

READING THE MIND

Advice for Meditators

from the Talks of
K. Khao-suan-luang

Translated from the Thai
by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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DISCERNMENT vs. SELF-DECEPTION

It's important that we discuss the steps of the practice in training the mind, for the mind has all sorts of deceptions by which it fools itself. If you aren't skillful in investigating and seeing through them, they are very difficult to overcome even if you are continually mindful to keep watch over the mind. You have to make an effort to focus on contemplating these things at all times. Mindfulness on its own won't be able to give rise to any real knowledge. At best, it can give you only a little protection against the effects of sensory contact. If you don't make a focused contemplation, the mind won't be able to give rise to any knowledge within itself at all.

This is why you have to train yourself to be constantly aware all

around. When you come to know anything for what it really is, there's nothing but letting go, letting go. On the beginning level, this means the mind won't give rise to any unwise or unprofitable thoughts. I will simply stop to watch, stop to know within itself at all times. If there's anything you have to think about, keep your thoughts on the themes of inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness. You have to keep the mind thinking and labeling solely in reference to these sorts of themes, for if your thinking and labeling are right, you'll come to see things rightly. If you go the opposite way, you'll have to think wrongly and label things wrongly, and that means you'll have to see things wrongly as well. This is what keeps the mind completely hidden from itself.

Now, when thoughts or labels arise in the mind, then if you focus on watching them closely, you'll see that they're sensations -- sensations of arising and disbanding, changeable, unreliable, and illusory. If you don't make an effort to keep a focused watch on them, you'll fall for the deceptions of thought-formation. In other words, the mind gives rise to memories of the past and fashions issues dealing with the past, but if you're aware of what's going on in time, you'll see that they're all illusory. There's no real truth to them at all. Even the meanings the mind gives to good and bad sensory contacts at the moment they occur: If you carefully observe and contemplate, you'll see that they're all deceptive. There's no real truth to them. But ignorance and delusion latch on to them all, and this drives the mind around in circles. In other words, it doesn't know what's what -- how these things arise, persist, and disband -- so it latches onto them and gets itself deceived on many, many levels. If you don't stop to focus and watch, there's no way you can see through these things at all.

But if the mind keeps its balance or stops to watch and know within itself, it can come to realize these things for what they are. When it realizes them, it can let them go automatically without being attached to anything. This is the knowledge that comes with true mindfulness and discernment: It knows and lets go. It doesn't cling. No matter what appears -- good or bad, pleasure or pain -- when the mind knows, it doesn't cling. //When it doesn't cling, there's no stress or suffering//. You have to keep hammering away at this point: When it doesn't cling, the mind can stay at normalcy. Empty. Undisturbed. Quiet and still. But if it doesn't read itself in this way, doesn't know itself in this way, it will fall for the deceits of defilement and craving. It will fashion up all sorts of complex and complicated things that it itself will have a hard time seeing through, for they will have their ways of playing up to the mind to keep it attached to them -- all of which is simply a matter of the mind's falling for the deceits of the defilements and cravings within itself. The fact that it isn't acquainted with itself, doesn't know how mental states arise and disband and take on objects, means that it loses itself in its many, many attachments.

//There's nothing as hard to keep watch of as the mind, // because it's so accustomed to wrong views and wrong opinions. This is what keeps it hidden from itself. But thanks to the teachings of the Buddha, we can gain knowledge into the mind, or into consciousness with its many layers and intricacies, which when you look into it deeply, you'll find to be empty -- empty of any meaning in and of

itself.

This is an emptiness that can appear clearly within consciousness. Even though it's hidden and profound, we can see into it by looking inward in a way that's quiet and still. The mind stops to watch, to know within itself. As for sensory contacts -- sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and that sort of thing -- it isn't interested, because it's intent on looking into consciousness pure and simple, to see what arises in there and how it generates issues. Sensations, thoughts, labels for pleasure and pain and so forth, are all natural phenomena that change as soon as they're sensed-- and they are very refined. If you view them as being about this or that matter, you won't be able to know them for what they are. The more intricate the meanings you give them, the more lost you become -- lost in the whorls of the cycle of rebirth.

