Hold a Mirror to Your Mind

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There was a book that appeared back around the World War II called The Perennial Philosophy. And in it the author noted that the Buddha tended to avoid metaphysical questions. But the thesis of the book was that the Perennial Philosophy, the essence of all the great religions of the world, was the answer that they gave. What is my relationship to these metaphysical questions? Who am I? What am I? What is my relationship to the universe? And the author, in discussing the Buddha, said that even though the Buddha avoided questions like this, ultimately they’re unavoidable. You have to answer them, the most important ones to answer. I think it’s better to give the Buddha the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he knew something about what questions should be asked, what questions shouldn’t be asked. You’ve got a whole list in one of the suttas, Majjhima two. What am I? Who am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist? What was I in the past? What will I be in the future? People have noted that those last questions call into question the whole idea of wanting to look into your past lives. But the Buddha learned an important lesson about past life knowledge on the night of his awakening. The first knowledge was just that, seeing what he had been, what his pleasures were, what his pains were, what kind of food he ate, what he looked like. And he realized that those questions, even getting an answer to them, didn’t answer the question, why is there suffering? How do you go beyond suffering? How do you find the deathless? More pertinent was the question, what did I do that led to those results? He found that that gave a better answer, because not only did it give insight into the pattern of action in shaping the world, but also focused in on, well, what am I doing that’s causing suffering? That’s the beginning of the Four Noble Truths. It’s not just actions from the past, it’s actions in the present moment that really matter. Seeing that got him to the third knowledge. And that was the knowledge that brought him awakening. So if you take that to heart, the big issue is the issue of suffering. And the solution to it is getting very clear about what you’re doing right now. Particularly what you’re doing that’s contributing to suffering, what you might do to put an end to that suffering. This is one of the reasons why we focus our attention on the present moment in our meditation. There are meditations where you think about the qualities of the Buddha, things that are more discursive. But the real work is done when you try to understand what you’re doing. This is why a mirror is such an important image throughout the Canon. When the Buddha taught his son, one of the first lessons was to look at his actions in the same way that he would look in a mirror. The way you’re looking in a mirror to examine your face. The useful way of looking in a mirror is not to just look at how beautiful you are. It’s to see, is there any blemish, is there any dirt on my face? In the same way you look at your actions, is there any dirt on your actions? In other words, you’re doing anything that’s causing harm, either in planning what to do, or in the act of your doing it, or in the long-term results. And it’s not just a preliminary practice just for kids. It’s useful all the way along the path. Like when you’re sitting here and meditating, there are going to be pains, there are going to be distractions. And what are you doing with those pains? What are you doing with those distractions? You’ll learn an awful lot if you look into that issue. As the Buddha said, when you’re dealing with pain, on the one hand you want to see what you can do to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of refreshment, sense of pleasure. In other words, give yourself another place in the body to focus. Work with your breath in such a way. Be aware of your whole body in such a way, so you’re not necessarily swallowed up by the pain. You’ve got one part of the body where you can stay safely. That becomes your foundation. And when that foundation is strong, then you can start asking the other questions. Which are, “How are my feelings and perceptions shaping my mind?” In other words, “How does that feeling of pain make inroads into the mind, and what role does perception play in that?” The Jhammahabhava gives a lot of interesting reflections on this. How do you perceive your pain? Is it a solid block? Is it the same thing as the part of the body where you find it? And are you actually finding it in that part of the body? Or are you imposing it on that part of the body? To what role does perception precede the pain? In other words, the mental image you have, what does that do to keep the pain going? If it’s a solid block, can you see it more as individual moments? When there are individual moments, can you see them going away rather than coming at you? Can you chase down the sharpest point of the pain? If you do, you’ll find it moves around. And if you keep pursuing it, the fact that you’re not afraid of it anymore changes your relationship. When you’re chasing it down, you’re offering it less of a target. If you’re just letting yourself