

Meeting and Clearing Ignorance

According to the Buddha, the underlying source of the suffering that we experience is dependent on an ignorance (*avijja*) that we can remove from our minds. Although ignorance obviously isn't something that we have a clear perspective on, as practitioners our work is to establish and sustain an honest focus on our mental behaviour in order to reveal this ignorance. In this context, ignorance means 'not being in touch' rather than stupidity, and so when we get fully in touch with how things are, the clarity of true understanding comes by itself. We don't have to be indoctrinated into truth – it's more a case of being honest, and clearing the view. Then it's like regaining balance: when you sense imbalance and have confidence that there is such a thing as a steady poise that doesn't need to hold on, then with some effort and some ease balance gets re-established.

Three levels of ignorance

One way of getting in touch is to focus on three levels where ignorance takes over. The first of these is ignorance in terms of not being in touch with our actions in terms of cause and effect, in moral terms. This is ignorance about kamma, or the ethical quality of action. Furthermore there is ignorance about the nature of mind, and there is ignorance regarding the sense of self.

The first kind of ignorance suppresses ethical clarity. It crushes scruples. We might do something and then excuse it by saying: 'Everybody does this.' For example a friend of mine was working in a warehouse. The other men working in the warehouse would always take a certain amount of goods for themselves when they were loading and unloading the lorries. My friend, on the other hand, wouldn't do that; he said: 'This is stealing; this is theft.' But the other men said: 'No, this is not stealing, it is a redistribution of property.'

Ignorance can be quite ingenious! We might also take the example of bombing a town and killing people: it can be called 'collateral damage.' There are many instances, and many excuses whereby the natural clarity of moral sensitivity gets blurred and uprooted...but all of them are based upon losing touch with two qualities: respect and conscience regarding oneself (*hiri*), and respect and concern regarding others (*ottappa*). When these are in place, there is a sense of 'to others as to myself', which is the basis of compassion, generosity and tolerance. Truly these two qualities are called 'the guardians of the world' because they keep the mind from narrowing into a 'me' and 'them' focus. Once others become 'them', 'the boss' the enemy' etc, then all kinds of abusive behaviour can take hold. 'Them' keeps people at a distance and supports fear and malice. However there is also a 'we' sense that does the opposite, supports generosity, kindness and tolerance. This 'we' isn't just a matter of an ideal, or a nationality or a social group. It isn't the 'we' that politicians use when they're not directly in touch with people. A real 'we' involves being real. And that means respecting the humanity, the basic goodness and the vulnerability of others – who will indeed have failings and different ways of seeing things. So 'respecting' them doesn't mean believing them or agreeing with everything they say; instead you respect their right to be different and you respect your own integrity and independence.

What can we respect in ourselves and in others? Being clear about this is one aim of cultivating the mind: to know how it is for all of us, that we all want comfort and happiness and fear pain and loss. All immoral actions arise around inadequately addressing these concerns. Living morally on the other hand isn't just a matter of obedience based on punishment and blame. It's a source of happiness when it's based on empathy – the wish to not harm others - and restraint – because calming the outgoing energies has a soothing and steadying effect. This establishes the sense of self-worth that isn't based on performance, status or unwise opinions.

Ethical clarity begins with and supports the sensitivity to what an action really feels like in the heart. Then we're more sensitive to how we might affect others, and to what habits we lay down in our own minds. As you do so, you realise this ethical sensitivity is a precious sense, you don't want to overlook it, or crush it, or dismiss it. It is from this that we are able to extend specific qualities of respect and kindness towards ourselves, and to relax some of the fearfulness, or the harshness that we may have adopted in our lives. When you experience these good results, then you know you can take this sensitivity as a guide in your life. In this way, ignorance of the value of moral sensitivity – which is a form that keeps us feeling inadequate, or unworthy – gets dispelled. It is also this sensitivity rather than willpower or force, which develops to clear further layers of ignorance from the mind.

