

## *Identifying Weeds*

*May 11, 2006*

We have weeds in our mind. A lot of us spent the evening or the early part of the afternoon weeding. When you do something like that, it's good to reflect on the lessons you learn outside and how they apply to the mind.

In the orchard, we try to provide a place that provides shade, so we want the trees to grow well. Yet we get weeds coming in, taking the water away from the trees, and not only that, making life difficult for people who stay here. Some of the weeds have burrs, some of them have thorns, so you've got to remove them.

Otherwise, the water goes to waste, and the people who live here—the ones living here now, the ones who will be living here later in the year—are put to difficulties.

It's the same with the mind. There are certain qualities in the mind that are like weeds. We're trying to develop good qualities in the mind—like mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment—yet there are qualities that stand in the way. You've probably heard of what they're called: the hindrances. These are the things that stand in the way of our concentration.

You can compare them to weeds of different sorts. Sensual desire is like a vine. There's a story in the Canon about a vine that grows up around a sala tree—a maluva creeper, it's called. One of its seeds lands next to the tree. The devas from other trees come and talk to the deva living in the sala tree and they say, "Don't worry, don't worry. Maybe fire will burn the seed or maybe a woodsman will come in step on it, or chop it, or a peacock will eat it, or maybe it isn't even a seed."

But it *is* a seed, and nothing happens to it. It gets watered by the rain and starts growing. The creeper starts going up the tree. At first the deva in the tree doesn't see anything wrong with it. After all, the tendrils of a creeper are soft and downy. But as the creeper grows up the tree, it winds around it and finally strangles the tree, creates a canopy over the top of the tree, and brings all the major limbs crashing down. That's when the deva realizes, "Oh, this is the future danger they saw. That's why they came and tried to console me."

Sensual desire is like that. When it first comes, that seems perfectly harmless. It actually seems quite nice: soft and downy. But after a while, it takes over the mind and brings all your good qualities crashing down. That's one kind of weed you've got to take care of in the mind.

Then there's ill will. This is like weeds with thorns. If you get anywhere near it, it cuts you. In other words, when you let anger overcome the mind, you're often harmed by it more than anybody else is. It's like a thistle. The thistle has its little

flowers, these tiny seeds, and they go all over the place. So that's a weed you've got to be very careful with. You have to treat it with good, strong gloves in your hands and get rid of the seeds before they mature and spread.

Then there's sloth and torpor. It's like a weed that, if you happen to eat the leaves, it puts you to sleep and knocks you unconscious, so that nothing can develop in the mind at all. Or you can compare it to eucalyptus trees. Once they grow someplace, they totally destroy the soil, so that nothing else can grow there.

Restlessness and anxiety is like poison oak or poison ivy. If you get anywhere near it, you're just covered with rashes and itches. You can't sit down in any peace or quiet anywhere.

Finally there's uncertainty, which is like one of those weeds that if you eat it, gets you confused, blurs your vision, blurs your mind.

So these are things you've got to get out of the mind. Some of them are obvious problems; others, you have to gain experience with them to know: This as a weed, that's not a weed. We've got these plants with burrs here in the grove. Unfortunately, their leaves are very similar to leaves of a California poppy. The poppies are things we like; the burrs are things we don't like. If you don't observe carefully, you might end up pulling up the poppies when you're trying to get rid of the burrs, or you might leave the burrs alone, thinking they're poppies.

So the first thing is to learn how to observe these qualities in the mind. Even with the obvious ones, it's important to observe how they come. You have to watch them. You have to put the mind in a good place where it can see these things clearly. That's why we're trying to develop a place for the mind where it can stay.

The Buddha recommends starting off with restraint of the senses. In other words, even before you sit down and close your eyes, you have to be careful about how you open your eyes, how you look, how you listen. You can take in all kinds of problems, bring in all kinds of seeds for weeds in your mind if you're not careful. Now, the Buddha is not saying not to look, not to listen. He's saying, "Have some skill in your looking and listening. Notice how the mind goes out and look at things, when it's looking for trouble, and when it's actually looking for something useful."

It's not the case that you can blame all your defilements on things coming in from outside. These things come from within the mind. The mind gets an itch, or restlessness and anxiety. It gets an itch to go out and look at this, look at that, listen to this, listen to things that will give rise to lust, things that will give rise to anger, whatever the itch is. So you have to be careful not to give in to that itch. If you see yourself looking at something for the purpose of lust, well, try to look at

its other side as well. If you're feeling irritated and want to find a good reason to get angry, be careful to look for the good side of whatever you're focused on. In other words, try to be a person with two eyes, not just one.

When you can begin to read your mind while your eyes are open, it gets a lot easier to read it while your eyes are closed, because you're familiar with the effect that these things have in your mind. Try to clear a little space in here where your mindfulness can grow, where your alertness can grow with the breath. Make up your mind that any other thought coming into the mind right now is something you don't want. No matter what the thought is, treat it as a weed, something you don't want to go near.

Then, as you get more firmly established in the breath, you can start watching these things. When these weeds grow, how do they grow? What's the little seed that gets them started? How do you feed the seed? How do you nourish it? Can you learn not to nourish it? And what's the soil that allows these seeds to grow? You want to put yourself in a position where you can see these things clearly. That's why it's so important to get the breath as a foundation, or whatever it is in the present moment that allows you to settle in and be solidly here right now.

Some people find that the 32 parts of the body are a more riveting way of getting into the present and staying here. Whatever the object, the important thing is that you keep your object in mind—that's what mindfulness means—and that you're alert to what's happening.

When you can watch what's happening, you can begin to control the weeds. In other words, you don't have to wait until they've already grown before you pull them out. You begin to see the seeds. You see how you nourish the seeds.

There are two ways of dealing with this. One is to nourish the seeds of good qualities instead, to squeeze out the weed seeds. The other is to try to deprive the weed seeds of soil and water.

So meditation is not simply a matter of sitting here and watching whatever arises without having preferences. After all, we'd much rather have the avocado orchard here than we would have a place full thistles. And it's the same with the mind: You'd much rather have good qualities inside than the weeds that pull you down, stick into your skin, give you a rash, make you drowsy. That kind of preference is really a skillful preference.

When they say that the great way is easy for those with no preferences, it doesn't mean that you're not trying to develop things skillful in the mind. It's simply that you're willing to do whatever work needs to be done. That's where the issue of preferences has to be put aside. When you see that you need to do work to get the mind to settle down, you do that work. When you need to do work to

fight lust and anger, you do that work. You're doing it because developing skillful qualities in the mind is important.

That's the big distinction that lies at the base of all the Buddha's teachings, at the base of right view: seeing what's skillful, seeing what's not skillful, learning to uproot what's unskillful, and learning to nourish what is skillful. That kind of preference is part of the path. After all, it is in our power to shape the mind. You're not simply a passive observer, trying to learn how to accept whatever comes up. In the beginning, you may have to accept what comes up simply because you want to watch it and see what's happening. But as you begin to get a sense of what's what, which plants are the good plants you can eat or whose shade you can use, that give fruit or flowers that you want, and which plants have thorns, plants that are poisonous: Once you can distinguish them, then you can start weeding out the unskillful qualities and promoting the skillful ones. You benefit, and the people around you benefit as well.

So allow yourself to follow through with that preference: the preference to develop states of mind that really do give a greater sense of ease, a greater sense of well-being in the present moment, and lead on to things that are even greater, ultimately to the end of suffering. Those are the plants you want to foster. Anything that gets in the way is a weed. Do your best uproot the weeds, do your best to make sure that they don't take over. Ultimately, they'll get squeezed out by all the good plants, so that the mind becomes a really good place to stay.