

Descartes' Error

October 28, 2004

Try to keep things as simple as possible while you meditate. Because after all, the purpose of meditation is to let go. So if you find your mind proliferating, remember that's not what we're here for. We're here to keep things simple, keep them solid.

The word for proliferation in Pali, *papañca*, can also mean to make things complicated. And it starts with a very simple perception: "I am the thinker." This reminds you a little of Descartes when he said, "I think, therefore I am." Or as someone once said, "I think, therefore I am, I think..." and from that one thought, you start spinning off into all kinds of other things. If you're the thinker, you've got to think about this, you've got to think about that. That's what you're here for: to think. It's as if you weren't thinking, you wouldn't exist. So you keep stitching yourself together out of bits and pieces of various things. And this is a habit we have to unlearn, reminding ourselves that there's no annihilation when you stop all this kind of activity, all this chatter in the mind.

The way you do this is to direct your thinking specifically to making the mind still. In other words, you don't try simply to stop thinking altogether, because that doesn't work. You have to do something that seems a little bit paradoxical: You're going to think about bringing the mind to stillness, or think about bringing it to a point where it doesn't have to think. That recognizes steps in the process. Like that old paradox, you have to have a desire to put an end to desire before you can actually get to the end of desire, because life is a constant process of desiring and acting.

People tend to lose sight of this, especially when they try to turn the Buddha's teachings into a philosophy or a philosophical system whose purpose is to step back and take a look at the way the world is and draw a map of the world. Now, the Buddha did draw maps, but instead of, say, drawing a whole set of plans for how the house is built, he simply drew a map to where the exits are. Part of the Buddha's map to the exits is realizing that life is made out of actions, the path is made out of actions, and because your thinking is a certain kind of action, you've got to learn how to put it to good use as part of the path to the end of suffering.

So if you *are* going to be thinking while you're here, try to direct your thinking to the present moment. Thinking that spins off away from the present moment is something you don't want right now. What have you got here? You've got the breath, you've got the body. Actually you've got a lot of things going on in the present moment. It's simply because you haven't looked deeply enough or carefully enough that you don't see what's going on. You may look at the breath and all you see is in and out, in and out, in and out. Or if you look at the awareness of the mind, it just seems to be aware and nothing really special.

The desire to make something special out of it is going to lead to proliferation again. After all, you feel that “If I’m the thinker, I’m responsible for making something interesting out of this.” So you lose sight of the process. How do you go from being aware to forming thoughts? What are the steps in that process? You can’t see them unless you make the mind really still, unless you raise that question in your mind and turn your attention to making the mind still.

So this is the proper role of thinking: directing your attention to important issues that are needed to see things clearly, not just to see but also to give rise to the sense of well-being that comes from stillness.

The Buddha once said, “There is no happiness other than peace,” and we don’t believe him. We think that happiness is something you have to stitch together from your thoughts about this and your perceptions and your sensations of that. Yet he’s saying that there’s more happiness in learning how to let go and be at peace. There are stages in letting go, which is why it requires a certain amount of intelligence, a certain amount of thought, but it’s the way your thinking gets directed that makes all the difference in the world. If it’s directed toward bringing the mind to stillness, observing what works and what doesn’t work in bringing the mind to stillness, then it’s useful thinking.

So thinking does have its role in the meditation. It just requires discipline. All too often, this is an area where discipline is very much lacking. We’re sitting here with a whole hour and you can fill it up with all kinds of thoughts. But the question is, at the end of the hour, what do you have? If you’ve been thinking about bringing the mind to stillness, and observing what works and what doesn’t work, then you’ve got something to show for the hour. You’re gaining a skill.

Otherwise, all you have are thought-worlds. They’re like bubbles. You blow bubbles and they stay for a while and then they pop. Then you have to blow some more. Then you’re left with not much of anything at all, just the gooey residue of the bubble solution, and that’s about it.

So you have to tell yourself, “I’ve got this ability to think. I’m constantly acting all the time anyhow. So let’s direct the action in a direction where it really is of help, really does make a difference.” So much effort goes into life. What the Buddha’s simply pointing out is which kind of effort is worthwhile and which kind is not.

