

Quarrels (4 of 5) Unbiased Attention

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We continue the theme of quarrels and disputes, a topic about which the Buddha had a lot to say.

The Buddha came across a report that there was a group of religious teachers and philosophers who were arguing about metaphysical topics such as the nature of the universe, the nature of life, whether the universe is finite or infinite, whether human beings live forever in multiple rebirths or there is no rebirth, and the nature of what happens after death. All these topics are not really about the here and now but are big existential questions people ponder. The people who had opinions were quarreling about who was right.

The Buddha described them with an analogy which in some ways is pretty apt for how people can be, but

maybe it has a kind of bias or stereotyping that we do not want to use. It's an example of what not to do. The Buddha suggested to the king who was questioning him about this that he have a group of blind people come and touch with their hands different parts of an elephant, and then report what they were touching. Those who touched the legs said the elephant was a solid column. Those who touched the torso said it was a big round barrel. Those who touched the ears said it was a winnowing basket. Those who touched the tail said it was a rope. And so it went.

Each of them thought they knew what the elephant was, but they had only a partial view. They were arguing because they had only a partial view of the reality of life. They were arguing based on that partial view. This example speaks to how we human beings are partial in our attention and awareness. We come with preconceived ideas. We come with selective vision, in that we see things according to what we want.

In this analogy, the Buddha also comes with a preconceived idea in an unfortunate way. He seems to assume that blind people can have only a partial understanding of what is going on because they're blind. And that's certainly not true.

But the Buddha put a great emphasis on the selectivity process – the biases, preconceived ideas, and judgments that we make through which we see the world around us. Arguing based on these limited views is very unfortunate. The root of many arguments is partly due to the selective and biased way that we understand and see the world. The Buddha gave many examples of this.

The Buddha identified two examples in particular. For some people, essential desires make their attention partial, biased, or selective. Desires orient them in terms of what they want, what they don't want, what they'll argue about, and the conflicts they get into. For other people, their views, opinions, and the stories they're living by make their attention selective. They insist that they're right. "This is how things are." They then argue because of that view.

One basis for these selective or biased viewpoints is objectifying the world – being the one who sees reality and creates an objective relationship, seeing everything through the lens of me, myself, and mine. It is a kind of selfishness or self-centeredness – how does everything relate to me? With essential desire, one asks what is in it for me? What can I get out of this? What kind of sensual discomfort can I avoid? With opinions, stories, and views, we think in terms of what supports our

views. What threatens our view so we have to attack, criticize, and show how wrong the other's view is?

We also have preconceived ideas that we bring into our awareness. Sometimes we may see a friend or a person who, some time ago, was one way, and we treat them that way forevermore. Maybe that has happened to you: you feel like someone keeps seeing you in a very selective way. They remember something you did long ago that doesn't really represent you anymore.

We may come to conclusions or make judgments. One big one is comparative thinking. We compare ourselves to others. We compare our views and opinions. Who has the best? We want to have the best, most thorough, and truest idea. We also want to have the best pleasure. We want to have the best experience. We think this is what the best is, and that is not the best. We always want to have the best.

The drive for essential pleasure in Buddhism is actually broader than we might think. The drive for essential pleasure is a drive for comfort and pleasantness. It's a drive to avoid discomfort and the unpleasant. We can get into conflict with others if they stand in the way, or if they are unpleasant to us or do unpleasant things, and we think that's not what we should experience. We push them away; we don't like them; maybe we get into

conflict with them. It's all about what we think is pleasant or unpleasant. We're jealous because they have the pleasure that we want. They have the wonderful experience.

Then we have views and opinions, the stories that we live in. Part of the reason why they can be so sticky is that sometimes we define ourselves by them. We want to reinforce who we are. We reinforce the idea of who we are by propping up those stories, insisting those views are true.

In all these ways, we are seeing partially. We're not seeing the full picture of things. We're oriented and selective. In that selectivity, our not seeing the whole picture, we run into things that challenge our selective narrow view. Then we easily get into conflict. We can be in quarrels and disputes over wanting our pleasure – you need to provide it. “My way or the highway,” because I want to have this wonderful, pleasant, enjoyable thing.

Sometimes there are intense fights over people's strong drive for or addiction to what Buddhism would call sensual pleasures. The same way with views and opinions. People get furious, judgmental, and self-righteous. In both these ways involving pleasure and views, we stop seeing the full picture. We stop

opening up to the full experience of what's happening here now – the full humanity of ourselves and others. One goal of our practice is to be able to drop the biases and selective ways in which we see ourselves and others. We stop the judgments, the comparative thinking, the ideas that “I'm not good enough,” “I'm a problem” or “I'm great, I'm wonderful and I have to prove it to everyone.”

Our goal is to relax all those things, to quiet the mind that's involved in all that chatter. And it's not just chatter. It's also deep subliminal attitudes we carry. We want to relax them so that we can go through the world without being in conflict, without quarreling and disputing and bumping into people, while self-righteously arguing, complaining, and criticizing.

Instead, we want to keep opening up to the full picture of what's really happening here. What's the fullness of yourself? What if you see yourself as whole, so whole that it can't be taken away by other people's opinions, views, and desires? What if you see other people as whole, worthy, autonomous, respect-worthy people?

When they show up, we can be fresh, interested, and curious – “Who is this person, what is this?” We don't have to agree or go along with what they want, but that doesn't have to be an argument. It doesn't have to

become a dispute. Approaching them with curiosity can grant people some space: “Okay, that's interesting. Tell me more.” Most people will respond less defensively if you ask them, “What's going on for you? How do you come to this? What's the background for this view or this desire you have? What are you trying to fill, or what are you trying to do here?” As we start getting to know people better, we'll find there's depth, there's background, there's a context of who people are that changes the whole nature of how we relate. That's not possible if we clash around desires or views.

Our meditation practice helps us to relax the judging mind – the mind that makes comparative thinking, that wants to be right, that wants to hold on to views and stories and chatter, the mind that is driven by desires, wants, and aversions.

It's phenomenal to drop down, relax, and settle, and to be able to be present for the world without those desires, aversions, and views, in a responsible, engaged, and wise way. This is a way that respects everyone involved and has space for everyone. We can support everyone involved in a conflict or dispute to begin opening up and seeing each other more wholly, more fully. We can find a different way that does not involve quarrels and supports the welfare and happiness of everyone involved.

We will have one more talk in this series on quarrels.
Thank you.