

## *Radical Questioning*

*September 4, 2007*

I heard a scary story today. I was talking to someone who'd been invited to address a group of people who were going to be leading communities in meditation groups, and in the course of the discussions he was having with them, he picked up more and more the sense that everybody was concerned about learning how to accept, that this is the whole purpose of meditation. You learn how to accept what you are, you learn how to accept the situation you're in. That seemed to be the goal of their practice.

So he stopped and said, "Wait a minute, I want to make sure we're all on the same page. The Buddha taught there is suffering, right? Right. There is a cause for suffering. Right. And there is path to the end of suffering. All these things involve duties. We're trying to make a change, right? We see where there's suffering and we're trying to put an end to that suffering."

He began to see people who were getting uncomfortable. So finally the person leading the group told him, "Well, we're taking a different model here. We're taking the therapeutic mode, where it's best to make people feel comfortable with themselves. If you challenge them and tell them they have to change, then they don't feel comfortable." At that point, the person who was addressing the group said, he gave up.

The story is scary for two reasons. One is that the idea being that we are here just to learn how to accept things. And secondly that the person gave up. It's the sort of thing you have to challenge, not only in Dhamma circles but also in yourself. There is a role for acceptance, when suffering is caused by neurotic reasons, when we simply can't accept the reality of a situation. That's where acceptance comes in and has a legitimate role.

But meditation has to go beyond that because we're working on something deeper than psychotherapy here. As Freud once said, psychotherapy takes people, cures them some of the misery that comes from neuroses, and teaches him how to be ordinary unhappy people. That's as far as psychotherapy can go, because, after all, we're living in a world of aging, illness, and death. These are things that make you unhappy—as long as you're identifying with things that age, grow ill, and die.

But the Dhamma is meant to take you beyond that, which is why a lot of the Dhamma is not so much radically accepting things, but radically questioning them. The attitudes you have, the thoughts that burn in your mind, burn in your

body: What are they based on? Why do they burn? Is there some way that you can learn not to be burned by them? A lot of the answer requires changing your attitudes, changing your assumptions.

Back in my days as a student studying intellectual history, one of the main lessons I picked up was that when you're reading a figure from the past, you want to figure out what the person's unstated assumptions are, and not simply accept everything they say. What lies behind that? Why would they say that? What are they assuming that they may not be aware of? When you've figured out what the unstated assumptions were, you're able to distance yourself from the thinker. On the one hand, you've understood the thinker better, but also there was a sense of distancing that you aren't taken in by that person's thought world. You could look at it from the outside.

In the same way, you want to be able to do this with your own thoughts. Learn how to question the assumptions, especially the assumptions where the mind says, "Well, of course it's this," or, "of course it's that." You have to ask yourself: Is that really the case?

Some of this requires not simply watching things coming and going, but also actively analyzing them. After all, analysis of qualities, *dhammavicaya*, is an important factor in the path: trying to figure out where the assumptions are that make you burn, what those assumptions are, and whether you really want to hold on to them. The Dhamma gives lots of clues—in terms of right view, in terms of what you might call the three perceptions—for where you might look. After all, the suffering is composed of clinging. Wherever there's suffering, there's clinging.

So you have to look at what you're clinging to. And the clinging can take any of four forms----clinging to a sensual desire, clinging to a particular view, clinging to a way of doing things that's become almost ritualistic in your mind, or clinging to certain views about yourself. Those are four areas to look into if you've noticed that a particular thought is making you suffer. Does it involve any of those four kinds of clinging?

Or in terms of three perceptions, there's the perception of inconstancy. Are you perceiving something as constant and permanent when it really isn't? Are you perceiving pleasure in something that's really painful? Are you perceiving a sense of self in something that really isn't worth it?

Those are very radical questions because they go very deep into our assumptions, especially the last, the "I am this kind of person": It doesn't have to be a metaphysical view about yourself, but just your general feeling of who you are, what kind of person you are, and what kind of feelings and ideas such a person should have. Well, if the feelings burn, if they cause trouble, cause suffering, you

might want to question the underlying assumptions. The Buddha doesn't have us accept the fact that suffering has to be there. There may be the stress of fabrications, which is a common factor in life, but then there's the stress and suffering that comes from craving, comes from ignorance, and that's not necessary. That's what we can change.

So if you have any thoughts that are burning in the mind, there's a wrong assumption there someplace. It may be backed up by facts and by a lot of your values, but it's wrong in the sense that you don't have to hold on to it. The fact that you're holding on to it, and it's causing stress and suffering: That's where it's wrong. Often we can hold on to ideas that have lots of factual basis, but maybe we're asking the wrong questions, taking irrelevant facts and putting together in the wrong way. Even though the facts may strictly speaking be right, the way you put them together is wrong. It doesn't mean you're a bad person, it just means that you've been making a mistake that's causing unnecessary suffering—and you don't have to keep on making that same mistake.

This is where the opportunity for change is so important. You learn to think of alternative ways of thinking, alternative assumptions that carry less suffering.

So radical questioning is an important part of the practice. Whenever there's a thought that causes pain in the mind, that gets into your system and seems to hang on there, you want to ask yourself: "What are the assumptions I'm going by here?" Look in particular for the assumptions that have an "of course" quality to them, the ones where you don't normally feel that there's any question at all, it's got to be that way.

One of the advantages of going to Thailand to learn the Dhamma was that I was in a culture where people's assumptions were very different from mine. Occasionally, I would take a problem to Ajaan Fuang, and I found, one, it was often difficult to explain the problem in Thai, and that should have been a warning signal right there. And two, when I finally seemed to get it out, he'd look at me as if it was one of the strangest things he'd ever heard. And the fact that it sounded strange to him helped make it look strange to me, that it was possible to look at this problem which I felt was just a normal part of having a mind, being a human being, and see that it might simply be cultural. Learning how to step back from it that way helped create a sense of distance. When you have a sense of distance, then you can look at it and not be totally taken in by it.

This is why it's good to have a teacher who's not always trying to make you comfortable, and is not totally familiar with the same assumptions you have. After all, the Buddha wasn't simply trying to make people comfortable as they were. He was trying to teach them some new habits so that they could go on beyond having

to be comfortable, to where there is no sense of suffering at all. That's a solution that goes a lot deeper. He's not here just to cure our neuroses. But he is here to help us cure our own ignorance, our own craving, the deeper things that cause a radical kind of suffering. If you radically question those assumptions, you can go beyond the suffering. This is what makes the Dhamma special.