//The cycle of rebirth and the processes of thought-formation are one and the same thing//. As a result we whirl around and around, lost in many, many levels of thought-formation, not just one. The knowledge that would read the heart can't break through to know, for it whirls around and around in these very same thought-formations, giving them meanings in terms of this or that, and then latching onto them. If it labels them as good, it latches onto them as good. If it labels them as bad, it latches onto them as bad. This is why the mind stays entirely in the whorls of the cycle of rebirth, the cycle of thought-formation.

For this reason, to see these things clearly requires the effort to stop and watch, to stop and know //in an appropriate way,// in a way that's just right. At the same time, you have to use your powers of observation. //That's// what will enable you to read your own consciousness in a special way. Otherwise, if you latch onto the issues of thoughts and labels, they'll keep you spinning around. So you have to stop and watch, stop and know clearly by focusing down -- //focusing down on the consciousness in charge//. That way your knowledge will become skillful.

Ultimately, you'll see that there's nothing at all -- just the arising and disbanding occurring every moment in emptiness. If there's no attachment, there are no issues. There's simply the natural phenomenon of arising and disbanding. But since we don't see things simply as natural phenomena, we see them as being true and latch onto them as our self, good, bad, and all sorts of other complicated things. This keeps us spinning around without knowing how to find a way out, what to let go of -- we don't know. When we don't know, we're like a person who wanders into a jungle and doesn't know the way out, doesn't know what to do....

Actually what we have to let go of lies right smack in front of us: where the mind fashions things and gives them meanings so that it doesn't know the characteristics of arising and disbanding, pure and simple. If you can simply keep watching and knowing, without any need for meanings, thoughts, imaginings -- simply watching the process of these things in and of itself -- there won't be any issues. There's just the phenomenon of the present -- arising, persisting, disbanding, arising, persisting, disbanding.... There's no special trick to this, but you have to stop and watch, stop and know within yourself //every

moment//. Don't let your awareness stream away from awareness to outside preoccupations. Gather it in so it can know itself clearly -- that there's nothing in there worth latching onto. It's all a bunch of deceits.

To know just this much is very useful for seeing the truth inside yourself. You'll see that consciousness is empty of any self. When you look at physical phenomena, you'll see them as elements, as empty of any self. You'll see mental phenomena as empty of any self, as elements of consciousness -- and that if there's no attachment, no latching on, there's no suffering or stress....

So even if there's thinking going on in the mind, simply watch it, simply let it go, and its cycling will slow down. Fewer and fewer thought-formation will occur. Even if it doesn't stop, it will form fewer and fewer thoughts. You'll be able to stop to watch, stop to know more and more. And this way, you'll come to see the tricks and deceits of thought-formation, mental labels, pleasure and pain, and so on. You'll be able to know that there's really nothing inside -- that the reason you were deluded into latching onto things was because of ignorance, and that you made yourself suffer right there in that very ignorance....

So you have to focus down on one point, one thing. Focusing on many things won't do. Keep mindfulness in place -- stopping, knowing, seeing. Don't let it run out after thoughts and labels. But knowing in this way requires that you make the effort to stay focused -- focused on seeing clearly, not just focused on making the mind still. Focus on seeing clearly. Look on in for the sake of seeing clearly ...and contemplate how to let go. The mind will become empty in line with its nature in a way that you'll know exclusively within.

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A DIFFERENCE IN THE KNOWING

What can we do to see the aggregates -- this mass of suffering and stress -- clearly in a way that we can cut attachment for them out of the mind? Why is it that people studying to be doctors can know everything in the body -- intestines, liver, kidneys, and all -- down to the details, and yet don't develop any dispassion or disenchantment for it -- why? Why is it that undertakers can spend their time with countless corpses and yet not gain any insight at all? This shows that this sort of insight is hard to attain. If there's no mindfulness and discernment to see things clearly for what they are, knowledge is simply a passing fancy. It doesn't sink in. The mind keeps latching onto its attachments.

But if the mind can gain true insight to the point where it can relinquish its attachments, it can gain the paths and fruitions leading to //nibbana//. This shows that there's a difference in the knowing. It's not that we have to know all the details like modern-day surgeons. All we have to know is that the body is composed

of the four physical elements plus the elements of space and consciousness. If we //really// know just this much, we've reached the paths and their fruitions, while those who know all the details to the point where they can perform surgery don't reach any transcendent attainments at all....

So let's analyze the body into its elements in order to know them thoroughly. If we do, then when there are changes in the body and mind, there won't be too much clinging. If we don't, our attachments will be fixed and strong and will lead to further states of being and birth in the future.

