

Clear Comprehension of Non-Delusion in Formal Meditation

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So welcome back. The topic today is clear comprehension of non-delusion. Shelley and I are including this topic. So I'm going to speak about non-delusion in formal practice. Shelley will talk about non-delusion in daily life.

At one of our meetings, we were talking about mindfulness of eating. It reminded me of one of my very early retreats at Spirit Rock. Jack Kornfield passed around a little tiny box of raisins to everybody, little children's boxes that they pack, to teach us eating meditation. He had us take out a few raisins. We all began with mindful seeing of the raisins.

I realized that after all the years of eating and loving raisins in my life, I had never really looked at a raisin before. I saw for the first time all the grooves and crevices, the color changing in different areas, the shape. We smelled it. We touched it in our fingers. We felt the texture. All these things I had never experienced before.

Then we put it in our mouths and slowly chewed it, noticing the full range of taste. It seemed to me I had never eaten a raisin before. I noticed the enjoyment as the flavor just burst in my mouth. Then I noticed the flavor starting to disappear and the immediate impulse to want to eat another one. Then he brought our attention to swallowing, which was neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It was a bit of, wasn't that interesting.

The sensations were there, but they were subtler compared to the pleasure of the raisin. That was much more attractive. So it was an exercise in seeing clearly. But even in this mundane experience of eating a few raisins, I could already see the nature of pleasure, how it arose, peaked, and faded away. Soon the desire was for more pleasure, right? That's what happens.

In Buddhist practice, we address three poisons, or three defilements. I'm sure we've mentioned them throughout: greed, ill will, and delusion. They're the root mental habits that

create suffering. They're habits of mind. Greed includes all the versions of wanting, just wanting a sip of water, any form of wanting.

Ill will, or aversion, includes what we don't want, what we want to push away. Delusion is seen as a misperception of reality, seeing life through some filter that doesn't let us see what's in front of us clearly. Especially as the point of insight practice is seeing that, seeing that delusion in relation to impermanence, not-self, and unsatisfactoriness. A simple way of thinking of these three roots, the roots of suffering, is: greed says, "I want"; hatred says, "I don't want that"; and delusion says, "I don't know what I feel, I don't know what I want or don't want, I don't know that I'm wanting or not wanting." Delusion is clueless, in other words.

But I've heard it said that delusion is the most dangerous of those three defilements or poisons, because it's the hardest to recognize. One of the strongest qualities of delusion is that it believes it's true. So when we believe something is true, how do we recognize it? On one meditation retreat, one of the longer ones, the teachers encouraged us to pay close attention to the effects of greed, hatred, and delusion on the mind. I tried. I gave it a lot of effort.

My mind was settled enough that it was fairly easy to see when desire rose and passed away. I could see aversion and ill will arise and pass away. I had a strong wanting for something wonderful to happen, wanting my experience to be better. I watched the tension of my body with craving, wanting, and then I watched it fade. Same thing, I watched ill will arise in me when the person in front of me kept scooting back and crowding me. They were practically sitting on my lap, and I saw myself beginning to get annoyed.

Then annoyance went to disliking them. My view of them changed. Instead of this yogi working to awaken with me, they became this horrible person that was insensitive. Yet I saw that begin to fade away. But I just couldn't put my finger on delusion. When I tried to be alert for it, I got more and more confused. How do you see a delusion arise when the nature of it is that it's not seen, that a primary quality is that we believe it's true?

Non-delusion is often defined as a clear comprehension of reality. It's considered the deeper part of clear comprehension. The raisin, like I mentioned, is kind of on the mundane side of things, where we can mindfully see all these things. But it's only when we begin to notice the clinging to wanting that other raisin that we begin to touch this deeper area. In non-delusion, in the deeper side, we clearly see that all experience is impermanent. It's not personal, and it's unable to provide lasting satisfaction.

When we see that in a very deep way, when we know it in our bones, it becomes obvious that

there's nothing to cling to. That's where freedom is. We can see these three characteristics in a very obvious way. All living things arise and pass away, right? Humans, animals, plants. If we grow some flowers, we can't tell them not to die. It's the nature of things.

We can't stop our children from growing up, getting older, changing. I couldn't stop my hair from turning gray. Trying to cling to life, trying to keep it from changing, resisting that change only causes some painful struggle in us. But understanding this on an intellectual level is only the very beginning of insight. There's a way that with practice, we gradually see it much more clearly, and eventually so completely, so deeply, that it becomes senseless to cling to anything. There's just no point in clinging to anything when we experience it that deeply.

We can see that if we're clinging, we're struggling. We're clinging to something. Our job in insight practice is to see this process clearly. At that time, when there's struggle, there's some version of greed, hatred, or delusion at play. So Buddhist practice ultimately addresses this much subtler, deeper delusion, the core delusion of ignorance of the true nature of existence.

Even though we know better, we believe that if we just get what we want and avoid what we don't want, then we'll be happy. We believe that chasing what we want and rejecting what we don't want is a good strategy for happiness. Since none of us can get what we want all the time, or most of the time, that view leads us to a state of being perpetually unsatisfied with our lives.

There are three core delusions we talk about. We tend to think that what is impermanent is permanent. The one we love forever, and then there's a divorce, right? We think that health will last. We resist aging, sickness, death, loss. Sometimes people feel like illness is a failure. Somehow they failed at life.

