

Conspiracies in the Mind

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The world is enthralled with conspiracy theories—political conspiracies, religious conspiracies. I've even read books commenting on the Buddha's teachings, saying that he couldn't possibly have meant what he said, this business about going beyond desire. Sometimes they point out the paradox: If you want to put an end to desire, there you are, you're caught with desire, which they think places you in a double bind. So maybe there was something else that the Buddha was trying to tell you. Maybe the Dhamma's a conspiracy. That's what they think.

There's a big irony here: The Buddha's teachings are the most straightforward, compassionate teachings in the world, and yet people still try to get around them.

The problem is, of course, that there is a conspiracy going on—in their own minds. They don't want to practice. If greed, aversion, and delusion can dress themselves up as wisdom, as Dhamma, they can fool you very easily. So you have to be very careful. As for conspiracy theories outside, there probably are some conspiracies going on. As someone once said, just the fact that you're paranoid doesn't mean that people aren't really conspiring against you. But even if there are conspiracies going on outside, what are you going to do about them? The real conspiracy is the way the mind fools itself into wanting things that are going to disappoint it in the end—and we play along. We've been disappointed many, many times in the past, but we keep going back to the same old thoughts of greed, same old thoughts of aversion, same old thoughts of delusion, as if somehow, if we rearranged the elements a little bit, they'd turn out a lot better this time. But it's really the same old stuff, just over and over again.

So instead of suspecting that the Buddha's conspiring against you—or the Pali Canon, or the people who composed the Canon or the Thai ajaans or whoever—try to see to what extent you're not being honest with yourself. That's where the real test for the teaching comes in. Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Fuang make the point again and again and again: that if you want to find the truth, you really have to be true to yourself. Your own honesty is your only guarantee. After all, we've encountered plenty of cases in the past where texts were highly regarded, even worshiped, and yet they turned out to be false—sometimes very false, sometimes very detrimental. So who knows who composed the Pali Canon or what their motivation was. The real question, though, is, how are you going to test it? You test it in your own practice.

Fortunately, the qualities that the texts recommend that you develop in order to test the Dhamma are going to stand you in good stead no matter what. Wherever you go in life, you're going to need more mindfulness, more alertness, more discernment, more integrity. So the fact that you're asked to develop these qualities is not a waste, even if it turned out that there never really was a Buddha, just a bunch of monks sitting around thinking things up for the fun of it. Someone once said, "Whether there really was a Buddha or not, whoever wrote the Canon was pretty inspired"—but still, their being inspired is no guarantee that their inspiration was true. Your guarantee, however, is your own truthfulness.

There's the image the Buddha gives of the elephant hunter who goes into the forest and sees footprints that resemble the footprints of a bull elephant. But the elephant hunter is a wise and experienced hunter who doesn't jump to conclusions. He knows that not every large footprint comes from a bull elephant. There are dwarf females with big feet. Of course, there's nothing wrong with female elephants, but dwarf females can't do the work that a bull elephant can do. You want a bull elephant. So even though the large footprints are no guarantee, they look likely, so you follow them. As you follow them, you see scratch marks high up in the trees on the bark, on the limbs. Again, the experienced elephant hunter doesn't come to the conclusion that those must be the marks of a bull elephant because, after all, there are tall, skinny females with tusks. The scratch marks may be theirs. It's only when you keep following the footprints and finally see a bull elephant in a clearing that you really know: "This is the bull elephant for sure."

It's the same with the practice. When you practice concentration to the point where the mind really does settle down in jhana, those levels of concentration are just footprints. Psychic powers are scratch marks. The only real guarantee is the experience of the deathless. And even with that, you have to be very, very honest and have a lot of integrity not to overestimate yourself.

You have to work on your integrity. That's what helps you see the tricks of your own defilements. It helps you see through any overestimation that may develop around your attainments. There's so much written about people who have low self-esteem as they meditate and every effort is made to give them high self-esteem. But the opposite is also true. Overly high self-esteem is a huge obstacle. And again, it's one of the conspiracies in your mind.

So whenever you find yourself thinking about outside conspiracies, remember: The big conspiracy is the way the mind fools itself. That's the conspiracy that you're really suffering from. The world outside is never going to be free of conspiracies or conspiracy theories. As we all know, this is the way human beings act. They know that some things are rightly regarded as wrong, but that doesn't keep them from doing those things. They just try to do them in secret. That sort of human behavior is never going to stop. But you can stop your own inner conspiracies.

This is why it's useful to think about the defilements of the mind as something separate from you, because if you can't see them as separate, you'll never be able to gain insight into them. The image of the committee in the mind is very useful here. This inner committee is not a group of angels deciding to put on a charity event. They're the city council in a really corrupt city. There are a lot of shady dealings going on behind the scenes. So when ideas come up in the mind, you have to learn how to step back from them. Question them.

Think of the example of Ajaan Mun or Upasika Kee—people who didn't have a teacher to guide them in the meditation. In every case, they had to be very, very wary of what their minds were telling them. In Ajaan Mun's case, he was getting a lot of visions, and he had to learn how to treat them in a way that they wouldn't make him go astray. If he had a vision of a deva, he had to learn how to regard the vision as not really a deva coming to talk to him. He had to ask the question, "What if this is my mind playing tricks on me? How do I protect against that?" As he came to realize, the first step is that you try to determine, "What's the Dhamma lesson here?" Then you try to determine how you might actually test the message in practice. Only if it passed the test could you trust it—regardless of whether the vision really did come from a deva.

Then there's Upasika Kee's advice—that when a realization comes into the mind, be very careful to see what happens in the next mental moment after that. What does your mind say? How does it comment on this? What assumptions is it making? Can you learn how to catch them and drop them? This is how you learn how to see through some of those conspiracies. And that helps keep your practice on the right path.