Now that we have the opportunity, we should contemplate the body and take things apart for a good look so as to get down to the details. Take the five basic meditation objects -- hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin -- and look at them carefully one at a time. You don't have to take on all five, you know. Focus on the hair of the head to see that it belongs to the earth element, to see that its roots are soaked in blood and lymph under the skin. It's unattractive in terms of its color, its smell, and where it dwells. If you analyze and contemplate these things, you won't be deluded into regarding them as //your// hair, your nails, your teeth, your skin.

All of these parts are composed of the earth element mixed in with water, wind, and fire. If they were purely earth they wouldn't last, because every part of the body has to be composed of all four elements for it to be a body. And then there's a mental phenomena -- the mind -- in charge. These are things that follow in line with nature in every way -- the arising, changing, and disbanding of physical and mental phenomena -- but we latch onto them, seeing the body as ours, the mental phenomena as us: It's all us and ours. If we don't contemplate to see these things for what they are, we'll do nothing but cling to them.

This is what meditation is: Seeing things clearly for what they are. It's not a matter of switching from topic to topic, for that would simply ensure that you wouldn't know a thing. But our inner character, under the sway of ignorance and delusion, doesn't like examining itself repeatedly. It keeps finding other issues to get in the way, so that we think constantly about other things. This is why we stay so ignorant and foolish.

Then why is it that we can know other things? Because they fall in line with what craving wants. To see things clearly for what they are would be to abandon craving, so it finds ways of keeping things hidden. It keeps changing, bringing in new things all the time, keeping us fooled all the time, so that we study and think about nothing but matters that add to the mind's suffering and stress. That's all that craving wants. As for the kind of study that would end the stress and suffering in the mind, it's always getting in the way.

This is why the mind is always wanting to shift to new things to know, new things to fall for. And this is why it's always becoming attached. So when it doesn't really know itself, you have to make a real effort to see the truth that the things within it aren't you or yours. Don't let the mind stop short of this knowledge: Make this a

law within yourself. If the mind doesn't know the truths of inconstancy, stress, and not-self within itself, it won't gain release from suffering. Its knowledge will simply be worldly knowledge, it will follow a worldly path. It won't reach the paths and fruition leading to //nibbana//.

//So this is where the worldly and the transcendent part ways//. If you comprehend inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the ultimate degree, that's the transcendent. If you don't get down to their details, you're still on the worldly level....

The Buddha has many teachings, but this is what they all come down to. The important principles of the practice -- the four foundations of mindfulness, the four Noble Truths -- all come down to these characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. If you try to learn too many principles, you'll end up not getting any clear knowledge of the truth as it is. //If you concentrate on knowing just a little, you'll end up with more true insight than if you try knowing a lot of things//. It's through wanting to know a lot of things that we end up deluded. We wander around in our deluded knowledge, thinking and labeling things, //but knowledge that is focused and specific, when it really knows, is absolute//. It keeps hammering away at one point. There's no need to know a lot of things, for when you really know one thing, everything converges right there....

* * *

THE BALANCED WAY

In practicing the Dhamma, if you don't foster a balance between concentration and discernment, you'll end up going wild in your thinking. If there's too much work at discernment, you'll go wild in your thinking. If there's too much concentration, it just stays still and undisturbed without coming to any knowledge either. So you have to keep them in balance. Stillness has to be paired with discernment. Don't let there be too much of one or the other. Try to get them just right. That's when you'll be able to see things clearly all the way through. Otherwise, you'll stay as deluded as ever. You may want to gain discernment into too many things -- and as a result, your thinking goes wild. The mind goes out of control. Some people keep wondering why discernment never arises in their practice, but when it does arise they really go off on a tangent. Their thinking goes wild, all out of bounds.

So when you practice, you have to observe in your meditation how you can make the mind still. Once it does grow still, it tends to get stuck there. Or it may grow empty, without any knowledge of anything -- quiet, disengaged, at ease for a while, but without any discernment to accompany it. But if you //can// get discernment to accompany your concentration, that's when you'll really benefit. You'll see things all the way through and be able to let them go. If you're too heavy on the side of either discernment or stillness, you can't let go. The mind may come to know this or that, but it latches onto its knowledge.

