

Think Outside the Ruts

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There's a strange passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about how we take the potential for a form, feeling, perception, fabrication, or consciousness, and we fabricate it into an actual aggregate of form, feeling, etc., for the sake of having that aggregate. It's expressed in a strange way in the Pāli, but the basic message is: All our experience is for the sake of something. It's purposeful. This is why we have questions about what is the meaning of life, hoping that somehow the "for the sake of" can be determined. Otherwise, we're pretty much making stabs in the dark, trying to figure out what will make us happy.

Usually that's what that "for the sake of" is: to find happiness of some kind. We do our best to find some pleasure. The question is: Is our best good enough? As the Buddha pointed out, we're usually operating in ignorance, which means that we end up creating suffering instead. We're ignorant of what we're doing, and our ideas of what's worth doing and what's not worth doing can be really skewed, because our perceptions are skewed.

There are four aberrations of perception the Buddha talks about: seeing constancy in things that are inconstant, seeing ease in things that are stressful, seeing self in things that are not-self, and seeing beauty in things that are not beautiful. Those are the big ones. But, if you look at how the mind operates, there are lots of variations on those themes, because every time we do something, think something, or say something, it's for the purpose of something, and we think it's worth it.

Basically, what discernment teaches us is that a lot of the things we think are worth doing are not worth doing at all. So, we have to learn to develop some dispassion for them, so that we can get out of them, because they tend to be like ruts in the mind.

The Buddha uses the word "bending" the mind. You keep thinking in certain ways and the mind gets bent in those directions. Nowadays, we'd say they're like ruts—like a rut in a road. You get stuck in the rut, and it takes a lot of energy to get out. In the same way, the mind just follows its old patterns again and again and again, even though there may not be much allure. It's just simply what it's familiar with and it would take a lot of energy to change.

So, one of the purposes of meditation is to try to get out of those ruts, to think in new ways, to think at cross purposes with the ruts. If you've ever tried to get out of a rut in the road, you've noticed that you have to turn the wheel at a really

sharp angle to get out. In the same way, you have to learn how to think in new angles.

One of the major causes of ruts in the mind is that we have limits in the way we think. There seem to be only one or two alternatives that are worth doing or worth thinking about at any one time. But when you have only two alternatives, it's like politics. Think of all the wonderful people who could be really good presidents in the United States, but somehow the sorting-out situation gets down to two people who are not really worth voting for at all. Then, we get really worked up about which one is the lesser of two evils, trying to see the lesser of two evils as actually something good. The problem is with the sorting-out process.

It's the same with the mind. The mind has its way of sorting out things, saying, "This has to be that way; that has to be this way," and denying other alternatives. So, when you find the mind in a rut, you have to ask yourself, "Are there any other possibilities?" Maybe there are three or four possibilities; or maybe we're asking the wrong question.

Because, as I said, often we find ourselves doing things that we *know* are harmful, that cause suffering. When we ask ourselves, "What's the allure?" there doesn't seem to be much. It's because we've caught ourselves in a box. So, when you find yourself faced with two alternatives like that, ask yourself: Maybe there's something else; maybe there's another way of dividing up the territory.

There's that whole issue of, "I do everything just for me, me, me, me, me" — and it becomes a very horrible "me," and, as long as you think there's only *one* in there, it's really difficult to figure out exactly what is it that the "me" wants? But, when you start dividing it up, you see that there are lots of little "me's" in there. Then the question becomes, what does this "me" want right now? What does that "me" want right now? That changes things; you're not stuck with just two alternatives or one alternative. So, learn how to turn your thoughts inside out.

We know that the Buddha's analysis of things is: The way you gain insight is to look for the origination of something, and the origination is in the mind itself. When the Buddha uses the word "origination," it's not just "arising"; something is caused, and it's caused from within the mind. You want to look for the cause. So when a certain thought pattern comes up, try to look and see, when it arises, what's coming up with it? What's pushing it into your mind?

