

Taking Stock of Oneself

by

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Though in principle the Buddhist path leads straight and unerringly from bondage to freedom, when we apply it to ourselves it often seems to take a tortuous route as imposed by the twists and turns of our own contorted mental topography. Unless we have exceptionally mature wholesome roots, we cannot expect to approach the goal "as the crow flies," soaring unhindered through the quick and blissful skyways of the jhanas and higher insights. Instead we must be prepared to tread the path at ground level, moving slowly, steadily and cautiously through the winding mountain roads of our own minds. We begin at the inevitable point of departure — with the unique constellation of personal qualities, habits and potentials that we bring with us into the practice. Our ingrained defilements and obstinate delusions, as well as our hidden reserves of goodness, inner strength and wisdom — these are at once the material out of which the practice is forged, the terrain to be passed through, and the vehicle that takes us to our destination.

Confidence in the Buddhist path is a prerequisite for persisting on this journey. Yet it often happens that though we may be fully convinced of the liberating efficacy of the Dhamma, we stumble along perplexed as to how we can apply the Dhamma fruitfully to ourselves. One major step toward reaping the benefits of Dhamma practice consists in making an honest assessment of one's own character. If we are to utilize effectively the methods the Buddha has taught for overcoming the mind's defilements, we first must take stock of those particular defilements that are prevalent in our individual makeup. It will not suffice for us to sit back and console ourselves with the thought that the path leads infallibly to the end of greed, hate and delusion. For the path to be effective in our own practice, we have to become familiar with our own persistent greeds, hates and delusions as they crop up in the round of daily life. Without this honest confrontation with ourselves, all our other pursuits of Dhamma may be to no avail and can actually lead us astray. Though we may gain extensive knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures, clarify our view and sharpen our powers of thought, invest so many hours on the meditation cushion and walkway, if we do not attend to the blemishes in our characters, these other achievements, far from extricating the defilements, may instead only go to reinforce them.

Yet, though honest self-assessment is one of the most vital steps in Dhamma practice, it is also one of the most difficult. What makes it so difficult is the radically new perspective that must be adopted to undertake an investigation of oneself and the dense barriers that must be penetrated to arrive at truthful self-understanding. In attempting to assess ourselves we are no longer observing an external entity which we can treat as an adventitious object to be evaluated in terms of our subjective purposes. We are observing instead the seat of observation itself, that most elusive center from which we gaze out upon the world, and we are doing so in a mode which casts all its motives and projects in

a critical light. To enter this domain of inquiry is to run smack up against our very sense of personal identity, and thus to have to pierce the thick screens of delusion and blind emotivity which keep that sense of identity intact.

Normally, in subservience to our need to confirm to ourselves our uniqueness and irreplaceable importance, we proceed to construct mental pictures — indeed, a picture gallery — of what we imagine ourselves to be. The self-image that emerges from these pictures becomes simultaneously a mainstay which we cling to in order to maintain our self-esteem and a standpoint from which we orient ourselves toward others and launch our projects in the world. To secure its tenuous status the mind employs a variety of tactics "behind the back" of our conscious awareness. It throws up blinders which keep out disturbing information, it flatters us with fantasied projections, it drives us to manipulate people and situations in ways that will seem to validate our tacit assumptions about our virtues and identity.

All these projects born of the quest to substantiate our sense of identity only increase our suffering. The more we lock ourselves into the images we form of ourselves, the more we alienate ourselves from others and close off our access to liberating truth. Thence release from suffering requires that we gradually discard our delusive self-images through rigorous examination of our minds.

The venerable Sariputta, in the Discourse on No Blemishes (MN 5), stresses the role of honest self-assessment as a prerequisite of spiritual growth. He points out that just as a dirty bronze bowl, deposited in a dusty place and utterly neglected, only becomes dirtier and dustier, so if we fail to recognize the blemishes of our minds we will not make any effort to eliminate them, but will continue to harbor greed, hate and delusion and will die with a corrupted mind. And just as a dirty bronze bowl which is cleaned and polished will in time become bright and radiant, so if we recognize the blemishes of our minds we will arouse our energy to purify them, and having purged ourselves of blemishes we will die with an undefiled mind. The task of self-knowledge is always a difficult one, but it is only by knowing our minds that we will be able to shape them, and it is only by shaping our minds that we can liberate them.

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