
Helping my 'deluded' friends

Question: Since I met Buddhism in the Forest Tradition, I've become keenly aware of anatta and the delusion of personality. It seems that youth and working life is all about fostering self - confidence and affirmation, character and leadership, whereas the refuge in the Triple Gem at my retirement age has happily provided many reflections to unwind and contentedly let go.

Nevertheless, either with monastery visitors, on social media or among friends, we sometimes deal with strong role models, fanaticism and partisanship in any field, music, sports, politics and so on. It would be useful to consider how to deal with deluded friends by lending some beneficial support, but avoiding taking sides in their aversion.

Martin: If I were to think 'how can I deal with my deluded friends' - I would investigate where that thought came from. I would look for the delusion in my own mind. Who is trying to fix whom? There is the delusion - right there. I would question how I'm forming this into a problem I need to fix - and when I've fixed it I'll be happy. So when will I ever be free from suffering? When I've fixed everybody else's delusion? Your desire to help your friends to see through their delusion might seem wholesome but it is a desire to find happiness by changing the external conditions you don't like - it isn't the sort of desire that leads to the end of suffering. The desire that leads to the end of suffering is the desire to free yourself from your own delusion. If you follow that desire you will let go of the desire to find happiness in external conditions.

When you apply this to relationships - it means you will accept people as they are - you will see that this is the greatest kindness. This is the basis of good relationships and forms the basis of good communication. When people think you are trying to change them they will naturally be resistant. But if they think you accept them as they are, they are receptive to what you have to say.

Multi-tasking

Question: The practice of Buddhism encourages present moment awareness, can this awareness co-exist with multitasking?

Martin: When you are driving, and having a conversation at the same time, it feels like you are aware of your driving, but in fact, the more you get involved

in the conversation, the slower your reaction times will be. Everything seems OK, until something runs into the road. Will you notice it and react as quickly as when you are just paying attention to your driving?

Standing meditation and waiting

Question: Can you explain standing meditations - Can it be practiced while waiting for the bus or train

Martin: Standing is one of the four postures, along with sitting, walking and lying down, that the Buddha recommended for meditation. I find it a very interesting posture to practice mindfulness, noticing the natural movement of the body as it sways to and fro, continually trying to defy gravity. And noticing the desire to move – resisting the desire to go and see that butterfly or just to find a change of scenery. If I'm doing walking meditation on a warm day I will often practice standing meditation in the shade of a tree.

And one of the great benefits of standing meditation is that it is always available – and particularly so at this time when we are doing a lot of queueing, waiting to go into shops or banks for example. But rather than waiting, try just standing. If we think 'waiting', we are waiting for something to happen in the future, rather than being present with now. I had to go to the bank recently to pay in some foreign currency. I had to queue outside and then, when I got inside, I was told the systems were down and that the problem wouldn't be fixed for a couple of weeks.

When I came out I said to my wife, 'Well that was a waste of time', and explained what had happened. She said, 'No it wasn't, if you hadn't gone you wouldn't have found out they couldn't do it, and it was pleasant enough standing outside, and we had a nice walk to town'. I thought – this is true Dhamma – and I'm supposed to be the Buddhist here!

If we think in terms of waiting, we are creating the conditions for suffering to arise, but if we come into the present moment – there's no problem.

Craving for economic growth

Question: Is craving for constant economic growth a delusion? If so, what do we do?

Martin: Craving comes out of delusion. Look at how we put it into words. 'I want', 'I want to get rid of'. It is all about me getting something in the future –

it is about fulfilling a dream. When you investigate you see it's based on the belief that if I could change this one thing I would be happy forever.

It's a delusion isn't it. Where is the self that in the future will be permanently fulfilled if only this or that were put right. Where is the future? It is all a mental creation, it's all a dream. It's far from the reality of the here and now.

And what does 'constant economic growth' really mean? We are told that the Gross Domestic Product in the UK declined by 20% in April. So how does that make you feel? The practical implications of that will have affected everyone in different ways, but what is really interesting to me is, how does it make me feel when I hear this.

It is a headline which is very disturbing if we are attached to the idea of constant economic growth. If we have that attachment, we may feel a gnawing sense of unease, 'It shouldn't be this way'. That feels like this. Or if you felt, 'Well of course GDP fell, how could it be otherwise when the economy is shut down', then we can notice how that felt. We can see how the media tries to sensationalise the obvious – tries to stir up fear with soundbite headlines.

The assumption is that a decline in GDP is bad – but it was very good for the environment wasn't it.

The air was so clear wasn't it. The reduction in pollution – the reduction in noise – was such an unexpected and wonderful consequence of the pandemic.

We should challenge assumptions like 'continuous economic growth is a good thing'. More is not necessarily good. In the economic model of constant economic growth there is no concept of 'enough'. No one is allowed to step off the wheel and cultivate contentment.

We should look at the connection between economic growth and the destruction of the environment and climate change. We are on a course of environmental destruction on a massive scale and we need to challenge the assumptions that have led to it if we are going to make any real change.

We can start with ourselves, by questioning our own assumptions about what we need, and really consider, does happiness come out of dissatisfaction? The Buddha's teaching is clear, craving leads to suffering. And the benefit of letting go of desire is not just for monastics - it is a teaching for all humanity. It is the only way out of suffering.

So what can we do? Put this teaching into practice. Whether changing ourselves will change humanity – it may not – but it might – big changes start in small ways.

Anger with the world

Question: Practice has been quite challenging in the last week or so as I'm struggling a bit with anger about politicians and keep getting distracted by it. I hope it will pass soon otherwise I may have to take myself off to a hermitage in the Isle of Skye or Timbuktu!

Martin: We forget that when we experience anger, it is simply conditions causing it to flare up. We blame the external conditions; we don't see that when anger flares up, it is like putting a twig on burning embers – the twig bursts into flame – but the twig isn't the source of the fire.

It's like, when you throw a stone at a dog, it chases around looking for the stone - you can see it blaming the stone. We should be like a lion. The lion looks for where it came from – and chases the person who threw it.

So rather than blaming the conditions which cause anger to arise, we should investigate the true source of the anger, understand it - and let it cease.

Don't be fooled by letting go – it is so easy to think we are letting go, when what we are doing is getting rid of it. Watch out for strategies – don't be fooled by the clever tricks of the mind. There is only one way to bring anger to an end – we have to bear with it.

The essence of the Buddha's teaching is that whatever arises by a cause must cease - it is impermanent. If we don't add fuel to the fire the anger must cease. If we can bear with it - whatever 'it' is - if we can watch it to the end - we will realise freedom. We'll know its nature is to cease - by letting it cease in its own time, we'll realise cessation. The challenge is to stay with it, to bear with it unconditionally.

You're opening up over and over to, 'anger feels like this'. At first it's good to name it - but then let go of the name and just rest in the feeling without the thought 'anger' - that's how you know it as it really is. Just rest in the feeling and don't stop - keep looking at it. Freedom lies in unconditional acceptance. You won't be free if you look away; give in to following a strategy - trying to get a result - trying to escape.

The whole thing is an amazing act of kindness - towards oneself as well as the external cause of your anger. When you see clearly how painful this is - you see that unconditional acceptance is the greatest kindness. You are not unconditionally accepting the wrongs of the world - but the nature of the world - Dhamma - the truth of it.

And you don't need to go anywhere to see it - if you go to Sky your anger will follow you - and you'll be even more angry - you have to let it cease right here.