Then it know still other things and latches onto them too. Or else it simply stays perfectly quiet and latches onto //that//.

It's not easy to keep your practice on the Middle Way. If you don't use your powers of observation, it's especially hard. The mind will keep falling for things, sometimes right, sometimes wrong, because it doesn't observe what's going on. This isn't the path to letting go. It's a path that's stuck, caught up on things. If you don't know what it's stuck and caught up on, you'll remain foolish and deluded. So you have to make an effort at focused contemplation until you see clearly into inconstancy, stress, and not-self. This without a doubt is what will stop every moment of suffering and stress....

* * *

A GLOB OF TAR

An important but subtle point is that even though we practice, we continue to fall for pleasant feelings, because feelings are illusory on many levels. We don't realize that they're changeable and unreliable. Instead of offering pleasure, they offer us nothing but stress -- yet we're still addicted to them.

This business of feeling is thus a very subtle matter. Please try to contemplate it carefully -- this business of latching onto feelings of pleasure, pain, or equanimity. You have to contemplate so as to see it clearly. And you have to experiment more than you may want to with pain. When there are feelings of physical pain or mental distress, the mind will struggle because it doesn't like pain. But when pain turns to pleasure, the mind likes it and is content with it, so it keeps on playing with feeling, even though as we've already said, feeling is inconstant, stressful, and not really ours. But the mind doesn't see this. All it sees are feelings of pleasure, and it wants them.

Try looking into how feeling gives rise to craving. It's because we want pleasant feeling that craving whispers -- whispers right there at the feeling. If you observe carefully, you'll see that this is very important, for this is where the paths and fruitions leading to //nibbana// are attained, right here at feeling and craving. If we can extinguish the craving in feeling, that's //nibbana//....

In the Solasa Panha, the Buddha said that defilement is like a wide and deep flood, but he then went on to summarize the practice to cross it simply as abandoning craving in every action. Now, right here at feeling is where we can practice to abandon craving, for the way we relish the flavor of feeling has many ramifications. This is where many of us get deceived, because we don't see feeling as inconstant. We want it to be constant. We want pleasant feelings to be constant. As for pain, we don't want it to be constant, but no matter how much we try to push it away, we still latch onto it.

This is why we have to focus on feeling, so that we can abandon

craving right there in the feeling. If you don't focus here, the other paths you may follow will simply proliferate. So bring the practice close to home. When the mind changes, or when it gains a sense of stillness or calm that would rank as a feeling of pleasure or equanimity: Try to see in what ways the pleasure or equanimity is inconstant, that it's not you or yours. When you can do this, you'll stop relishing that particular feeling. You can stop right there, right where the mind relishes the flavor of feeling and gives rise to craving. This is why the mind has to be fully aware of itself -- all around, at all times -- in its focused contemplation to see feeling as empty of self....

This business of liking and disliking feelings is a disease hard to detect, because our intoxication with feelings is so very strong. Even with the sensations of peace and emptiness in the mind, we're still infatuated with feeling. Feelings on the crude level -- the violent and stressful ones that come with defilement -- are easy to detect. But when the mind grows still -- steady, cool, bright, and so on -- we're still addicted to feeling. We want these feeling of pleasure or equanimity. We enjoy them. Even on the level of firm concentration or meditative absorption, there's attachment to the feeling....

This is the subtle magnetic pull of craving, which paints and plasters things over. This painting and plastering is hard to detect, because craving is always whispering inside us, "I want nothing but pleasant feelings." This is very important, for it's because of this virus of craving that we continue to be reborn

So explore to see how craving paints and plasters things, how it causes desires to form -- the desires to get this or take that -- and what sort of flavor it has that makes you so addicted to it, that makes it hard for you to pull away. You have to contemplate to see how craving fastens the mind so firmly to feelings that you never weary of sensuality or of pleasant feelings no matter what the level. If you don't contemplate so as to see clearly that the mind is stuck right here at feeling and craving, it will keep you from gaining release....

We're stuck on feeling like a monkey stuck in a tar trap. They take a glob of tar and put it where a monkey will get its hand stuck in it and, in trying to pull free, the monkey gets its other hand, both feet, and finally its mouth stuck, too. Consider this: Whatever we do, we end up stuck right here at feeling and craving. We can't separate them out. We can't wash them off. If we don't grow weary of craving, we're like the monkey stuck in the glob of tar, getting ourselves more and more trapped all the time. So if we're intent on freeing ourselves in the footsteps of the arahants, we have to focus specifically on feeling until we can succeed at freeing ourselves from it. Even with painful feelings, we have to practice -- for if we're afraid of pain and always try to change it to pleasure, we'll end up even more ignorant than before.