be victimized by the pain, it’s like you’re opening up your chest and saying, “Here, here, shoot me right here.” Whereas if you’re chasing it down, you can be more elusive. It can shoot at you, but it’s going to miss you. And then as you pursue it further, you begin to realize it’s not even shooting at you, it’s shooting around randomly. And you learn a lot about perception in the course of doing this. In other words, you’re holding a mirror to the mind. What you do around the pain. If you reflect on that, you’ll learn an awful lot about all the aggregates. Because wherever there’s pain, there’s going to be the issue of the form of the body. Is the form of the body the same as the pain? Well, no. The form of the body is made out of the elements or properties of earth, water, wind, and fire. Pain is something separate. We’re all in them together. It’s part of the mind’s message to itself. The mind sends messages into the future. It says, “Watch out for this, watch out for that.” And many times those messages prime us to suffer, as we shrink away from the area where the pain is. But you can change that relationship, as I said, by chasing it down. And there’ll come a sense that the pain and the body separate out. You realize that you were the one who smashed them together. But if you don’t do that, and if you learn how not to do that, they separate out. And then it’s a lot easier to stay with the pain. The pain is one thing. The body is one thing. The awareness is something else. There even come times when your perception of the pain, the mental image of it, gets separated from the pain itself. And the pain slips into your heart and disappears. No matter where it was in the body, it goes zip into the heart and it’s gone. Strange things can happen as you investigate pain. And as you hold a mirror to the mind while you’re investigating it. A similar principle applies when you’re getting into deeper states of concentration. There’s a strong tendency, especially when you get to states of infinite space, consciousness, to interpret them in a metaphysical way. That you reach the ground of being. We’re asking the wrong questions. The questions are, “Well, what are you doing as you’re tuning in to the, say, the aggregate of consciousness?” Your emphasis should be not so much on the consciousness, but how you tune in. What’s the process of tuning in? How do perceptions play a role in that? How does your mental conversation play a role in that? And the big question is, to what extent are you causing suffering? Now, “suffering” may be a too heavy a word here. The Buddha actually uses another word when he gets to these states of concentration. He calls it a “disturbance.” Where is the disturbance here? And one way to look for it is to see that the level of stress, disturbance in the mind, is not totally steady. It goes up and down. But the ups and downs are pretty subtle, but they’re there. Then the question should be, holding a mirror to the mind, “What do I do when the level of stress goes up? What am I doing when it goes down? What changed?” You’re looking for, “What did you do? What perception did you change? How did you change your focus? How did you change your conversation?” Because you want to see what you’re doing to create this, so that you don’t get stuck on it. There was a book that appeared a couple years back, by John Cha, done by one of his former students, who is now a lay teacher. He had John Cha talking about the ground of being. I’ve asked a number of Thais, who are fluent both in English and Thai, “How would you say ‘ground of being’ in Thai?” And there is no word. So the idea was imposed by the translator. Which means you have to be careful when you’re reading things. Because a lot of people who like that author of the book on the perennial philosophy, tend to think that metaphysical issues are inescapable. But the Buddha did a good job of escaping them. He’s recommending that we do too. The one metaphysical issue he does recommend, of course, is karma. And he goes into a lot of detail. We tend to dismiss the teachings on karma, thinking they were just baggage the Buddha picked up from his culture, unthinkingly. But again, when you look at the questions that he answered, one category he had of questions was questions that deserved an analytical answer, in which you had to basically rephrase the question, before you could give a proper answer. And a lot of those questions in that category have to do with karma. Which means that the people of his time really didn’t understand karma. The concept was there in the culture. But the Buddha’s take on karma was very different from theirs. And so he would catch people asking the wrong question, and he would have to rephrase the question. Which shows that the Buddha was not unthinking in taking up the issue. He had something new to say, and he said it in a new way. So take his teachings on karma seriously, and hold up that mirror to your mind. What am I doing right now? What am I doing to contribute to suffering or stress or disturbance? And what can I do to stop that? That’s when you’re asking the right questions. The questions that open things up in the mind, that otherwise would stay closed.

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