Tuning in to the nature of mind

Ignorance as to the nature of mind has no understanding of the 'stuff' of mind. By which I don't mean the rush of thoughts, the flow of emotions, or the patterns, the habits of nervousness or exuberance for example that we all have to different degrees. The elemental stuff of mind is the energy that all these psychological and emotional forms draw upon. And it is through deeper sensitivity that the range and blocks to your mental energy become apparent. This energy is intelligent and responsive, but it can be contaminated with ignorance. It can be gentle, it can hold us open and bright, it can be still and balanced and witness what feelings are happening, but it can also support recklessness, and violence. And when ignorance is dominating it, it closes down, holds on tight and gets stubborn and wilful. This, however, is the mind that can be trained: the Buddha likened this mind to a wild elephant – a creature that can be trained to use its power and strength skilfully. Training it depends on addressing its basic energy and impulses.

Undertaking this training is up to each individual – you have to know and own your mind. And this means not getting convinced and captured by the persuasive reasoning of the intellect, or the evocative mood-swings of the heart. They're all convincing: but how true are they? Do their messages amount to wisdom and compassion, or are they based on narrow self-interest, biases and short-term benefits? These are good questions to put to yourself. Meditation will certainly play a big part in this, by giving you the chance to witness thoughts and moods and get a feel for their energies. Are they steady and brightening? Do they take you to a place of breadth and ease? Or are they speedy and constricting, and going who knows where? Which ones do you want to live with?

So you question and evaluate your reflexes in terms of how they feel. Just watch in your meditation the compulsive tendency to keep doing something or thinking something or getting somewhere else. It's stressful, hungry and dissatisfied. First you don't really get to know this because the mind is moving so much that the impression is blurred. Therefore you need to develop an energy that isn't about doing and distracting...like that which accompanies breathing in and breathing out. In following how the body does breathing and how it feels to just take one breath at a time, the mind changes gear. And it moderates energy into something that bears with and heals your stress, rather than makes things worse.

Reveal awareness through breathing

With breathing and with whatever you focus on, you adjust and flex your awareness. When you do standing meditation for example, just feel the soles of your feet, and then from the feet, the lower legs, the upper legs, the whole body, the face....Then gradually sense the whole body standing. Then open the chest, open the back, relax the head...the whole body becomes a sensitive organ... And within that you experience the sense of solidity, which is called 'earth element.' Or the sense of warmth and vitality, the 'fire element'; or the movement, the subtle movement of breathing, which is the 'air element'. And you can experience the quality of cohesiveness, the sense of everything fitting

together and each part of the body attuned to the whole body. This sense of belonging, of cohesion is called - the 'water element.'

We don't always experience these elements as being in balance. A lot of us live in our heads and are out of touch with the body. And we run on imperatives rather than with our feet on the ground. So there may be a lot of fire and air and not much cohesion - a fragmented 'on edge' sense. Maybe there's not much earth, so we feel ungrounded. And when the mental/nervous energy is based on such a fragmented and dislocated state, it's difficult to have a clear and broad perspective, or to arrive at a balanced form of action. No matter how smart you are, ignorance takes hold.

Therefore it's important to get fully embodied when you meditate. The posture takes care of the external aspect of the body, and the breathing, the internal. When there is balance they come together and the breathing supports the posture by itself. You can cultivate an awareness of how the body and the breathing feel in terms of elements, grounding yourself by referring to the rhythm of the breathing and especially through giving the body the time to fully breathe all the way out and pause before it starts to pull breath in. Subsequent to establishing a full settled breath-rhythm, you can spread the breath-energy through the whole body. Slowly widen and flex awareness with the breathing. This is important because the automatic tendencies are to tighten and hold on, or to hasten and spin out, or to sag and stagnate.

Carefully put breathing in the centre of your attention, and feel all around that. How hard do you have to hold it? What is necessary? You don't have to tighten up, to bear with and steady your mind. It's mostly a matter of patience and good will. If you employ this ethical sensitivity, the practice is much more enjoyable. And then that enjoyment holds it, you're in a flow. This is something you just have to cultivate, which means probably dropping it many times, losing it many times, until you get more skilful.

