

Delusion (3 of 5) Practicing With Delusion

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Today is the third talk on delusion. The topic is practicing with delusion. This can be hard because part of the nature of delusion is to not know that we are deluded. Delusion can camouflage itself as truth or that this is the way things are. It can be hard to notice delusion, but it is possible to see delusion for what it is. It is possible to become free of delusion. This is a worthwhile goal because so much of the suffering and the harm caused in the world has some connection to delusion.

First, it is helpful to have some wisdom. That is an antidote to delusion. Many pieces of wisdom are useful. One of them comes from this Sufi story I heard. A man went to a Sufi master with a ring and asked, "Could you

inscribe in this ring some piece of wisdom that will always be useful for me?" A week later the man came back to get the inscribed ring. It said, "This too will pass."

This too will pass is a simple expression. It can cut through the delusion of permanence or the expectation that it will always be this way. It can free these delusions.

Another of my favorite stories about bringing wisdom is this story from China. The story has many variations, but here is one way the story is told. There was a farmer who was quite old and frail. He could barely eke out an existence on his farm, but he had a strong, young son who could certainly help a lot. They were still very poor, but the young son could do a lot of the work. They also had an old, weak donkey that somehow was their main way of plowing and caring for the farm.

One day the donkey died. Their neighbor said: "Oh, this is terrible. I am so sorry. This is a terrible thing. You are so poor." The old farmer said, "We shall see." Then one day the son went up into the mountains to collect firewood, and he found a wild horse. It was a strong stallion, and the son was able to bring it back. The neighbor said, "Oh, you are so lucky." The old man said, "We shall see."

As the son was training the horse, he fell off the horse and broke his leg. Then the neighbor said, “Oh no, you are so unlucky.” Again, the farmer said, “We shall see.” Then the local king recruited all the young men to fight a hopeless war against a neighboring country. Because the son had broken his leg, he was not recruited. Now the neighbor said, “Oh, you are so lucky that your son is not going off to war.” The farmer of course said, “We shall see.”

There is a wisdom to “We shall see.” It reminds us to not be caught in the conclusions we can make, and think that this is the way it is. There are so many kinds of wisdom we can bring, but wisdom and understanding like that only go so deep. It is a nice medicine or counter force to our tendency to delusion, but vipassana practice involves a deeper look at it.

I think vipassana practice, in relation to delusion, is a practice for people who are well established in their mindfulness practice. Just developing mindfulness is an antidote to delusion. We are developing the capacity to recognize moment by moment what is happening. We begin to recognize: “Oh, this is an emotion. I am feeling sad, happy, angry, or peaceful.” There is a freeing moment and a clear recognition where we are not entangled so much. The different beliefs and ideas we have that entangle us are put down. That provides

some protection from the delusive ways in which we are involved in our emotions and feelings.

The same thing happens with thoughts. As we learn to recognize we are thinking, there is a simple label that can be used – thinking, thinking – or remembering or planning. This clear recognition begins freeing us from the automatic way in which associations, beliefs, expectations, prejudice, or bias are involved in how we relate to our thoughts. There is a freeing from how quickly we believe or are horrified by our thoughts. We are less compelled to believe we have to think – that it is necessary to think. It is just – thinking, thinking. It is such a peaceful thing to do, and it can also be freeing.

As we begin finding this freedom, simplicity, strength, and mindfulness, there comes a time when we are better able to notice the arising or the beginning of a particular idea. When we can see the thought arise, we are not so lost in the sea of thoughts. We are not just swept along in the great currents of many thoughts. Seeing the birth of a thought is a fantastic place to question the thought: “Is it true? Maybe it’s not. Let’s see.” We can see that this is a thought. It is just a thought. It is not necessarily true. It is not necessarily reality.

For example, you might see a stranger. Somehow that stranger reminds you of the strict elementary school

teacher you had and was really afraid of. The person looks like the teacher. So the emotion and thought arise, “Oh, this is a dangerous person.”

If we are going along and not noticing when thoughts arise, it is easy for the mind to simply assume the thought is true. We take it as a true idea – that person is dangerous. If we can notice the thought, “Oh, that person is dangerous,” arising, and see it as just a thought, then that is a powerful moment.

We can question the thought, “Is it true?” We can take a second look. “What is really there in front of me? Who is this person? I don’t know this person. It looks like my elementary school teacher. Let me take a good look. In fact, when I look carefully at the person, they seem quite friendly.” Seeing the arising of thoughts, we can begin to question. We don’t have to assign so much authority to every thought. We are more likely to question in a healthy way what is there.

As we begin looking at these arising thoughts, we begin recognizing that some of them are regular patterns, the same kind of thinking. People who practice mindfulness a lot will start to see patterns of thoughts. Their thought pattern might be that the worst is always going to happen. They might think that people don’t like them, or that they should always get what they want – all kinds of ideas like that.

When we start seeing these patterns, we start realizing, “Wait a minute, this is just a belief I carry.” To apply this belief to all situations is a delusion. It is the imposition of an idea on something which is not necessarily appropriate for those ideas. Then we can start looking at the pattern. There is a quality of delusion to always be seeing through that filter.

We can then use our mindfulness to look deeper and see what is underneath all this. What is the emotion that is driving this? Is there loneliness, insecurities, or fear? Is there some kind of delusion of grandeur or fantasy self we want to create? For example, some desires or thoughts we have might come from the fantastical way in which we want to create an idea of ourselves that we are all good. Or we might create ideas that are critical of ourselves.

Once we start seeing the patterns of thinking and delusion we have, we can start dropping deeper into the emotional level – into the sources within for why or how we think this way. We are not analyzing it; we are feeling our way in. Practicing mindfulness of thinking connects us to the sources underneath where delusion is born. This allows for more freedom and the chance for something to resolve itself or to be released. Most delusions have their genesis in some clinging, something we are attached to. Delusions without

attachment are generally not as dangerous as delusions that we are very attached to.

These are a lot of words about how to practice with delusion. The simplest way is to learn how to be mindful in the present moment. Be able to track this flow of present-moment experiences. In that flow of present-moment experiences, we can watch the arising of feelings, sensations, or thoughts. Have a settled mind that can watch this arising, and then bring some wisdom to it.

Maybe one piece of wisdom is: “Maybe not. Maybe it’s not this way.” Or: “We shall see. Let’s wait. Let’s not jump to some conclusion.” Learning how to have thoughts arise and not take them as being conclusive is a powerful way of popping the bubble of delusion. The danger of delusion is often the authority we give it. If we don’t give it authority, it is easier to see delusion for what it is.

So practice mindfulness. It is such a great thing. If you feel like practicing mindfulness is too much work, it really is not. It is trusting that we can rest and be present for the deep capacity we have to be open, present, and aware of what is happening now. We discover over time that this is a place of non-work, in a sense, and everything else is a lot of work – a lot of agitation and stress in the mind.

So enjoy your mindfulness. Develop it and let it become an intimate part of who you are. Thank you