the footprint. It’s so small that if you reached down and tried to get the water with your hand, you’d make it muddy. So you have to very carefully bend over and slurp up the water to make sure that it doesn’t get muddy or disturbed.” The Buddha said in the same way, “You have to regard the good points of other people, even though they have a lot of bad stuff in their thoughts, in their words, in their deeds, if they have any goodness at all. Treat it as you would treat that water. Remember, you’re hot, tired, trembling, and thirsty. You can’t afford to feed on the dry, hot things that other people give you, because that makes your goodness wither away. Focus on their good points.” The lecture develops some equanimity around the things that you can’t change. So you can focus on the things that you can change, the things that you can’t change. The things that you can work with. So even though we’re different, we connect on the areas where what we have in common is good, what we have in common is helpful. It takes work. It doesn’t always come naturally. In fact, many times it goes against the grain. Where does that grain come from? If we’re all basically good, it would be easy, easy, easy to do good things. But it’s not. Sometimes it’s very hard. So accept that fact and take it in the light of the fact that at least we all want true happiness. We want happiness that lasts. We can work from that desire to develop wisdom, compassion, and purity. We can also work from the fact that other people have that desire buried someplace in them. That’s how we can connect. That’s how we can live together, regardless of whether we like each other or not, as long as we can connect with that basic desire. There’s room for some sense of commonality, some sense of working together. So focus your attention there. Make that your basic assumption about people, about yourself. When you take that desire for happiness seriously, that’s what’s going to get you on the right path. you

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