It is like how you learn to ride a bicycle. When I was a little boy, I saw those big boys, they just ran towards the bicycle, jumped on it, and started straight away- and me, I ran towards the bicycle, jumped on it..... and fell down! And if I tried to do it very carefully....I fell down again! And I thought : I can't ride a bicycle, everybody else can ride a bicycle, but not me – there is something wrong with me. The problem was not really having a feel for a bike. You can't ride a bike from your head, but with time your body can do it naturally. Meditation's like that. When you drop that 'me' sense and instead get the direct feel of what is going on, you don't fall very far, you find your balance and you get into flow.

This 'me' sense is another way in which ignorance keeps us out of touch. Because the 'me' is not a direct sense, it's a filter contrived by anxiety and need. We can never get things right from that place, because it isn't about being in touch, but about organising what we've touched on. We can have a strong anxiety reflex not to sense things directly - but in meditation, as we start to shift our centre from the 'me' sense, to the natural sensitivity of mind, we realise that we have an intelligence that is uncontrived and in touch .

This intelligence, or awareness isn't something in our heads – nor is it an emotional quality. It balances and attends to these, it's something you can rely on because it isn't an idea or an inspired feeling that comes and goes. And it get free of the biases of me and mine. It develops as you clear the other obstructions of ignorance. So when you are in touch with self-respect and respect for others, you're not obstructing the mind with gross biases. Then when you're more balanced in terms of elements, you feel settled and open, grounded and uncramped, free from tension or stagnation. When the obstructions are cleared in these areas, then awareness is more apparent. You begin to sense it as a

balance, a sort of poise. This awareness is the most primary form of mind, the form whose energy the various mental behaviours draw upon. The process of Awakening is one of liberating this awareness from adopting intentions, comings and goings, memories, attitudes and biases: in short from kamma and the result of kamma.

This awareness is what we deliberately reveal and develop in terms of mindfulness of breathing. It's always of the moment and specific, whereas the habitual tendency is to be slightly dreamy or inattentive to the moment. So try to be specific about how the breathing flows. It's the way in which your hand knows if you are holding a stick, or holding a bird or holding an egg – it responds to what is being held. It's the kind of knowing, intelligence, awareness that doesn't add a lot of ideas and opinions, it's sensitive to attuning to and relating to things as they are.

Ignorance regarding self

We get to know the need to be liberated from the patterns and habits of mental action, or kamma when you listen to your thoughts. It's like listening to tape recordings. You can hear different personae speaking...there is one of me being righteous...and then there is me when I am feeling a bit pathetic, and wounded...and then I feel more playful and alive, and so on. These sets of voices come from different patterns and habits, or in Buddhist terms '*sankhara*,' rather than from some real identity.

However, under the influence of ignorance, we often take those voices and emotional patterns to be ourselves. They are convincing; they justify themselves – just like the one who says that there is no theft, just a redistribution of property....Or the one who says: I don't have time to meditate....Or the one that says you are this or you are that....And there's one in particular that you may have met many times and that I call the inner tyrant. This is the one that says: 'You've got to do this! You've got to do that! And what you've done so far isn't enough, isn't good enough! ' It can only express life in terms of performances or duties; it's incapable of expressing anything like appreciation, love, or congratulation - it can't do that.

This one is not going to look after you; it doesn't know how to do it! So you don't want to put it in the centre of your life. Of course it's always able to prove why you're not good enough and list all the mistakes you've made. It can always produce the statistics and the facts and figures...and how you didn't work hard enough. But look at it another way. Is this voice going to support and encourage you? If not, respect yourself and get that one out of the driver's seat!

Now when you start to investigate and work with the conditioning of the inner speech, try to understand who it is that is speaking. Feel the energy of it. Listen to this voice as if it is someone else, try to imagine that. Listen to the attitude it has; look at the aims and goals it has and ask yourself if it respects you, has concern for you and for others. Then take the personality out of it, just look at the qualities that are present in your heart – say the anxiety, the disappointment, the irritation...regard the personal realm in this way, as qualities, pleasant or unpleasant in the mind or heart. Then your awareness isn't getting distorted into creating a self, an identity out of them.

