

Self Image and Denial

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Tonight's topic is Self Image and Denial. It's about what the Buddha called "mental formations" that cause us and others suffering, but which conflict with our self image and are therefore obscured from our awareness by subconscious denial or suppression.

We have a lot of mental formations. They are ideas, attitudes, assumptions, etc. that are stored in the mind. Like things in the back of our closets, they are usually old. We may not remember forming these notions, or even realize that we have them. Many of them are beliefs common in the society at the time they were absorbed. One of the most insidious kinds of mental formations have for millennia been those supporting the way societies oppress and exploit some groups who look or behave differently from dominant groups.

However reprehensible, ideas like this are absorbed unconsciously when they're rampant in a culture. We even acquire them when we're members of the groups that are looked down on. I've had to examine and dismantle prejudices I've absorbed against myself as a woman and a lesbian. Ultimately attitudes like this, that arise out of *separating* people into opposing categories, cause suffering to everyone in the society, not just those being oppressed.

Mindfulness practice is aimed toward Liberation, the uprooting of all causes of dukkha, including these semi-unconscious mental formations. It takes conscious, intentional effort. We may not know that we need to dismantle some attitude. In fact, we may not even know we have it until something we do makes it obvious. Or perhaps more painfully it's when someone tells us we seem to think that way. Then it often feels like we're being accused of being a bad person.

In order to dig these attitudes out completely, we need to use our practice to *study* our mental states. We need to observe how they cause us to feel and act out. We need to study the nature of these mental formations over time to know their nature, and to see how they lead to dukkha – for us and others. Buddhism's basic teachings on nonharming and non-duality show that harm to ourselves is also harm to others, and vice versa.

The main difficulty we face in this study is the mind's tendency to obstruct our even *seeing* some of these attitudes. It uses the unconscious techniques of denial and suppression that lead us to say, "I don't know why I did that." It's our own shame over these states of mind that makes it so hard to understand and let go of them. Feeling that shame might make us briefly feel virtuous that at least we *want to disavow* those thoughts or behavior, but feeling bad about thoughts doesn't keep them from occurring again.

So we have to be like detectives, and fairly brave ones. I love a phrase in the most daunting of the 12 Steps, which makes it not just doable but painless. The dreaded Fourth Step, the Moral Inventory, is not just thorough, but also *fearless*. When we can face our shame or guilt and simply *accept* that we have this old, fossilized mental formation, the fear dissipates. We become fearless. It lets us look into the jumbled and dirty corners of our minds' closets.

As we set out fearlessly to examine what's hidden in our minds, we find clues in how we feel after thoughts arise in our awareness. If they come from a state of mind that conflicts with the way we like to see ourselves, we'll usually feel some form of clinging or aversion. Either of these forms of attachment produce dukkha, or

internal suffering. It's a bit like a doctor poking you to see where it hurts: that's what you want to examine more closely.

Let's consider *why* our subconscious resorts to denial or suppression. It's because having these thoughts conflicts with our image of ourselves. If we want to come across as a "good" person, we don't like finding out that we have "bad" thoughts and feelings. So we work hard at distancing ourselves from "bad attitudes." We use a lot of energy rationalizing any evidence that we do have these mindstates. If we're directly confronted with proof that we do, we may launch a defensive attack, run and hide, or just crumble. We are so attached to our self-image that we're almost unable to cope with having contradictory thoughts or behaviors. When it comes down to truth or self-image, truth often loses. Very few of us want to be despicable in the eyes of others, or in our own eyes. The idea of self is like the villain in a massive cover up.

Our identification with the idea of self is enforced by the notion that people are either good or bad. This assumes that we are all separated into immutable types of people, like, "Once a bigot always a bigot." But the third characteristic of all phenomena – anicca – shows that it's all impermanent. We are all impermanent. Our minds are, too. When we lose sight of impermanence, and forget that all phenomena are interconnected, then we can get locked into categories that separate us. This notion of being a separate, permanent self is the source of all our attachments and in turn, our dukkha, or inner suffering.

Nisargadatta Maharaj" was an Indian guru who died in 1981 after a long and prolific life of teaching. He said, "When you know, beyond all doubting, that the same life flows through all that is, and *you are* that life, you will love all naturally and spontaneously. ... But when you look at anything as separate from you, you cannot love it for you are afraid of it. Alienation causes fear and fear deepens alienation. It is a vicious circle. Only self-realization can break it. Go for it resolutely."

Separating people into categories, such as our being either a good or a bad person, reinforces the key source of dukkha: that sense of self. The fear of being "bad" leads to denial. But that denial doesn't entirely silence the inner voices berating us for having ideas that we didn't choose and are only vaguely aware of.