This is why we have to be brave in experimenting with pain -- both physical pain and mental distress. When it arises in full measure, like a house afire, can we let go of it? We have to know both sides of feeling. When it's hot and burning, how can we deal with it? When

it's cool and refreshing, how can we see through it? We have to make an effort to focus on both sides, contemplating until we know how to let go. Otherwise we won't know anything, for all we want is the cool side, the cooler the better...and when this is the case, how can we expect to gain release from the cycle of rebirth?

//Nibbana// is the extinguishing of craving, and yet we like to stay with craving -- so how can we expect to get anywhere at all? We'll stay right here in the world, right here with stress and suffering, for craving is a sticky sap. If there's no craving, there's nothing: no stress, no rebirth. But we have to watch out for it. It's a sticky sap, a glob of tar, a dye that's hard to wash out.

So don't let yourself get carried away with feeling. The crucial part of the practice lies right here....

* * *

WHEN CONVENTIONAL TRUTHS COLLAPSE

In making yourself quiet, you have to be quiet on all fronts -- quiet in your deeds, quiet in your words, quiet in your mind. Only then will you be able to contemplate what's going on inside yourself. If you aren't quiet, you'll become involved in external affairs and end up having too much to do and too much to say. This will keep your awareness or mindfulness from holding steady and firm. You have to stop doing, saying, or thinking anything that isn't necessary. That way your mindfulness will be able to develop continuously. Don't let yourself get involved in too many outside things.

In training your mindfulness to be continuously aware so that it will enable you to contemplate yourself, you have to be observant: When there's sensory contact, can the mind stay continuously undisturbed and at normalcy? Or does it still run out into liking and disliking? Being observant in this way will enable you to read yourself, to know yourself. If mindfulness is firmly established, the mind won't waver. If it's not yet firm, the mind will waver in the form of liking and disliking. You have to be wary of even the slightest wavering. Don't let yourself think that the slight waverings are unimportant, or else they'll become habitual.

Being uncomplacent means that you have to watch out for the details, the little things, the tiny flaws that arise in the mind. If you can do this, you'll be able to keep your mind protected -- better than giving all your attention to the worthless affairs of the outside world. So really try to be careful. Don't get entangled in sensory contact. This is something you have to work at mastering. If you focus yourself exclusively in the area of the mind like this, you'll be able to contemplate feelings in all their details. You'll be able to see them clearly, to let them go.

So focus your practice right at feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither-pleasure-nor-pain. Contemplate how to leave them alone,

simply as feelings, without relishing them -- //for if you relish feelings, that's craving//. Desires for this and that will seep in and influence the mind so that it gets carried away with inner and outer feelings. This is why you have to be quiet -- quiet in a way that doesn't let the mind become attached to the flavors of feelings, quiet in a way that uproots their influence.

The desire for pleasure is like a virus deep in our character. What we're doing here is to make the mind stop taking pleasant feelings into itself and stop pushing painful feelings away. It's because we're addicted to taking in pleasant feelings that we dislike painful feelings and push them away. So don't let the mind love pleasure and resist pain. Let it be undisturbed by both. Give it a try. If the mind can let go of feelings so that it's above pleasure, pain, and indifference, that means it's not stuck on feeling. And then try to observe: How can it //stay// unaffected by feelings? This is something you have to work at mastering in order to release your grasp on feelings once and for all, so that you won't latch onto physical pain or mental distress as being you or yours.

If you don't release your grasp on feeling, you'll stay attached to it, both in its physical and in its mental forms. If there's the pleasure of physical ease, you'll be attracted to it. As for the purely mental feeling of pleasure, that's something you'll really want, you'll really love. And then you'll be attracted to the mental perceptions and labels that accompany the pleasure, the thought-formations, and even the consciousness that accompany the pleasure. You'll latch onto all of these things as you or yours.

