

Harmony of Zen and Vipassana (4 of 5) The Suchness of Thinking

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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I was introduced to vipassana practice in Southeast Asia – first in Thailand, then a bit in Nepal, and quite a bit in Burma. Then I came back to the United States and began participating in the vipassana practice that was taught here by Western teachers. One of the differences was that Western teachers would have a systematic way of laying out the instructions in the first days of a retreat. Like I did this week, they would begin on the first day with mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of the body on the second day, mindfulness of emotions on the third day, and mindfulness of thinking on the fourth day. Then there might be a few days of something else. At some point, the instructions were to bring all those together into a seamless whole.

The instructions, in the beginning, were like learning the alphabet. Once you learned the alphabet, you could put ideas together into words and sentences. You could communicate, saying or writing to people, “I love you,” “I apologize,” or “I forgive you.” You can say all kinds of profound things once you know how to put those letters and words together.

In Asia, however, the instructions were not laid out in a step-by-step way. You were given the instructions at the monastery relatively quickly, in maybe 15 to 20 minutes. The basic idea was that you sit down and you are present for whatever is the most predominant experience of the moment. If there is nothing that is particularly predominant or more predominant than the breathing, then you focus on the breathing. That was the default – the anchor to the present moment that kept you tethered to the present: “Stay with the breath, stay with the breath.”

The idea was not to hold everything else at bay. Rather, if something else arose that was predominant – meaning it was compelling and got your attention – then the instruction was to let go of the breath and bring your attention to the new experience.

If it was a compelling experience in the body – your knees hurt or a pleasant sensation arose – you would let go of the breathing and offer your mindful awareness to be present for the new experience, just taking it in. If the compelling experience was an emotion or thinking, then you would do the same thing. No matter what it was, you would just bring your attention to it.

When I was a relatively new Zen student, I had a koan, a question, that I was very curious about. I was not perplexed by it exactly, but I did not have an answer for it. Maybe I did not need an answer. It was enlivening to just have the question. It felt like there was something really true there.

I said to one of my teachers: “It’s easy to see how everything is different. The rug in this room is different from the wall. It is different from the ceiling and the lamps. Each one is a different thing. But how are they all the same?” I never tried too hard to think logically about how they all were the same. I believe what was happening was that the sameness of those experiences was somehow associated with how I was aware of them.

I was aware of everything with a certain kind of equanimity, openness, or respect for each thing. Each thing deserved its own respect from me. With this idea of vipassana practice – when we know the alphabet, put it all together, and it becomes a seamless whole – there is no part of human experience that is considered to be outside the domain of practice. No matter what we are experiencing, it is included: “Yes, this too is for my presence, my mindfulness.”

What I valued so much about the instructions of vipassana were the clear instructions around doing vipassana with emotions and thinking. These were things I mostly ignored when I was practicing Zen, sometimes to my detriment. I had emotions I wasn't aware of and didn't know to pay attention to. But in vipassana, I learned that everything is allowed to be included in a seamless whole.

There is an element of respect that goes into touching an experience with awareness – taking it in and letting it register. You are allowing it to be deeply felt and known as a valuable thing. Everything is allowed to be here.

There is an idea in Zen – which was very important to me – of the suchness, the thusness, of experience. Each thing in its own suchness can exist. How I understood suchness was to know whatever is being experienced or how it is experienced *before* the judgments or the ideas of being for or against it – *before* what clearly can be seen as the mind's responses, reactions, and ideas about it. Just to know the experience in its own pristine simplicity.

This can be done with something like thinking. Rather than the idea that thinking is bad – that thinking is a problem because it is a reaction that does not allow things to be in their pristine suchness – we can have the wonderful idea of turning the attention around 180 degrees. When thinking is strong or predominant, be mindful of thinking – in a sense, the pristine suchness of thinking.

Have you ever considered what a thought is? Have you ever held a thought in the palm of your hand to feel its weight? Or have you ever tried to touch a thought and see how flexible or pliant it is? Can you push a thought and it gives? Is a thought hard or can you go right through it? Have you ever considered what color your thoughts are, how large or how small they are? For some of us, when we have these kinds of thoughts, our whole relationship to thinking begins to shift.

A lot of the substance of thinking is our involvement with it – our desperation, anger, desires, the intensity around how we think. Carrying the burden of the world on our shoulders has a lot to do with our relationship to thinking – how intensely we are involved in thoughts and ideas.

To have the question, “How much does thinking weigh?” is one way, for some of us, to shift out of being so glued to and glommed on to thinking. We are carrying our thinking so heavily. Or our mind feels claustrophobic because of all that thinking. Then we can start creating space.

A very common experience for people as they meditate – if they can get settled – is that while the thinking mind does not necessarily go away, the thoughts stop coming one after another. Or they stop feeling so heavy, dense, or compelling. They get lighter and lighter, thinner and thinner, softer and softer. The thoughts can be as profound as before, but the way in which we infuse them with extra weight and intensity begins to quiet down.

We are turning our attention around to look at thinking – to be present for thought – with a light touch, just seeing it for what it is. We are also looking at the way we relate to thinking. What is our involvement with thoughts and the pristine suchness of seeing our involvement?

It is very easy to say: “Well, now it's okay – I've learned I don't have to get rid of my thoughts and that they are not my enemy. But I am not supposed to be so attached to or involved with them – now I'm a bad meditator.” In vipassana practice and Zen practice, I believe, there is no such thing as a bad meditator. It is just one more thing to experience in its pristine simplicity. “Oh, this is me chasing my thoughts.” “This is me contracting around this set of thoughts.” “This is me being so interested in this particular concern.” “Oh, this is what it is. This is what it is.”

As we do vipassana practice, we learn more and more about this seamless whole – where we bring a quiet, light touch or presence to anything compelling in the moment. With time, we get a sense that, because the attention is inclusive – that nothing is left out – awareness becomes sacred or the world becomes sacred. Awareness and the world are not two different things exactly. We have an awareness that includes everything, perhaps not actively in the moment, but ready to include everything.

As soon as awareness has something that is outside of what is acceptable for awareness – what we are not supposed to pay attention to – then my sense of this sacredness disappears. When there is no outside and everything is included, then maybe there is no inside either. It is just a seamless whole that we can sit in, not being bothered by anything, but ready to respect and care for everything.

In the next 24 hours, it may be interesting for you to look at your relationship to thinking. Is there a wiser way to relate to thinking? Is there a useful vantage point from which to experience and know that you are thinking, which suggests something about this sacred dimension of our world that comes through the medium of being aware?

Thank you all very much.