Sometimes these thoughts seem to arise simply because of the force of past kamma, but there'll be a present-kamma addition. Look for that. In fact, the Pāli word for "origination," *samudaya*, means something "arising together." So, what's coming up together at the same time? We like to talk about deep underlying

causes, but maybe the cause is right there on the surface—so much on the surface that we look right through it.

Then try to see, when that thought is allowed to pass away on its own, *how* did it pass away? And what causes it to come back? Because then you'll see: There's part of the mind that's not allowing it to pass away. That's the part you want to look at.

What's the allure driving it? Sometimes it'll just say, "Well, this is just the way it has to be." That's why you find yourself ending up doing things that you know are really not all that good and don't have that much allure, but you've blocked off better alternatives. So, you want to see that sorting out process. How did you block them out? It's when you see *that* that you begin to understand the allure of certain things, because the allure is not so much in the thought; it's in the way of thinking that's got you trapped.

That's something you want to learn how to step out of. It's hard to figure out precisely what the problem is unless you have a place to stand outside of it. That's what the breath provides: a place to stand outside your thoughts. You can be with the breath coming in, breath going out, bathing your body in the breath, bathing your own sense of "you" in the breath—"you" inhabiting the body. You want to fully inhabit the body so that you can get out of your mind, or at the very least get out of the discussion inside and gain a chance to rest from it.

This is why we talk about the karate chops: Sometimes your old thoughts will come in, and you've got to have a quick retort to get them out of the way. This is one of the reasons why we read those books of short Dhamma passages by Ajaan Fuang, Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Chah: because they give some ideas—how you can stop a thought in its track and step out of it.

You see a student coming to say something really stupid to Ajaan Fuang, and he's got a quick retort. Sometimes what the student said doesn't seem all that stupid to begin with, but he's got a good retort and you see that yes, what the student thought was stupid. Where did Ajaan Fuang learn that ability? By learning how to use it on his own thoughts. Not that he was sitting around trying to think of clever things to say to people; he was trying to think of clever things to do with his own defilements—cut them out for the time being so that he could give some space for the mind to settle down.

Then, when it's settled down, that's when you can do the real work: beginning to see the assumptions that place limitations on your thoughts, because those are the things that have the allure. This way, you can start questioning things, more in the sense of, "Why do you like this way of thinking?"

Part of the mind will say, “Well, this is the way things are. This is the way I put together my reality, and it’s worked good enough for me.” Well, if it’s really working good enough, it’s not going to cause you suffering like this.

They’ve discovered that, as children develop, it’s not that they simply add new information to what they’ve had before. They go through periods where they develop a paradigm—their understanding of the world—but then finally the new information gets so dissonant with their understanding of the world that they’ve got to drop the old paradigm, drop the old structure of their thoughts, and come up with a new structure. That’s how they grow; that’s how they mature. The problem is, as adults, we figure that we’ve got our structure and it works.

And the Buddha’s saying, “No—the way you structure your thinking is causing you to suffer.” So, you have to look at the larger pattern, because that, as I said, is where the allure lies. Then, when you can see its drawbacks, it’s a lot easier to get rid of the individual thoughts that are coming in, driving you crazy.

So, the ruts in the mind are not so much individual thoughts. They’re patterns of thinking that we hold to.

This is one of the reasons why it’s so important to see that, as we’re bringing the Dhamma to the West, we shouldn’t be in such a great hurry to make the Dhamma fit in with our Western views of reality. After all, our views of reality are making us suffer. The Dhamma’s offering us another way of looking at things. Learn how to use the teaching on kamma; learn how to use the teaching on rebirth in a skillful way, so that you can come up with new narratives—new patterns of thinking that *don’t* cause you to suffer.

So, think outside the ruts. Turn at sharp angles from them. It takes effort because you have to figure out exactly where the ruts are. And, since you’re in the ruts, they seem a very natural place to be. But the mind doesn’t have to stay in those ruts. That’s the good news. It’s simply a matter of learning how to take that good news and seeing how you can apply it to the way the mind is making itself suffer right here and now. You can let go of the things that you think are worth holding on to until you see that they really do cause you to suffer, but you don’t have to think in those terms. That’s when the Dhamma gets liberating.