So analyze physical and mental pleasure. Take them apart to contemplate how to let them go. Don't fool yourself into relishing them. As for pain, don't push it away. //Let pain simply be pain, let pleasure simply be pleasure//. Let them simply fall into the category of feelings. Don't go thinking that //you// feel pleasure, that //you// feel pain. If you can let go of feeling in this way, you'll be able to gain release from suffering and stress //because you'll be above and beyond feeling//. This way when ageing, illness, and death come, you won't latch onto them thinking that //you// are ageing, that //you// are ill, that //you// are dying. You'll be able to release these things from your grasp.

If you can contemplate purely in these terms -- that the five aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and not-self -- you won't enter into them and latch onto them as "me" or "mine." If you don't analyze them in this way, you'll be trapped in dying. Even your bones, skin, flesh, and so forth will become "mine." This is why we're taught to contemplate death -- so that we can make ourselves aware that death doesn't mean that //we// die. You have to contemplate until you really know this. Otherwise you'll stay trapped right there. You must make yourself sensitive in a way that sees clearly how your bones, flesh, and skin are empty of any self. That way you won't latch onto them. The fact that you still latch onto them shows that you haven't really seen into their inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness.

When you see the bones of animals, they don't have much meaning, but when you see the bones of people, your perception labels them: "That's

a person's skeleton. That's a person's skull." If there are a lot of them, they can really scare you. When you see the picture of a skeleton or of anything that shows the inconstancy and not-selfness of the body: If you don't see clear through it, you'll get stuck at the level of skeleton and bones. Actually, there are no bones at all. They're empty, nothing but elements. You have to penetrate into the bones so that they're elements. Otherwise you'll get stuck at the level of skeleton. And since you haven't seen through it, it can make you distressed and upset. This shows that you haven't penetrated into the Dhamma. You're stuck at the outer shell because you haven't analyzed things into their elements.

When days and nights pass by, they're not the only things that pass by. The body constantly decays and falls apart, too. The body decays bit by bit, but we don't realize it. Only after it's decayed a lot -- when the hair has gone grey and teeth fall out -- do we realize that it's old. This is knowledge on a crude and really blatant level. But as for the gradual decaying that goes on quietly inside, we aren't aware of it.

As a result, we cling to the body as being us -- every single part of it. Its eyes are //our// eyes, the sights they see are the things //we// see, the sensation of seeing is something //we// sense. We don't see these things as elements. Actually the element of vision and the element of form make contact. The awareness of the contact is the element of consciousness: the mental phenomenon that senses sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and all. This we don't realize, which is why we latch onto everything -- eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, intellect -- as being us or ours. Then when the body decays, we feel that //we// are growing old; when it dies and mental phenomena stop, we feel that //we// die.

Once you've taken the elements apart, though, there's nothing. These things lose their meaning on their own. //They're simply physical and mental elements, without any illness or death//. If you don't penetrate into things this way, you stay deluded and blind. For instance, when we chant //"jara-dhammamhi"// -- I am subject to death -- that's simply to make us mindful and uncomplacent in the beginning stages of the practice. When you reach the stage of insight meditation, though, there's none of that. All assumptions, all conventional truths get ripped away. They all collapse. When the body is empty of self, what is there to latch onto? Physical elements, mental elements, they're already empty of any self. You have to see this clearly all the way through. Otherwise they gather together and form a being, both physical and mental, and then we latch onto them as being our self.

Once we see the world as elements, however, there's no death. And once we can see that there's no death, that's when we'll really //know//. If we still see that we die, that shows that we haven't yet seen the Dhamma. We're still stuck on the outer shell. And when this is the case, what sort of Dhamma can we expect to know? You have to penetrate deeper in, you have to contemplate, taking things apart.

You're almost at the end of your lease in this burning house, and yet you continue latching onto it as your self. It tricks you into feeling fear and love, and when you fall for it, what path will you

practice? The mind latches onto these things to fool itself on many, many levels. You can't see through even //these// conventions, so you grasp hold of them as your self, as a woman, a man -- and you really turn yourself into these things. If you can't contemplate so as to empty yourself of these conventions and assumptions, your practice simply circles around in the same old place, and as a result you can't find any way out.

So you have to contemplate down through many levels. It's like using a cloth to filter things. If you use a coarse weave, you won't catch much of anything. You have to use a fine weave to filter down to the deeper levels and penetrate //into// the deeper levels by contemplating over and over again, through level after level. That's why there are many levels to being mindful and discerning, filtering on in to the details.

