

THE MIRROR-LIKE MIND:

EXCERPTS FROM A RETREAT TALK GIVEN AT
IXOPO, S.AFRICA IN DECEMBER 1996

REFLECTING THOUGHTS

GODWIN: ... [now] going on to the mirror-like mind, can we reflect our thoughts just as they are? And ideally - it's an interesting practice - can we relate to our thoughts without plusses, without minuses, because it's a very strong conditioning we have, this tendency to give plusses and minuses. And please see the difference when that is not there, when you are not the teacher, when you are only a humble student, with a 'don't know' mind. Marking is knowing: you know. Most teachers assume they know, otherwise they wouldn't teach, including so-called meditation teachers!

So without knowing, without being the teacher, you're just being with the thoughts. Just see the difference, you'll see how it's not so easy!

Now a mirror-like mind will reflect the thoughts just as they are. And maybe even if you are giving plusses and minuses you can even reflect that. But this is the important thing: a mind that is not reacting. What happens is that we react to the thoughts. As one of the meditating monks in Sri Lanka said, can we watch our movie unmoved? Interesting way of looking at it - just watching our movies. They are very creative, the best producers, producing, directing, sometimes acting. So all these are our own movies. From morning to night we are with our movies!

Now is it possible to watch the movie unmoved? A non-reactive mind - that would correspond to a mirror-like mind in relation to thoughts...

REFLECTING EMOTIONS

The next important aspect is emotions. Now there is a very strong connection between thoughts and emotions. I would like to raise this question - what comes first, thoughts or emotions?

RETREATANT: *Thoughts.*

GODWIN: Does everyone agree? Interesting.

RETREATANT: *It's the chicken or the egg!*

GODWIN: So anyway, these things are debated in the West in certain circles now, and the debate continues. But as meditators, it's really interesting for us to see how a thought gives rise to an emotion, and then when we have an emotion, how thought takes it over and builds it up. This is watching the movie.

RETREATANT: *In the Dhammapada it says our minds precede all things.*

GODWIN: Well, yes, that is what the Dhammapada says, that it true. Those who do not know the Dhammapada are debating these issues. And I think I would suggest that when you

explore, forget the Dhammapada, and find out for yourself: the Dhammapada says this, what is my actual experience? This is the beauty of the Dhamma, nothing is to be accepted on authority, not even the texts.

You should read the Kalama Sutta. It's described as a text which encourages free enquiry. It's fascinating, there is a list of things which are not to be relied upon, which include teachers, scriptures, and traditions - it's really a radical teaching. And how it ends is fascinating, too - see through your own experience what gives rise to happiness, what gives rise to the absence of happiness; what gives rise to suffering, what gives rise to the absence of suffering. This is the criterion. So please have that spirit of enquiry.

So in relation to emotions - this is the real challenge we have in everyday life on the spiritual path: how to work with emotions, especially unpleasant emotions. We all know them. When they are there, how far can we reflect them just as they are? Because there is an immediate reaction: disliking, resisting, fighting, wanting them to go away. So see how reactions come in, and see the importance of a non-reactive mind. And by these reactions sometimes we give more power and more energy to the emotions.

It's interesting that this aspect of being friendly, creating space, is there in the Buddhist texts. There is an interesting story in the texts, in the form of a myth. How these psychological truths are presented by way of myths is interesting, so I'll relate the story:

It's about a demon. The demon was living among human beings, and the food for the demon comes when people get angry. So you can just imagine he was all the time having plenty of food! But even demons get bored with the same food. So this demon thought: I'm getting the same food everyday, maybe I should go to the realm of the Gods and see whether I shall starve, or whether I'll get some better food there.

So as the story goes that having gone to the realm of the gods, he went inside. He found the throne of the boss, Sakra, Chief of the Gods in that realm - and he went and sat on his throne. And then the gods started complaining: Who is this demon, this creature, who is sitting on our boss' throne? And when the gods saw this demon they got angry! And the demon was at first very small, but when the gods were getting angrier and angrier the demon became bigger and bigger and bigger. And the boss, Sakra, realized that something was happening and he came and greeted the demon kindly: Welcome, what would you like to have? And when he made friends with the demon, just allowing the demon to be there without resisting him or disliking him, the demon became smaller and smaller and smaller.