This syndrome keeps us anxious and makes it hard to face our hidden attitudes directly. All this mental effort to maintain our illusion of self is very stressful. It contributes to the rampant anxiety in our extremely individualist society.

So, let's sum this up so far: We're attached to the ideas that: 1) I'm a separate person "in my own right" and 2) I have been and will be that person all my life; and 3) I'm a good person. But in fact, we're all interconnected and always changing, and we may have acquired some attitudes without knowing it, which we now label as bad. This causes dukkha and gives rise to denial which makes it hard even to see that we have these attitudes, and therefore very hard to dismantle them.

To uproot these mental formations – these causes of dukkha – we have to be able to see them. Initially, it means we have to recognize that we're having thoughts we would rather not have. This requires us to form the intention to notice and accept our thoughts, whatever they're about. Otherwise we go on living in a somewhat dirty house because we have no interest in noticing the dust, dirt and clutter that's not directly in our view. Does that resonate with anyone else who's been sheltering in place for three and a half months?

We have to accept that thoughts are not US. They arise without our choosing them. They don't define us and they're not our fault. But, if we find ourselves bridling at the sense that we're being accused of, or blamed for some attitudes we insist we don't have, it's a good clue that our self-image is tied up with them.

All phenomena are impermanent, and inseparable from all other beings. *And* they all have causes. To understand what causes our thoughts, we need to investigate them by feeling how they affect us. Then we need to stay with that experience until we sink into an understanding of the causes and conditions out of which they arise.

We practice accepting our thoughts during mindfulness meditation by repeatedly noticing them without beating ourselves up about them. Instead, we greet them like a passerby, without clinging or aversion. We don't linger over a thought, just notice and immediately turn our attention to how it's made us feel for as long as that feeling lasts. Once that feeling fades, we just invite our attention back to the breath. We do this over and over, as a practice, without clinging to any goal.

This practice shows us a lot about the nature of the thought, giving us a chance to learn what mental formations lead it to arise in our awareness. It also familiarizes us with the dukkha which the thought and its underlying causes provoke in us. Eventually, it leads to Insights into deeper and deeper causes. When we begin to see the connection between this dukkha and our self-image, we're close to being able to let go of the ideas we've been clinging to, however unconsciously. These deeper Insights often occur quite some time *after* we've explored our mental fabrications. So just go ahead and credit all insights to your practice.

Once we become aware of some attitude or other kind of mental formation, we will notice it popping up, sometimes in our behavior or just a trace of a thought flitting through our minds when we're meditating or going through our day. Formal mindfulness meditation is not the only tool we have to investigate these states of mind. In daily life practice we bring mindfulness to as much of our life experience as possible. It's especially helpful in getting to know and dismantle troublesome mental formations.

If we have the time when a troublesome thought arises, we can use the same technique as we use in stationery meditation. Often we don't have the time right then, so journaling later is helpful. We can recall the thought we had and the unease it caused, and explore it by writing it out in our journals. We can also work with another person or a group to delve into the ways our minds work. As we increasingly get to know and understand our hidden mindstates, they loosen up, like weeds undercut with a trowel, and fall or shrivel away.

"Just noticing" habits of the mind is one of the most powerful tools this practice gives us. It's one of the best tools in my recovery program, too. I grew up in a culture where socializing centered on "having a drink" with others. Without realizing it, I developed the attitude that drinking is a necessary part of being friendly or having fun. But as an alcoholic, this attitude is really dangerous to me. Mindfulness practice has shown me that pro-drinking thoughts precede the urge to drink, so I am always on the alert for such thoughts. Once I see them for what they are, they lose power over me.

This is like the Buddha-to-be saying "I see you, Mara," on the night of his Enlightenment. I still need to spot and disarm thoughts of drinking, but I've been free of any *desire* to drink for almost 20 years. When I feel the first hint of an urge, I talk to another alcoholic about it – admit it and dismantle it. I do something similar with other thoughts born of social prejudices. It reduces their power over my feelings and behavior.

Are they gone completely? Well, probably not. I see it like weeding a fertile garden. As long as the seeds are in the air, from anywhere around me, they could take root if my mind is receptive. The mother root of all attachments, which makes the mind receptive to harmful mental formations, is of course the delusion of a separate, unchanging Self. Until that is uprooted, weeding remains a routine chore. As we keep digging the weeds up, we learn to keep going ever deeper.

I'm not saying this work is pleasant or easy, or that I myself am "finished" doing it. While having certain thoughts and suppressed attitudes are not our fault, it *is* our *job* to disarm and dismantle them, especially when they can harm others.

Thank you