NR The Fangs of Ignorance

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The Buddha uses the word “conceit.” He doesn’t mean just pride. He means that act of the mind where you compare yourself with other people, either as better than, or equal to, or worse than. The basic element of the Buddha’s teaching is “I am.” Sometimes there’s an “I am,” and it’s a dot, dot, dot, after that, whatever the “I am” is. You can even be identifying with a thing or a quality, such as “I am good” or “I am bad.” “I’m above that person.” “I’m below this person.” And Ajahn Mahaprabhu has a good analogy, or a good image, for conceit. He said, “It’s the fangs of your ignorance.” It’s your ignorance biting yourself or biting other people. For instance, that issue we just discussed today. You start getting certain things happening in your meditation, and part of you says, “It can’t be happening to me. I don’t deserve this. I’m not good enough. I can’t be at that level yet.” So you have to ask yourself, “What does that kind of thinking accomplish? Exactly what level was it?” As you’ve probably noticed, when you meditate in different states or ways, they don’t come with signs attached. It’s useful to have labels for these things, but the label is not the important part. The important part is the actual experience. So you might want to put a little post-it note on it. This may be for a state of jhana or maybe something else. But for the time being, let’s just put this post-it note on it and then get back to the actual experience. After all, we’re not here to force the texts on our meditation or to clone what we’ve read. This is one major mistake that people make in meditation. They read something in a book and they try to clone it. They try to get their heads around it first and then take whatever concept they’ve managed to figure out and then force that on the mind. That’s a misuse of the Dharma. The written Dharma is there as a map to help you feel your way around inside your mind. So don’t try to clone what you’ve read. Follow the instructions that say, “Do this. And then when something comes up, put a post-it note on it and then just keep on doing it.” This is not the case that, “Well, if it’s the first jhana, I’ll hold on to it. But if it’s not the first jhana, I’m going to throw it away.” You hold on to what you’ve gotten until it becomes obviously unskillful. Or you find that there’s something more skillful that you can move to. Then you learn to hold on to that and keep doing it. You might make an analogy with writings about food. There are some descriptions of food that simply tell you that, say, a baked Alaska looks like this and has these ingredients and tastes like that. But it doesn’t tell you how to make a baked Alaska. For that, you need a recipe. The recipe says, “Do this, do that.” And then at the end you decide whether you like the recipe or not, whether it’s gotten good results. And you can decide. It’s based either on the fact that you didn’t follow the recipe carefully enough, or the recipe was too sketchy, or maybe the recipe wasn’t good. But simply thinking about the baked Alaska is not going to make it happen. You have to go through the motions. It has to involve your body and your mind. Following one step after the next, one step after another, until you actually get the results. So you notice in the descriptions of jhana, like we read just now, chanted just now, the definition of right concentration, that’s like the description of the baked Alaska. The first jhana has these factors, the second jhana has those. The actual recipe is in the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation. You train yourself to do “X,” then you train yourself to do “Y.” Train yourself to breathe in and out, sensitive to the whole body, then calming bodily fabrication, then being sensitive to rapture and sensitive to pleasure. Rapture can also be translated as refreshment. Whatever in your experience seems refreshing, focus on that. Be sensitive to it. Turn up the volume on it. In other words, learn how to breathe in such a way that you maximize whatever sense of refreshment or ease there is. Then you learn to calm it down. These are all instructions on what you do, both with body and with mind. It’s important that the body is brought along here. There is an element of embodiment in the practice. That’s essential. After all, as many of the passages say, when you eventually touch the Dhamma, you touch it with the body. In other words, this area of your awareness where you’re sensing the body now, that will be involved in the experience too. Instead of trying to clone your ideas, you actually develop things from within the body, from within your breath. That’s how you develop the body and develop the mind. Developing here doesn’t mean that you go down and lift weights, but it means that you develop your ability to handle pain, your ability to handle pleasure, because you’re going to gain a lot of insights in your ability to deal with these things. Then, of course, of mastering these things. The question of where you are on the map or how it fits in the description that you read is not nearly as important as your ability to sense what’s going well and what’s not going well. In other words, the nuts and the bolts of the practice. That’s where the insight comes in. Sometimes it’s really frustrating because the nuts and bolts seem to be very minor, little tiny things, and you want the big things. Well, the big things don’t come until you master the little ones. You’ve got to deal with the fact that, say, there’s a pain in a body right now, and you’ve got to sit through it. Or pleasure is coming up and you wonder what to do with it, or there may be a very strong feeling of energy, and what do you do with that? Or you learn to deal with it, you learn to get a sense of how you handle it, and you learn what to do with it. That’s what’s going to make the difference. That’s where your insight comes. It’s not the insight that’s cloned. It’s the insight that gets from getting a feel of things, which is how we steer our attention away from that “I am,” from the fangs of ignorance. You’re looking into causes. What’s in effect? What’s happening right now? Why is it happening? Is it something you want to encourage or something you want to learn how to abandon? Either way, you’ve first got to figure out why it’s happening. You look at it arise, you look at it pass away. When it’s arising, what’s arising with it? When it passes away, what passes away with it? Gain a sense of the causes that surround it. So what’s something you want to abandon? There are other things you’ve got to abandon, too. If it’s something you want to encourage, how do you encourage it? Once you’ve got it, how do you maintain it? How do you keep it on that cusp, where you’re not pushing it too hard or grabbing at it too strongly? At the same time, you’re not just letting it go. These are skills. It’s important to have them. Remember when they were talking about ignorance, the word he chose is avijja. Avijja, among its various meanings, can also mean a skill, like the skill of a doctor, or the skill by which you gain control over certain things. So ignorance can also mean lack of control, lack of skill. It’s not simply a knowing of some thing or some fact that you either know or you don’t know. It’s more like the mastery of a skill, something you learn gradually, through trial and error. That’s where you want to focus, on the trial and the error, and the times when you try and it’s not an error. It works. And how well is it working? Well, you find that as you go through the practice, your standards get more refined. As you explore the areas of the mind, you gain a better sense of the territory, and you can start moving those post-it notes around until you know, from experience, where they really fit. And you didn’t learn this from cloning what you read in the books. You gain a familiar sense of the nuts and bolts of training yourself to work with the breath, training yourself to breathe in different ways, training yourself to adjust your awareness of the breath in different ways, your perception of the breath in different ways. Because it’s through this nuts and bolts kind of work that you find out what the nuts and the bolts are. They’re the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. And you learn about them because you learn how to manipulate them and see what they do, which is much better than just reading a book and dealing only in the concepts. When you learn how to manipulate these things, there are lots of advantages. One, you can turn them into a path. Two, your insight into them is a lot clearer. After all, these are the rules. They’re raw materials from which you ordinarily create your sense of self, this “I am” that can be such a problem. You’re taking those raw materials and you’re treating them in a different way. So you can begin to defang your ignorance. At the same time, you’re working to undercut the ignorance as a whole. So when the thought comes up in your meditation, “I’m not good enough for this,” or “I’m too good for this,” remember, those are the fangs of ignorance. That’s ignorance biting you. You might find also that it turns around and starts biting other people, too. So the way around it is, as I said, developing the sense of self. Developing the skills that can replace that ignorance, bit by bit, with practical knowledge, as you develop both body and mind in the practice. As you approach awakening, not through your imagination or through your concepts, you approach it through the body, your experience right here, being the mind in touch with the body. Mental phenomena, physical phenomena, working through them. It’s through developing that awareness that the awakening comes.

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