As meditation practice evolves, we see that each breath, each feeling, each thought comes and goes. We see that everything, everything, absolutely everything comes and goes. Clinging to things that come and go can only cause us to be unhappy.

The second core delusion is we tend to think that what is suffering is happiness. If I just get what I want right now, then I'll be happy. You see little kids that way. They've got to get my ice cream now, now. That's all they need. I'll be happy then. Everything will be okay. I just need my ice cream.

But we're the same way. We tend to be the same way. We're just a little more prettied up a little more. If I just get this job, this is the greatest job, if I just get it, then I'll be happy. Or this house, or this relationship. Many of you who might have garagefuls of things might really

recognize that owning a lot of things can be burdensome. There's more to take care of, more things. Sometimes you walk into a garage and you can't even walk through because it's been stuffed so full.

We often don't realize that endless wanting itself is painful. If you really think about the whole idea of unrequited love, that hurts, right? If we're in perpetual desire of wanting, just wanting, wanting, wanting, it's uncomfortable. It doesn't actually feel good. We think it does.

But if you actually pay close attention to the desire, for instance, have you sat in meditation with a desire for the bell to ring? I think some of you may have had that experience, right? The feeling isn't particularly good. It's, "I want that bell to ring now." It doesn't feel good. So it's a delusion that what is suffering is happiness.

We have all sorts of physical addictions, but there are a lot of other mental addictions. We think in that moment that it will make us happy. Reaching for that device, we'll doomscroll, looking at bad news one after the other after the other, as if it's going to make us happy, as if it's going to satisfy something. And it doesn't.

The third core delusion is probably the one that tends to be trickier to really understand in ourselves. It's that what is empty of self to be self. We can identify with our looks, our clothes, our jobs, our success, our families, our status, our opinions in particular. When I was a teenager, I felt I couldn't leave the house without makeup. I just could not. It wasn't just something I wore. It felt like who I was.

Without it, I felt diminished. I felt something essential of me was missing. These days it's much easier to become aware of how we identify with our thoughts. A single opinion about politics can arise, or about how things should be, and suddenly we're fully identified with my opinion. If someone disagrees, it doesn't just feel like a different view. It can feel like we're being attacked.

So we can definitely identify with our thoughts so much that we distance ourselves from people just because we're so identified with our thoughts. We can identify with our roles. I'm the teacher. I'm the parent. I'm the one who holds it all together. We can identify with a doer.

If we accomplish a lot one day, we feel worthy. If we have an unproductive day, we feel like our personal value has been diminished. So there are all these ways that we, me, me, me, I'm this. That solidifying of the self, of things. I always remember Gil talked about when he first started teaching. He went home and he was talking to his wife, and she said, "Don't talk to me like a teacher. I'm your wife." It was like he couldn't set his role down. We've all probably done that at times.

We identify with our emotions. I've heard a lot of that here. "I'm an anxious person." It's very different than, "Oh, anxiety arose and it passed away." It's not there at one particular moment. Anybody who identifies as an anxious person has some moments of non-anxiety. But it's the way we see ourselves, the filter through which we see ourselves.

One last one I'll mention: we can often identify based on how others see us. If people praise us, we feel good. A little bit of criticism can stay with us all day. Our sense of self depends on, and shifts on, how other people see us.

That's a big part of the training in mindfulness. We want to de-automate these automatic ways of seeing life. We tend to live our lives automatically a lot of the time. The example that's the most obvious is that anybody who's driven has probably experienced driving 20 minutes on the freeway at 70 miles an hour and suddenly realized that you have no idea where you were for 20 minutes.

We do this with our senses most of the time. We see, we use some memories and past experience to provide the information instead of experiencing something newly. Like the raisin. Normally I eat a raisin. I know what a raisin tastes like. I'm not going to give it that much attention. Let me grab another one. We tend to use past experience to not see what's right in front of us.

There's such a richness of presence if we really show up newly for the things that we may know, so-called know. Every time we fully arrive in the present, we're practicing letting go of delusion. So it's not something far away. Every time we honestly, sincerely, fully arrive in the present, and we're wholehearted in arriving in the present, even if it's not pleasant, even if it's not the way we want it, we're practicing letting go of delusion.

On the retreat where I was trying to understand delusion, much later in the retreat, as I was watching the arising and passing away of things, I began to understand that we don't see delusion arise, but as we learn to see clearly, we see through our delusions. The fog clears, and that's what we call insight. So insight isn't something that we intellectually, point by point, come to, but it's something that arises as we keep showing up. When the conditions arrive, these insights arise.

One teaching that really stayed with me in this practice of non-delusion is that whenever there is struggle, there is clinging, and that the way forward is through it. So instead of my lifelong habit of turning away from struggle, "Let me get back to my breath so I can be peaceful," I began to turn toward the struggle, allowing the clinging itself to reveal itself. I turn to the struggle not to fix it, not to get rid of it, but to feel it and to see that clinging directly.

Sometimes, when we're willing to turn toward that struggle, we begin to see something very simple: that it's not the experience itself, but the clinging to it that creates the suffering. When we see that clinging clearly, there's a softening, a small letting go. It doesn't have to be the huge letting go of enlightenment, but in that moment, it's just a little bit more freedom. It's the practice of freedom, the practice of non-delusion. So I'll pass it on to Shelley. So thank you.