

Ignorance & Deception

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The Buddha had said several times that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. You have to keep that in mind as you're practicing his teaching: Everything is aimed at those two topics. To put an end to suffering, you have to understand where it comes from. The two main causes are craving and ignorance. The ignorance here is not so much being ignorant of a particular teaching. It's more the mind's being ignorant of itself. It doesn't know what it's doing.

This is the problem we have to tackle, and we can tackle it in several ways. What doesn't the mind know that it's doing? Often it hides things from itself. This is why, when the Buddha was teaching his son, Rahula, one of the very first things he said to Rahula concerned honesty: not only telling the truth to other people, but also learning how to tell the truth to yourself—being clear to yourself about what you're doing, why you're doing it, what you expect the results to be, and then, when you've done something, looking at what the results actually were, tallying them against your original plan.

One of the important things the Buddha found is that if you intentionally act in an unfair or dishonest way toward other people, or yourself, if you intentionally cause harm, you'll have a lot of problems dealing with the truth. There's a passage where he says that people who glory in their power or are hungry for power, if they harm people in unfair ways, will find it harder and harder to accept the truth. They also find it hard to look into lies to see exactly what's a lie and what's not a lie. They tend to not touch those issues, because deep down inside, they know they don't want those issues to touch them. They've got some sensitive issues inside with their own dishonesty.

This is what the precepts are designed for: to put the mind in a position where it can really be honest with itself. That's why the first precept is against killing, for if you take a life, even of a little thing, it tends to create a kind of dishonesty inside the mind. This is also why, of all the precepts, the one the Buddha stressed the most was the one against lying. He singled it out at one point. He said if you're careless in this one thing, you can't really be trusted with anything else.

So keep this in mind as you're thinking about the precepts, as you're thinking about how to apply them in your life, that that's their main purpose: to develop honesty. It's impossible to be totally pure in all of our actions. The simple fact that we need to eat creates burdens on other beings. This is one of the problems of living in a conditioned world. It's one of the reasons why we want to get out of the

conditioned world. But the precepts are designed specifically to train the mind to be harmless in its intentions so that it can learn to be truthful with itself.

The same goes with concentration practice. You make up your mind to stay with one object, and you want to be true to that determination. The more you can stick with that determination, the more you can be true to it, then the more you see. The stronger and more solid the mind becomes, the more it can see its motions. Ordinarily, the mind has a funny way of clouding itself out. Or as Ajaan Lee says, it passes out, goes unconscious for a moment, and wakes up and finds itself someplace else. That's how it moves from one thought world into another one.

That right there contains a lot of ignorance. It's like when they put on a play: When they're going to change the scenery, they close the curtains, because if you could see the old scenery being moved away and new scenery being put in place, it would destroy some of the illusion they're trying to create. In the same way, the mind tries to create and maintain some illusions around its thought-worlds.

What we're trying to do here in the meditation is to learn how to see through those illusions. So try to catch the mind as it's playing this kind of shell game with itself, where there's sleight-of-hand with itself. You're here with the breath coming in, going out, and there's a moment where the mind actually decides whether it's going to stay or whether it wants to move on. Then as soon as it's made that decision, it tries to hide that decision from itself. This is where the blanking out starts. So you want to look for that decision. Most of us don't even know that we make these decisions. The mind seems to go on its own, but there's actually an element of choice on our part.

Look for it. As you're riding the breath in, riding the breath out, all of a sudden, there may be a moment of boredom or a moment of deciding you've had enough of this, you want something else. If that happens, immediately reaffirm your decision that you're going to stay with the breath no matter what. You're not going to fall for whatever thought that wants to pull you away. And it's when you're able to deal with these sleights-of-hand in the mind that you actually begin to see things better in the mind. Once you see through this particular trick, you start seeing through a lot of the mind's other tricks as well. You're quicker to be up on things in the mind, and the insights you gain will be a lot more solid because they can withstand this particular sleight-of-hand.

This is how we come to see the truth about the mind: learning how to see through its tricks, the curtains it puts up, the walls it puts up inside. As meditators, we try to arrange our lives in such way that we live a life where it's easier to be truthful with ourselves, to minimize regret, to minimize denial on the

outside levels, so that we can minimize denial on the inside level as well. Even the little moments when the mind pretends that it hasn't made the choice to leave the meditation object: We're able to see right through that.

That's a lot of what the vipassana or the clear seeing is in the mind: seeing those movements, seeing the choice, seeing the results that come about, and being perfectly frank with yourself about what's happening. Again, the concentration helps here as you gain a greater and greater sense of well-being from staying with the breath. It's easier to see through these things and not get upset, not get frustrated, and not get really down on yourself, because you've got a sense of well-being, a sense of solidity inside. That way, when uncovering some of your old habits, you don't feel so invested in them. You can see them for what they are. You can realize, "When I do this, it actually does create suffering," or maybe not strong suffering, but at least it creates some stress. You're in good enough a mood that you can admit it to yourself in a good-natured way.

It's like trying to tell someone else something you know the person doesn't want to hear. Usually, it's wise to find a time when the person is well fed, well rested, in a good mood. Then you can talk about these things. If the person is hungry and tired, that's a bad time to sort things out, because they'll just lash right back. They're already feeling weak, they're already feeling exasperated, whatever, and just one more thing becomes the straw that breaks the camel's back. And it's the same with the mind. If you're going to point out some of the mind's dishonesty, some of its foolish habits, it's best to do it when the mind is in a good mood, when it doesn't feel so invested in those habits.

So the practice of concentration is how you put the mind into a state where it can really hear the things it doesn't want to hear, and willing to admit the things that ordinarily it wouldn't want to admit. This is one of the problems with the way Dhamma is often taught here in the West. Teachers trying to earn a living from teaching put themselves in a position where they're afraid to tell people what they don't want to hear. As a result, the really important parts of the Dhamma get clipped off, clipped off, clipped off until there's hardly anything left. But a lot of what we need to learn is precisely what we don't want to hear.

When you realize that, when you realize that it's really to your advantage to hear these things and to admit the truth of these things, then you do your best to put yourself in a position where you're willing to and it doesn't hurt—where you actually become eager to find things about the way the mind fools itself. You get a certain satisfaction about seeing through these old habits, because you really realize after a while that it does put the mind in a much better place, with less suffering, less stress, less dishonesty inside.

So feed the mind well. Let it rest in concentration, so that on the one hand, it's in a position to see clearly through the mind's tricks, and part of the concentration is just learning that: seeing through that particular trick of how the mind slips off. On the other hand, it's also in a position where it's in a good enough mood to admit what it's been doing, and it's willing to let go.

This quality of truthfulness is very important. The Buddha once said, "Let a person come who is observant and no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." That was his prerequisite for who he would want to teach: honesty and powers of observation. This gives you an idea how precious the Dharma is. Only people who are true will understand it.

So make yourself a person who's true. We all have our ways of lying to ourselves, but here's a technique, here's a training, that allows us to see through those lying habits, so that the mind can be true to itself all the way through. When the mind is true in this way, it has no problem with the truth, because there's nothing false inside that the truth could ever threaten.