See how creatively this psychological truth is presented in the form of a story. So this is very difficult, because it's a very strong conditioning which we have - we need to learn to allow these emotions, as I've been saying so often, to make friends with them, learning just to be with them. And when you can just be with them, most of the time they leave you alone!

TRANSCENDING THE POSITIVE/NEGATIVE DICHOTOMY

So back to the mirror-like mind: you reflect the emotion just as it is. And what is important - this is very significant - you reflect it whether it is a pleasant emotion or an unpleasant emotion. Because in meditation what sometimes happens is that we are only looking for pleasant, positive experiences, and we don't like unpleasant, negative experiences. So it becomes a battle, meditative life becomes a battle, wanting this, not wanting that. But here, having this mirror-like mind is a very powerful way of transcending this duality, of going

beyond the positive and the negative. And that, I would suggest, is an important breakthrough.

Then your mind is open: whether it is a pleasant emotion, whether it is an unpleasant emotion, we don't have a preconception, we don't have a model of what should happen or what shouldn't happen. So joy comes, the mirror-like mind reflects it as it is. Sadness comes, its reflected as it is. Something that is considered beautiful comes, its presented just as it is. Something that is considered ugly comes - that is the beauty of the mirror, it just reflects it as it is.

So we need to slowly, slowly, and gently learn to see things just as they are. And when we do see things as they are, and we are reacting, then we have a chance to reflect: now what is happening, why am I reacting to this? And when you react you immediately see how the suffering is created. It is really the resistance, the disliking which creates the suffering. So again, see the connections. And can you take away that resistance, let go of that - immediately you might see some difference, some change ...

A NON-RETENTIVE MIND

So this is the mirror-like mind in relation to thoughts, emotions, sensations, and sounds. As I've been saying, seeing things just as they are. Now there's another very interesting aspect of a mirror-like mind. It does not retain anything. Yesterday we found out what we retain and how we retain it. Wounds are areas, aspects of our lives, which we retain. So it is again a very interesting area to explore: what we retain, what we don't retain - what I called the selective memory. And how when the memory is distorted what we retain is distorted, then the distortion comes through the way we see, the way we hear, the way we feel.

In everyday life it is natural that we retain certain things. But if we retain things like wounds, then we must just realise that and learn to let go of them. This should be our daily practice. And then you might have experiences when something happens but you don't retain it too much, it doesn't affect you so much, you have not reacted to it.

There is a story which brings this out very clearly, how we hold onto things, how we retain things. It's about two monks who were walking together, and they came to a pool of water. There was a beautiful girl standing there, unable to get across. So one of the monks picked her up, carried her across and put her down on the other shore. Then they continued the walk. But the next day the other monk says: You know, you shouldn't have done that, don't you realise that monks shouldn't touch girls? Then the other monk said: I left her behind on the shore yesterday, while you are still carrying her!

This is what we do. We are carrying things. Sometimes we are carrying rubbish, like the second monk. Why do I say rubbish? Because its creating our own suffering, and creating suffering for others.

Another word for rubbish is minuses. Minuses about others, minuses about ourselves - we are carrying them, and they are continuing to wound us. Aren't we funny? So can we catch it initially when we retain it, when we hold onto it - or as Mervyn would say - when we buy it? You see how important awareness is?

In the Dhamma they use a very interesting word for this: contact. The Pali word for contact is *phassa*, which means touching. I use a very simple image to understand *phassa* or contact.

We have gum, we have very solid gum with us, or glue. With this glue we get stuck. And its always very effective, this glue, always works very well. Sometimes the glue in Sri Lanka doesn't work, but this is powerful glue!

And for what we hold onto with our glue, a sense of ownership comes: this is mine - even with unpleasant things, even with minuses. That's why we find it difficult to let go. Very interesting: we are amused when we look at it this way.

So what is beautiful about a mirror-like mind, it just reflects it as it is, nothing is retained. Or if it's retained, you realise it immediately, before it goes to the so-called unconscious mind ...