Even good thinking, skillful thinking, finally has to stop for a while. As the Buddha once said, when you’re thinking about good things for a whole day and a whole night, there’s no real harm except for the fact that the mind gets tired. It wears itself out.

So bring your mind to stillness. As for the thinking, you don’t have to follow it. Just work with the thinking that keeps you right here. Be observant as to what works and what doesn’t work. We’re not shooting birds up in the dark. In other words, it’s not a process of just aiming your gun into the dark and hoping there’ll be a bird there. If you look, you can actually see where the birds are. You can see what works and what doesn’t work.

As we were pointing out this afternoon, the kind of concentration you want is a concentration that has a large solid frame of reference: the whole body. If your concentration is just one-pointed, it has its uses from time to time. When you really want to get precise about pain for instance, you want a very focused concentration. But you want that in the context of a larger frame of reference: mindfulness filling the body, mindfulness immersed in the body, saturating the body.

These are the images that the Buddha uses. Concentration with a large frame doesn't get knocked over easily. If your concentration is one-pointed, you can't take it out into the world. As soon as your mind drops its one point, then it's gone. But if it has a larger frame of reference—the whole body—this becomes your field. Other things that you're aware of are simply things entering into the field of this concentration. You know they're there, but the framework is solid. This way, you can maintain your concentration in all kinds of settings, all kinds of situations.

So direct your thoughts in this direction: finding a comfortable place to stay and then spreading that sense of comfort to fill the body. When the comfort fills the body as much as it can, the mind will be a lot more willing to settle down and get into the present moment, get into the body, fill the body with its awareness.

Any amount of thinking that's involved in doing this is skillful thinking, the kind of thinking you want. Once you get to that state of filling the whole body it's a lot harder to think about anything at all. There still is a sort of background commentary that reminds you: whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out. It also reminds you to check up to see if any spots of your awareness are beginning to shrink, which would leave an opening for more thinking and leave an opening for more of that bubble-blowing that creates little worlds.

This state of concentration is kind of a world of its own. It's a big bubble. But it's somehow a bubble that gets solid, one you can really live in for a long period of time. Not forever—after all, concentration is a construct—but it's one of the more lasting ones. When you have this basic construct, the mind's more willing to settle down and stay. When it can stay, it gets a greater sense of well-being. Well-being begins to suffuse the whole body and the mind, softening it up. To make another analogy, it's like rain seeping into the earth, softening up the earth so that the plants can spread their roots. Your awareness begins to permeate into areas of your mind and body that you weren't really aware of before. And because it's all softened up, there's a sense of well-being.

It's because of this kind of enlarged awareness that you begin to see things you didn't see before, giving rise to insights you never had before. Direct observations. To see these things, you have to have a sense of what's important to look for. Otherwise, you can just sit here and be very still and very quiet and really not notice much of anything at all. Again, this is where thinking is useful: It sets up questions; directs your attention. It's called appropriate attention,

pointing you in the right direction to the issues that can open things up to put an end to suffering.

So that's another useful function of thinking: learning how to ask the right questions of this still mind, of this still awareness. In other words, this kind of thinking is not involved in proliferation. It's simply directing your thoughts and watching. The more you watch, the more you strip things away, then the simpler things get. A lot of the issues that you bring into the meditation you just learn to drop.

The Pali word is *nibbida*, which means disenchantment. It can also be translated in a stronger way, disgust, in the sense of losing your taste for something—not so much an aversive state, simply that you've outgrown your old ways of thinking because you find that skillful of thinking gets genuine results. It really does make a difference.

Ajaan Suwat used to quote a passage from the Pali Canon, "We're here to attain what we've never attained before, to realize what we've never realized before, to see what we never saw before." You don't do that simply by spinning your thinking wheels. You use your thinking to be observant, to direct the mind toward the stillness, toward the clarity that you're going to need, toward the concentration you're going to need to see what was never seen before.

So thinking *can* serve that function: setting you in the right direction, observing what works and what doesn't work, keeping the mind on the path. So when you find the mind thinking, ask yourself, "Exactly where is this leading to? Just more proliferation? Or is it leading to more stripping away, peeling away? Exposing things in the mind that have remained hidden up to now?" You have that choice.