Radical Questioning

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I heard a scary story today. I was talking to someone who’d been invited to address a group of people who were going to be leading community meditation groups. And in the course of the discussions he was having with them, he picked up more and more the sense that everybody was concerned about learning how to accept. This was the whole purpose of meditation. You learn how to accept what you are, you learn how to accept your situation. That seemed to be the goal of the practice. So he stopped and said, “Wait a minute, I want to make sure that we’re all on the same page. The Buddha taught there is suffering, right? There’s a cause to suffering, right? And this path to the end of suffering. All things involve duties, and we’re trying to make a change, right? We see where there’s suffering and we’re trying to put an end to that suffering.” They began to see people were getting uncomfortable. And so finally the person who was leading the group said, “Well, we’re taking a different model here. We’re taking the therapeutic model, where it’s best to make people feel comfortable with themselves. If you challenge them and tell them they have to change, then they don’t feel comfortable.” At that point the person who was addressing the group said he gave up. It’s scary for two reasons. One is the idea being that we’re here just to learn how to accept things. And secondly, that the person gave up. It’s the sort of thing you have to challenge, not only in Dharma circles but also in yourself. There is a role for acceptance when suffering is caused by neurotic reasons, when you simply can’t accept the reality of a situation. That’s where acceptance comes in, and it has a role. But it has to go beyond that, because you’re working at something deeper than psychotherapy here. Freud once said, “Psychotherapy takes people and cures them of the misery that comes from their neurotic processes and teaches them how to be ordinary, unhappy people.” That’s as far as psychotherapy can go, because after all, we are living in a world of aging, illness, and death. These are the things that make you unhappy, as long as you’re identifying with things that age, grow ill, and die. But the Dharma is meant to take you beyond that. So a lot of the Dharma is not so much radically accepting things but radically questioning them, the attitudes you have, the thoughts that burn in your mind, burn in your body. What are they based on? Why do they burn? Is there some way that you can learn not to be burned by them? A lot of the Dharma means changing your attitudes, changing your assumptions. Back in my days as a student studying intellectual history, one of the main lessons I picked up was that when you’re reading a figure from the past, you want to figure out what the person’s unstated assumptions are, not simply accept everything they say. What lies behind that? Why would they say that? What are they assuming that they may not be aware of? When you figured out what the unstated assumptions were, you were able to distance yourself from the thinker. On the one hand, you understood the thinker better, but also there was a sense of distancing that you weren’t taken into that person’s thought world. You could look at it from the outside. In the same way, you want to be able to do this with your own thoughts. Learn how to question the assumptions, especially the assumptions that the mind says, “Well, of course it’s this,” or, “Of course it’s that.” You have to ask yourself, “Is that really the case?” Some of this requires not simply watching things coming and going, but actively analyzing them. After all, analysis of qualities, Dhamma vijjaya, is an important factor in the path. Try to figure out where the assumptions are that make you burn, what those assumptions are, and do you really want to hold on to them. The Dhamma gives lots of clues in terms of right view, in terms of what you might call the three perceptions of where you might look. After all, the suffering is composed of clinging, wherever there’s suffering. So you have to look at what you’re clinging to. Clinging can take any one of four forms. Clinging to a sensual desire. Clinging to a particular view. Clinging to a way of doing things that has become almost ritualistic in your mind. Or clinging to certain views about yourself. Those are four areas you might want to look into. Do you notice that a particular thought is making you suffer? Does it involve any of those four kinds of clinging? In terms of the three perceptions, there’s the perception of inconstancy. Are you perceiving something as constant and permanent when it really isn’t? Are you perceiving pleasure in something that’s really painful? Are you perceiving a sense of self, something that really isn’t self? Those are very radical questions because they go very deep to our assumptions, especially at the last. “I am this kind of person.” It doesn’t have to be a metaphysical view about yourself. It can be your general feeling of who you are, what kind of person you are, and what kind of feelings and ideas that such a person should have. If the feelings burn, if they cause trouble, cause suffering, you might want to question the underlying assumptions. Because the Buddha doesn’t have us accept the fact that suffering has to be there. There may be the stress of fabrications, which is a common factor. But then there’s the stress and suffering that comes from craving, that comes from ignorance. That is not necessary. That’s what we can change. So if you have any thoughts that are burning in the mind, there’s a wrong assumption in there someplace. It may be backed up by facts and backed up by a lot of your values, but it’s wrong in a sense that you don’t have to hold on to what you’re holding on to and it’s causing stress and suffering. That’s where it’s wrong. Many times we can hold on to ideas that have lots of factual basis, but maybe we’re asking the wrong questions, taking the wrong facts and putting them together, even though the facts may, strictly speaking, be right. The way you put them together is wrong. It doesn’t mean you’re a bad person, it just means simply that you’ve been making a mistake that’s causing unnecessary suffering. And you don’t have to keep on making that same mistake. This is where the opportunity for change is so important. Learn to think of alternative ways of thinking, alternative assumptions that carry less suffering. So radical questioning is an important part of the practice. Whenever there’s a thought that causes pain in the mind, that gets into your system and seems to hang on there, you’re going to ask yourself, “What are the assumptions I’m going by here?” And look particularly for the assumptions that have a kind of coarse quality to them. The ones that you don’t normally feel that there’s any question at all. It’s got to be that way. One of the advantages of going to Thailand to learn the Dhamma was that I was in a culture where people’s assumptions were very different. Occasionally I would take a problem to a Jon Fuehrer, and I found, one, it was often difficult to explain the problem in Thai. That should have been a warning signal right there. And when I finally seemed to get it out, he looked at me as if it was one of the strangest things he’d ever heard. And the fact that it sounded strange to him helped make it look strange to me. That it was possible to look at this problem, which I felt was just a normal part of having a mind, being a human being, might simply be cultural. And learning how to step back from it in that way helped create a sense of distance. And when you have a sense of distance, then you can look at it and not be totally taken in by it. This is why it’s good to have a teacher who’s not always trying to make you comfortable, and who’s not totally familiar with the same assumptions you have. After all, the Buddha is not simply trying to make people comfortable as they are. He’s trying to teach them new habits so they can go on beyond having to be comfortable, because there’s no sense of suffering at all. That’s a solution that goes a lot deeper. He’s not here just to cure our neuroses, but he’s here to cure our ignorance and our craving, the deeper things. It’s a radical kind of suffering. If you radically question those assumptions, you can go beyond the suffering. This is what makes the Dharma special.

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