



See for Yourself

Released Heart: Your Guide

Removing the Thorn

-Andrew Olendzki

In a remarkable passage in the Attadanda Sutta, the Buddha speaks frankly about his fear and dismay about the state of society:

*Fear is born from arming oneself.
Just see how many people fight!
I'll tell you about the dreadful fear
That caused me to shake all over.
Seeing creatures flopping around,
Like fishes in shallow water,
So hostile to one another!
—Seeing this, I became afraid.*

This image—fishes flopping around in the shallows—seems as apt today as ever. As the world's resources diminish and the number of people in need of them increases, things may well get only more desperate. Even in the Buddha's time the situation seemed overwhelming. The Buddha acknowledges his despair, but he also describes his breakthrough to a deeper understanding:

*Seeing people locked in conflict,
I became completely distraught.
But then I discerned here a thorn
—Hard to see—lodged deep in the heart.*

*It's only when pierced by this thorn
That one runs in all directions.
So if that thorn is taken out—
One does not run, and settles down.
(Sutta Nipata 935—39)*

This pivotal insight shapes how conflict and peace are to be understood in the Buddhist tradition. Human society is formed by the collective action of its individuals; it thus reflects the qualities of heart and mind of each person. Peace in people's hearts creates peace in the world; turmoil in people's hearts creates turmoil in the world. The harmful behavior people manifest in the world can be seen as having a single cause. That cause is desire.

Desire comes in two forms, attachment and aversion. The first makes us grab after the things we like and hold onto them, the second makes us avoid or resist or attack the things we don't like. Attachment leads us to consume resources at any cost, take from others what has not been given to us, and drives us to exploit others for personal gain. It also underlies such personality traits as pride, arrogance, conceit, selfishness, and the lust for power. Aversion compels us to turn away from what we find unpleasant, to shut out or discriminate against those we don't like, and to destroy what we fear or what we don't understand. It also causes such aberrant behaviors as violence, cruelty, bigotry, and other acts of hatefulness.

But these thorns in the heart can be removed. It is just the thorn, driving us mad with pain and fear, that makes us crazy enough to hurt and hate, that makes us lose touch with our innate goodness. Like a ferocious lion with a thorn in its paw, we are only in need of a healer to come pull out the thorn that afflicts us. The Buddha was such a healer. Having diagnosed the problem as desire—so embedded in the heart that it is often hard to see—his prescription was simply to apply awareness to the problem, and to do so in massive doses. Because the workings of desire are hidden in the unconscious functioning of the mind, we must bring greater consciousness to bear on the moment. We have only to learn to see things clearly, and a natural process of healing will occur.

To heal the individual wounds brought about by desire, the Buddha prescribed mindful meditation, the careful, moment-to-moment observation of everything arising and falling in the field of phenomenal experience. When we are able to see what is actually occurring within us, wisdom will gradually evolve. The principle is simple, but it takes practice. To heal the collective wounds of our planet, likewise brought about by desire in its various forms, it seems to me we might apply the

same prescription. The way to bring collective mindfulness to bear on the collective field of experience is through witnessing and sharing what has been seen by others.

We can see many examples today of the beneficial things that can happen when an atrocity is caught on tape and shared widely with others, or when evidence of wrongdoing is brought to light and exposed before the court of world opinion. Just as the evil we are capable of as individuals lies lurking unexamined deep in our psyches, so also much of the cruelty and abuse that takes place in the world is hidden from view. And just as uncovering our personal demons can begin a process of healing, so also can the revealing of cruelties and injustices that have been kept secret have a transformative effect on global behavior.

According to the Buddha, the human world is protected by twin guardians, two forces in the mind that watch over and guide moral behavior. The first guardian of the world is hiri, a word that connotes conscience, moral intuition, and self-respect. It refers to that within the human psyche that knows the difference between right and wrong, between what is noble and ignoble, between what is worthy of respect and what is not. Each of us has within us an innate moral compass, and it is the view of the Buddhist tradition that religion is not the source of this but rather a form by which it is given expression. The second guardian of the world is ottappa, which comprises such notions as social conscience, a cultural or collective sense of morality, and respect for the opinions and the rights of others.

Buddhism teaches that anything we do that is wholesome will be done with the support and guidance of these two inner guardians. Conversely, everything we do that is unwholesome can only be done when these moral guides are disregarded. So if there is something morally reprehensible occurring in an individual or in a society, it means that we lack sufficient clarity of awareness of what we are doing. It means we are temporarily blinded by our greed, hatred, or delusion, or by some combination of the three, such that we refuse to attend openly to the deeds we are committing. When attention has been brought to bear on the matter—in sufficient amounts, with sufficient intensity, and with sufficient honesty—we will naturally shy away from doing harm to ourselves, to others, and to both.

Vijja-bhagiya Sutta:
Pali Canon, The Buddha
(paraphrased)

“These two qualities balance clear knowing (guidance). Which two?
Tranquillity (samatha) & insight (vipassana).

- **Tanquility** can be thought of, in meditation, as the mind/heart/body in the ease and repose of balance. -

- **Insight** can be thought of, in meditation, as the **understanding (knowledge)** of the nature of phenomena arising and passing away—along with (**vision**) **personal experience** of observing the origin, the arising and passing away of all phenomena.-

“When **tranquillity** is developed, what purpose does it serve?
The mind is developed
which allows obsession to be abandoned.

“When **insight** is developed, what purpose does it serve?
Discernment is developed.
Which allows ignorance to be abandoned.

“Defiled by obsession, the mind is not released.
Defiled by ignorance, discernment does not develop.

Thus from the fading of obsession there is there **awareness-release**.
From the fading of ignorance there is there **discernment-release**.”