Feel underneath the thought, feel the bitterness or the disappointment, or the frustration, or the resignation. Feel into the undertone of the voices of the mind – the uncertainty – what will I be, am I ok, where should I be, what should I do, what is the right thing? Or: 'I want! I don't know what I want, but I want!'

You can sense some of these *sankhara*, these mental patterns or programs, by the effect that they have on the body: you can feel tense areas, or feel your energy and your centre rush into your head and lose

much of the rest of your body. When you feel some of this discomfort, you can also feel the mind trying to force through it and change it. The mind is like a bird in the cage, trying to find a way out, it can't quite sit down, it can't quite get out so it is hitting against the bars and then falls, and it hits against the bars and falls again. So the end result is a restless agitation and sense of dislocation - where should I go? What should I do with this feeling, this mind-state?

The simple answer is to get back in your whole body. In general, when you sense some of these mind-states, rather than think about them or struggle with them, keep breathing in...breathing out...breathing in...breathing out, feeling the mental and bodily state with reference to the breath-energy. You let that breath-energy come directly into play. It's an energy that carries awareness, an energy that carries the sensitivity that we attuned to with regards to ethics. It is clear, unbiased, unhurried; and you can trust it. You're all right. Then as that awareness meets the mental patterns of our old kamma, the psychologies and personal history, it takes on a specific quality. It may seem broad or bright, or fierce, or very still. It's different for different people.

Meeting yourself

Here is the time when you have to put aside the book. You've read the book on how to ride a bike; now you are going to jump on the bike and find your own way with it. First it is not so good; it may seem wobbly or shaky. But it is good to be riding, rather than reading about it or watching others, or wondering whether you can ever do that, or deciding that you can't....When you are with your patterns, meeting them with awareness, then you get a sense of enjoyment, because you are gaining confidence and balance for yourself, in what is happening for you.

So for the education of awareness, you have to meet yourself. When I say 'yourself,' I don't mean a picture, a photograph of yourself - particularly those pictures that the tyrant shows you of yourself- I mean that experience of being someone, as it is occurring in the mind. This self-forming *sankhara*, is the friend and accomplice of ignorance. It's called 'becoming' (*bhava*). It is a program that takes our habits and idiosyncrasies and pieces of history and makes them into a unified self. But you can undo it by not adopting the big picture of who I am, but by instead tackling each facet and voice of the program as it arises. And for this you need to have made awareness work in the mode of moment-specific, rather than buy into any blurred big picture of 'this is me, this is mine, this is what I am.'

This then is the standard for meditation, a moment-at-a-time occasion where we meet ourselves. It's also a sacred meeting place, where there are rules and codes of behaviour: no harming, no abuse, no stealing. You can't take any prizes home with you. If you grab anything as 'that is mine,' then you buy into becoming and ignorance again. It's tempting to grab hold, because there is a beauty that develops. But the beauty doesn't belong to some person, it is the beauty of awareness as it matures, and meets the *sankhara*. It has flexibility, warmth, courage, and sensitivity; and for everyone it has very specific qualities.

So this awareness has an energy, a subtle form that is specific to each person. Some adepts are quite fierce and animated some still and quiet. It's not as if we were all to become like white sheets of paper, blank uniform size, uniform shape. The awareness that meets your *sankhara* is the gift of your spiritual life. And it develops around the grit of your life, like a pearl. If you put the grit in a living oyster, gradually a pearl forms around the grit. So it is with meeting yourself. Your true beauty is not the artificial jewel that the tyrant says you should be or have, but the pearl of awareness that arises when your habitual tendencies and kamma are met with balance and sensitivity. This is what we can trust and hand ourselves over to, because it doesn't collude with ignorance. And here is the highest form of self-respect: to meet the patterns and programs of becoming, the ones that keep trying to form you, with a mind that doesn't contract, grab hold or spin off into stories. Because of being gathered

into that awareness, the mind puts aside kammic activities. And all those *sankhara* are truly seen as incapable of bringing balance and wholeness into our lives. The consequence of that seeing is relinquishment, or letting go into Nibbana. And that letting go isn't nihilistic, but noble, because it is based upon ethical sensitivity, deep understanding and a peaceful awareness.