THE NON-DUAL EXPERIENCE

Another aspect of the mirror-like mind - I hope I can communicate this - is that between the mirror and what is reflected on the mirror, there is no duality. To apply that to our experience: when there is a thought there is no thinker apart from the thought, there is only the thinking. From the thinking the idea that 'I' am thinking is created; from the feeling, the idea is created 'I' am feeling, identifying with the feeling. With hearing it is the same: there is a kind of duality which is created, where between the hearer and the sounds a division, a dichotomy, is created.

So here if you can really see thoughts, emotions, sensations, and sounds just as they are, without this sense of ownership. "In the thinking, only the thinking" - that's the Buddha's way: "in the hearing just the hearing, in the feeling, only the feeling." So this is another interesting aspect of a mirror-like mind. Another aspect related to this is that there is no I-consciousness in the mirror, simply consciousness just as it is. 'I' am seeing, 'I' am hearing, 'I' am feeling is not there.

So in our practice, in our everyday life, this is what we can try to develop, what can be described as a non-reactive mind, as least as far as possible. And when there is a non-reactive mind, that gives rise to freedom, absence of suffering, whereas a reactive mind gives rise to suffering. A very simple, very practical, very direct way of understanding ...

CALM AND INSIGHT

Now in Buddhist meditation there are these two aspects: meditation of calm or tranquillity, and meditation of insight. Meditation of calm can be likened to there being dust on the mirror, so what we do initially is to clear the dust away. And for that, focusing on an object and being anchored on the breath you can learn to create more space, clearing off the dust. And once the dust is cleared, then we learn to see things as they are. So this is a way of understanding the relation between tranquillity meditation and insight meditation.

So it's a very interesting model. Initially we need to stabilise our minds - immediately we can't see most things just as they are. So what we did for the first few days of this retreat was to practice awareness, being with our breath, learning to handle things, making the mind strong and stable. And in doing that you're pushing away the emotions when they come. When thoughts come, you push them away.

But once we are strong we are in a position to handle anything which arises. So then we allow any thought to arise, any emotion to arise, any sensation to arise, and we can also allow any sound to arise. And when they arise, with that strength, with that calm, with that

clarity, with that self-confidence we know that whatever comes we can just reflect it. Do you see how the two aspects are related to each other?

So I would like to suggest that tomorrow you can also go back to the friend, the breath. And in one sitting it is better not to mix the two techniques. But to start with perhaps you can spend 10 or 15 minutes with the breath, then after that time just allow things. Or maybe in the morning you can spend some time with the breath, and in the evening, allow anything to arise. I would like you to see how they are related, how they complement each other. And especially how this technique of just being with our thoughts, sounds, emotions can be applied in everyday life...

QUESTIONS

GODWIN: Now do you have any questions, especially about emotions, and thoughts, and how to work with them, because it's a very important area, especially the area of emotions.

RETREATANT: *I have a question about feeling excited by something: how can I see it as in a mirror?*

GODWIN: We will take a practical example: you feel excited as a Sri Lankan that Sri Lanka has won the World Cup! So a mirror-like mind will reflect it as it is - you don't give it a minus, you just leave it there, just being with it. This is one of the tools. Or, do you remember I mentioned the simile of the surgeon's probe? So if you want to you can also use the surgeon's probe: Ah, I'm excited now, what is this excitement, why do I feel so excited? What is feeding this excitement - is it a thought? Or what exactly is happening to me? Yes, so please ask such questions, practical questions - how to relate to our emotions, how to work with them.

RETREATANT: *Using that allowing technique, I find I'm completely swept up in what's going on: how do I get myself back?*

GODWIN: This is why I say it's always good to rely on our friend, the breath. The friend will always tell you, come on now, come back to the reality. So it's good for understanding when the mind is not empty, when it's not alert, awake.

RETREATANT: *How long do I have to clean the mirror so that then I can see clearly?*

GODWIN: Very interesting question! There are so many opinions on it, lots of positions in Buddhist circles, a grand debate about this. My practical position, criterion is: when you know you can handle the thoughts that are arising, not to react to the thoughts, not to react to the emotions, when you realise that you have established awareness to a great extent, when you realise that there is clarity about what is happening; in other words, when you realise the mind is now strong, stable, with awareness, then you can see what happens: just open the lid! Open the lid and see: can I handle it? Or is it too much? This is experimenting, exploring, finding out for yourself...