

Our Variegated Minds

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The Buddha once said that the mind is more variegated than the animal world. When you stop to think of it, that's saying a lot. Think of all the different kinds of fish and birds and mammals and reptiles and all the little animals, big animals, striped animals, spotted animals, the thousands and thousands of species—and our mind is more variegated than that: all kinds of things we can do, all kinds of things we can identify with.

Ajaan Fuang once said he heard a teaching from Ajaan Mun that people are all alike, but they're not all alike, but when you come down to it, they're all alike. You can think about that for a bit.

One way in which we're all alike is that all of us love ourselves. All of us want happiness. There's that famous passage where King Pasenadi is in his inner chambers with his queen, Mallikā and—probably with some romantic intention—he asks her, “Is there is anyone you love more than yourself?” Hoping, of course, that she would say, “Yes, Your Majesty, you.” But instead, she says, “No, there's no one I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” The king is forced to admit that, no, there's nobody he loves more than himself, either.

So then he leaves the palace, goes to see the Buddha, reports their conversation, and the Buddha says, “That's true. You can survey the whole world and you'll never find anybody you love more than yourself. And the same holds true for everybody else. Everyone loves himself first and foremost.” Then the Buddha says something very interesting. He says, “As you reflect on that, never do harm to anyone else or get them to do harm.” No one else wants to be harmed just like you don't want to be harmed.

You can read this in two ways. One is a sense of resonance, that we all resonate with this fear of harm, but it also means that if you want any kind of lasting happiness, you can't have your happiness dependent on someone else's misery because they're going to do everything they can to destroy your happiness. You have to look for happiness that doesn't cause any harm to anyone else.

So this is a point where we are all the same. We all want happiness.

Notice that the Buddha never said that we're all basically good or all basically bad, because that kind of assumption isn't helpful when you're dealing with people. You'd like to believe that everybody's basically good but you look at their

behavior: How could the behavior of the world come from minds that are all basically good, from intentions that are basically good?

You might say, “Well, people are warped by society,” but then again, society is created by people. What it comes down to is the fact that we’re all alike, but we’re all very different. We’re different in our understandings of what happiness comes from, what happiness is. You’ve got to learn how to live with that. It means that if you’re trying to connect with people, you have to connect with their desire for happiness. If you can connect with their good intentions, you can try to help them see more clearly where true happiness lies.

Most people in the world connect with other people’s desire for happiness and try to exploit it. But that doesn’t lead to any solid lasting happiness for either side. What this means for us as meditators is that we can’t depend that our motives are all going to be good.

This is another problem with the teaching that everybody’s basically good: It makes us complacent. We tend to think that once the mind is quiet, anything that comes up in a quiet mind will be trustworthy and good, but that’s not the case. All kinds of things can come up in a quiet mind. You have to test them. You have to be heedful. You have to be a little bit wary.

After all, the mind is so variegated that anything could come up. But what you can learn to rely on is this desire for happiness. Take it seriously. The Buddha’s whole teaching is based on the assumption that you can take this desire for happiness and can develop in such a way that it becomes skillful. You really can use your desire for happiness to attain true happiness. This kind of desire is part of right effort. Then you try to use your understanding through right view to figure out how you can train your desires to help create skillful mental states.

The Buddha’s teachings on fabrication are helpful here. He talks about three kinds of fabrication: bodily fabrication, verbal, and mental. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath. Verbal is directed thought and evaluation. Mental is feeling and perception. These are the things we’re trying to train here as we concentrate on the breath. Take the breath as your object; That’s bodily fabrication. You direct your thoughts repeatedly to the breath and you evaluate the breathing, so that it becomes more comfortable. In other words, you bring knowledge and awareness in terms of the four noble truths to the process of breathing; That’s the verbal fabrication. Mental fabrication is learning how to perceive the breath in such a way it becomes more and more of a home, leads to more reliable feelings of well-being, rapture.

It’s with these building blocks that we create skillful states of mind. If you can create a physical sense of well-being, you’ll find it easier to deal with what’s

coming up in your mind, how to tweak it, direct it in ways that are actually helpful rather than harmful. This is why we spend so much time working with the breath, making it subtle, making it broad, making it suffuse the body with a sense of ease. That's because the mind is in a much better mood to do what's skillful when it feels in a very visceral way good deep down inside.

So even though you can't always assume that whatever comes up in your mind is going to be coming from your basic good nature, because you can't really assume that it's a basically good nature you've got there—you've got all kinds of stuff in here, more than the animal kingdom—still, if you create the right conditions, the more skillful mental states will become more predominant. They'll take over and get so that you can rely on them more and more, use them more and more, both in dealing with issues that come up in your mind and also in dealing with other people. The more you get in touch with your desire for happiness and learn how to relate to it skillfully, how to use it skillfully, then the easier it becomes to connect with other people's desire for happiness in a skillful way.

So you get in touch with what we have in common. As for the people who never seem to want to learn from their mistakes in the search for happiness, that's where you have to exercise a lot of equanimity. This, too, is a skillful mental state that you have to learn how to exercise when it's necessary. This is what the brahmavihāras are all about. They're not just feelings of goodwill or feelings of compassion or empathetic joy or equanimity. They're attitudes. For any of these attitudes to really be a brahmavihara—a dwelling place, a sublime attitude, a dwelling place for Brahma—you have to be able to tap into them at any time, in any situation, wherever appropriate. That takes some training.

Again we've got the basic building blocks here: your breath, directed thought and evaluation, feelings and perceptions. If you see any emotions arising in the mind that you know are unskillful, try to take them apart in these terms. How are you breathing right now? Where are you directing your thoughts? How are you evaluating things? Are these skillful ways of thinking or could you replace them with some other more skillful ways of thinking? What kind of perceptions are you applying to your situation?

We feed so often on the bad things that other people have done. We chew them over again and again and again, but don't get any nourishment from them. It's helpful to reflect on an analogy the Buddha once gave. He says, you're like a person crossing a desert. You're hot, tired, trembling, thirsty, and you come across the print of a cow's foot. There's a little puddle of water in the footprint there. It's so small that if you reach down and try to scoop up the water with your hand, you'll make it muddy. So you have to very carefully bend over and slurp up the

water, make sure that it doesn't get muddy or be disturbed. The Buddha said that, in the same way, you have to regard the good points of other people that way. Even though they may have a lot bad stuff in their thoughts, words, and deeds, if they have any goodness at all, treat it as you would treat that water. Remember: You're hot, tired, trembling with thirst. You can't afford to feed on the dry hot things that other people give you, because that would make your goodness wither away. Focus on their good points, and that will nourish you.

At the same time, learn to develop some equanimity around the things you can't change so that you can focus on the things you *can* change, the things you *can* work with. That's why, even though we're different, we can connect on the areas where what we have in common is good, what we have in common is helpful. It takes work. It doesn't always come naturally. In fact, often it goes against the grain. But again, where does that grain come from? If we were all basically good, it would be easy, easy, easy to do good things. But it's not. Sometimes it's very hard.

So accept that fact but also allow for the fact that at least we all want true happiness, we want a happiness that lasts. Then we can work from that desire, to develop wisdom, compassion, purity. We can also work with the fact that other people have that desire buried someplace in them. That's how we can connect, It's how we can live together, regardless of whether we like one another or not. As long as we can connect with that basic desire, there's room for some sense of commonality, some sense of working together. So focus your attention there. Make that your basic assumption about people, about yourself. When you take that desire for happiness seriously, it'll get you on the right path.