And this is why examining and becoming fully aware of your own inner character is so important. The practice of meditation is nothing but catching sight of self-deceptions, to see how they infiltrate into the deepest levels, and to see how even the most blatant levels fool us right before our very eyes. If you can't catch sight of the deceptions and deceptions of the self, your practice won't lead to release from suffering. It will simply keep you deluded into thinking that everything is you and yours.

To practice in line with the Buddha's teachings is to go //against// the flow. Every living being, deep down inside, wants pleasure on the physical level and then on the higher and more subtle levels of feeling, such as the types of concentration that are stuck on feelings of peace and respite. This is why you have to investigate into feeling so that you can let go of it and thus snuff out craving, through being fully aware of feeling as it actually is -- free from any self -- in line with its nature: unentangled, uninvolved. This is what snuffs out the virus of craving so that ultimately it vanishes without a trace.

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THE INTRICACIES OF IGNORANCE

There are many layers to self-deception. The more you practice and the more you investigate things, the less you feel like claiming to know. Instead, you'll simply see the harm of your own many-faceted ignorance and foolishness. Your examination of the viruses in the mind gets more and more subtle. Before, you didn't know, so you took your views to be knowledge -- because you thought you knew. But actually these things aren't real knowledge. They're the type of understanding that comes from labels. Still we think they're knowledge and we think //we// know. This in itself is a very intricate self-deception.

So you have to keep watch on these things. You have to keep contemplating them. Sometimes they fool us right before our eyes:

That's when it really gets bad, because we don't know that we've got ourselves fooled, and instead think we're people who know. We can deal thoroughly with this or that topic, but our knowledge is simply the memory of labels. We think that labels are discernment, or though-formations are discernment, or the awareness of sensory consciousness is discernment, and so we get these things all mixed up. As a result, we become enamored with all the bits of knowledge that slip in and fashion the mind -- which are simply the illusions within awareness. As for genuine awareness, there's very little of it, while deceptive awareness has us surrounded on all sides.

We thus have to contemplate and investigate so as to see through these illusions in awareness. This is what will enable us to read the mind. If your awareness goes out, don't follow it out. Stop and turn inward instead. Whatever slips in to fashion the mind, you have to be wise to it. You can't forbid it, for it's something natural, and you shouldn't try to close off the mind too much. Simply keep watch on awareness to see how far it will go, how true or false it is, how it disbands and then arises again. You have to watch it over and over again. Simply watching in this way will enable you to read yourself, to know cause and effect within yourself, and to contemplate yourself. This is what will make your mindfulness and discernment more and more skillful. If you don't practice in this way, the mind will be dark. It may get a little empty, a little still, and you'll decide that's plenty good enough.

But if you look at the Buddha's teachings, you'll find that no matter what sort of correct knowledge he gained, he was never willing to stop there. He always said, "There's more." To begin with, he developed mindfulness and clear comprehension in every activity, but then he said, "There's more to do, further to go." As for us, we're always ready to brag. We work at developing this or that factor for a while and then say we already know all about it and don't have to develop it any further. As a result, the principles in our awareness go soft //because of our boastfulness and pride//.

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EMPTINESS vs. THE VOID

To open the door so that you can really see inside yourself isn't easy, but it's something you can train yourself to do. If you have the mindfulness that enables you to read yourself and understand yourself, that cuts through a lot of the issues right there. Craving will have a hard time forming. In whatever guise it arises, you'll get to read it, to know it, to extinguish it, to let it go.

When you get to do these things, it doesn't mean that you "get" anything, for actually once the mind is empty, that means it doesn't gain anything at all. But to put it into words for those who haven't experienced it: In what ways is emptiness empty? Does it mean that everything disappears or is annihilated? Actually, you should know that emptiness doesn't mean that the mind is annihilated. All that's

annihilated is clinging and attachment. What you have to do is to see what emptiness is like as it actually appears and then don't latch onto it. The nature of this emptiness is that it's deathless within you -- this emptiness of self -- and yet the mind can still function, know, and read itself. Just don't label it or latch onto it, that's all.

There are many levels to emptiness, many types, but if it's this or that type, then it's not genuine emptiness, for there's the intention trying to know what type of emptiness it is, what features it has. This is something you have to look into deeply if you really want to know. If it's superficial emptiness -- the emptiness of the still mind, free from thought-formations about its objects or free from the external sense of self -- that's not genuine emptiness. Genuine emptiness lies deep, not on the level of mere stillness or concentration. The emptiness of the void is something very profound.

