

The Hall of Mirrors

September 22, 2006

Ajaan Lee, in talking about the deluded mind, the ignorant mind, the greedy mind, often compares it to an animal encountering a mirror. The animal doesn't know that it's a mirror, so understands what it sees in the mirror as another animal. If it's a monkey, the monkey sees another monkey, but doesn't gain anything out of it. A bird sees another bird in the mirror. The bird may have a berry in its mouth, it sees the berry in the other bird's mouth and it wants to get that, so it drops the one on its own mouth—and of course it doesn't get the one in the reflection's mouth either.

What he's saying is that a lot of what we see in life is simply a reflection of the mind, but we mistake it for something else. We don't understand where it came from, so we go chasing after things that are simply the mind's own creations. We've got to learn how to catch the mind in the act of creating things.

This is why we meditate. We're creating a state in the mind. This takes skill. In the course of creating it, you learn a lot about the mind right there, where it tends to be overly controlling, where it tends to be operating under wrong presuppositions. If you're sensitive, you'll notice a sense of strain or stress, a tightness that comes with the way you, say, try to control the breath or clamp down on the mind.

Ajaan Fuang, when he gave meditations instruction, in almost the second or third sentence would say, "Don't try to put yourself into a trance or to hypnotize yourself." In other words, don't force the mind into some preconceived notion of what good solid concentration should be. Simply allow it to stay with the breath and try to use as gentle a touch as possible. If you're going to change the breath, just think. You don't have to exert pressure on it. The parts of the body you can exert pressure on are the liquid parts. The breath just slips through. It's like a breeze going through a screen. The screen can't catch the breeze. Where are the borders of the breeze that you could catch hold of?

It's the same with the breath. The breath doesn't have any borders that you can catch hold of. And yet we try to do that. So try to give as much freedom as you can to the breath.

In the course of creating this state of mind, you learn an awful lot about the process of creation and about your own particular habits. Different people approach this in different ways. Some people are more controlling than others. Everybody comes to the breath with lots of different preconceived notions about

what the breath is, or, when you're focusing on something, how you have to focus in order to stay with it. These are old habits we picked up a long time ago, and it's up to you to observe them. The breath is a good mirror for reflecting the mind if you give it a chance.

So it's important that you learn how to read yourself and remind yourself as problems come up in the breath, that they're usually reflections of what's going on in the mind. After all, everything you experience, the Buddha said, is a reflection of intention, either past intentions or present intentions. That's the mirror effect.

So try to loosen up your intentions a bit, loosen up your perceptions. Think outside the box so that you don't simply fall into the old hall of mirrors that you've been living in for so long.

If you were to make another comparison, it's like trying to detect very faint infrared radiation from outer space while you're standing on the Earth. The problem is that the Earth emits a lot of heat as well, so the heat of the Earth is bound to get in the way of the much fainter information coming from way out there.

Essentially what the Buddha is telling you is to look at the radiation given off by the Earth. To hell with outer space. Look at the process of how you create something with the mind. The idea of a mind state where you're just a blank slate receiving information from outside without any coloration at all: That's not how things work. In fact, it's impossible, because every moment you're aware of things through the senses has an element of intention as well. Some people would say, well, that means everything is totally random and subjective. But the Buddha said that there are patterns to how you create things. That's what's interesting. Once you've created a state of mind, once you can actually get a state of concentration created, it's an ideal place to observe the patterns in the mind's process of creation.

After all, the noble eightfold path is something fabricated. You take all the various fabrications of the mind and you try to turn them into a path. Then you can observe them to see how even when the mind gets shaped into something really good, there's still an element of stress, there's still an element of inconstancy. It's still not totally under your control.

This is why an important part of the meditation is that phrase in the description of right mindfulness: "putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." In other words, you're not playing with the monkey out there. You're not trying to steal berries from the birds. You're trying to understand this process of what it means to look into a mirror. In what ways do you look into the mirror that cause suffering? And what ways don't cause suffering? That's something you can really observe right here as it's happening in your mind.

So do your best to follow the path, to be generous, to observe the precepts, because these are good fabrications in the mind. They create a good environment for the practice of watching the mind, because you're creating good mind states to watch. When you meditate, try to create a good mind states, a good attitude toward the breath, a good relationship with the breath, and then watch those things to see exactly how even the best attitudes, even the best relationships still have their limitations. That's how you can disentangle yourself from the process of fabrication altogether. You totally leave all the mirrors because you've found something better.

But in the meantime, try your best to, as I said, to create these calm states in the mind and maintain them. Then, as you get better at maintaining them, you begin to catch little interesting things about this process of fabrication out of the corner of your mind's eye. That's the way insight comes about—not through a lot of reading, not through a lot of memorizing. It comes about by learning to observe what you're doing as you're doing it, learning to observe the results as they come, looking in areas where you don't usually focus your attention. It's a very simple principle, simply that learning how to apply it to the subtleties of the mind: That's where it gets hard.

But the practice is the same principle all the way through. When you're watching your actions, you're watching where things come from, where those reflections come from. So instead of getting deluded by reflections, you directly observe the actual process of how they're made. Understanding that is what allows real liberation.