But because of the things we've studied and heard, we tend to label the emptiness of the still mind as the void -- and so we label things wrongly in that emptiness....Actually it's just ordinary stillness. We have to look more deeply in. No matter what you've encountered that you've heard about before, don't get excited. Don't label it as this or that level of attainment. Otherwise you'll spoil everything. You reach the level where you should be able to keep your awareness steady, but once you label things, it stops right there -- or else goes all out of control.

This labeling is attachment in action. It's something very subtle, very refined. Whatever appears, it latches on. So you simply have to let the mind be empty without labeling it as anything, for the emptiness that lets go of preoccupations or that is free from the influence of thought-formations //is something you have to look further into//. Don't label it as this or that level, for to measure and compare things in this way blocks everything -- and in particular, knowledge of how the mind changes.

So to start out, simply watch these things, simply be aware. If you get excited, it ruins everything. Instead of seeing things clear through, you don't. You stop there and don't go any further. For this reason, when you train the mind or contemplate the mind to the point of gaining clear realizations every now and then, regard them as simply things to observe.

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OPENING THE WAY IN THE HEART

Once you can read your mind correctly, you can catch hold of defilements and kill them off: That's insight meditation. The mind becomes razor sharp, just as if you have a sharp knife that can cut anything clear through. Even if defilements arise again, you can dig them up again, cut them off again. It's actually a lot of fun, this job of uprooting the defilements in the mind. There's no other work

nearly as much fun as getting this sense of "I" or self under your thumb, because you get to see all of its tricks. It's really fun. Whenever it shows its face in order to get anything, you just watch it -- to see what it wants and why it wants it, to see what inflated claims it makes for itself. This way you can cross-examine it and get to the facts.

Once you know, there's nothing to do but let go, to become unentangled and free. Just think of how good that can be! This practice of ours is a way of stopping and preventing all kinds of things inside ourselves. Whenever defilement rises up to get anything, to grab hold of anything, we don't play along. We let go. Just this is enough to do away with a lot of stress and suffering, even though the defilements feel the heat.

When we oppress the defilements a lot in this way, it gets them hot and feverish, you know. But remember, it's the //defilements// that get hot and feverish. And remember that the Buddha told us to put the heat on the defilements, because if we don't put the heat on them, they put the heat on us all the time.

So we must be intent on burning the defilements away, even though they may complain that we're mistreating them. We close the door and imprison them. Since they can't go anywhere, they're sure to complain: "I can't take it! I'm not free to go anywhere at all!" So simply watch them: Where do they want to go? What do they want to grab hold of? Where? Watch them carefully, and they'll stop -- stop going, stop running. It's easy to say no to other things, but saying no to yourself, saying no to your defilements, isn't easy at all -- and yet it doesn't lie beyond your discernment or capabilities to do it. If you have the mindfulness and discernment to say no to defilement, it will stop. Don't think that you can't make it stop. You //can// make it stop -- simply that you've been foolish enough to give in to it so quickly that it's become second nature.

So we have to stop. Once we stop, the defilements can stop, too. Wherever they turn up, we can extinguish them. And when this is the case, how can we //not// want to practice? No matter how stubbornly they want anything, simply watch them. Get acquainted with them, and they won't stay. They'll disband. As soon as they disband, you realize exactly how deceptive they are. Before, you didn't know. As soon as they urged you to do anything, you went along with them. But once you're wise to them, they stop. They disband. Even though you don't disband them, they disband on their own. And as soon as you see their disbanding, that opens the path wide for you. Everything opens up in the heart. You can see that there's a way you can overcome defilement, you can put an end to defilement, no matter how much it arises. But you've got to remember to keep on watching out for it, keep on letting it go.

So I ask that you all make the effort to keep sharpening your tools at all times. Once your discernment is sharp on any point, it can let go of that point and uproot it. If you look after that state of mind and contemplate how to keep it going, you'll be able to keep your tools from growing too easily dull.

And now that you know the basic principles, I ask that you make the

effort to the utmost of your strength and mindfulness. May you be
brave and resilient, so that your practice for gaining release from
all your sufferings and stress can reap good results in every way.

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