

In part one of this three-part series, it was pointed out how Buddhism, very sharply, focuses on the human being living in this world and on his own responsibility for his life. Unlike the authors of Abrahamic religions, the Buddha was not other-worldly. Buddhists have their feet firmly planted on the ground. In My Kind of Buddhism, I even set aside rebirth and samsaric ideas in order to concentrate on this central and practical quality of Buddhist teaching. My Kind of Buddhism identifies the vein of Buddhism as something very pragmatic and I pick and choose what accords with such a perception. The notion of rebirth, therefore, doesn't attract me. Buddhism has many sects and each of these emphasize different aspects. In like manner, my emphasis is on the pragmatism of Buddhism

MY KIND OF BUDDHISM - Part 2

THE POWER OF THE MIND AND MEDITATION

I find the human-centric approach of this pragmatism very refreshing and very life affirming. The Suttas show us how many times the Buddha avoided brain teasing questions about the 'ultimate reality,' and other metaphysical questions. Is the universe finite or infinite, for instance? Renowned Buddhist scholar, KN Jayatilleka pointed out that the Buddha refused to answer such queries deliberately because he considered them to be meaningless in the sense of what contemporary logical positivists call meaningless. For example, AJ Ayer, in his classic, 'Language, Truth, and Logic,' stated that any question that is not even in principle verifiable is nonsensical.

Even unmindful of such technologies and developments, the Buddhist practice of meditation has for centuries been believed in mind and consciousness improvement through meditation practices.

The Jayatilleka view in the latter's classic, "Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge," asserted the same. Jayatilleka cites one instance, where when posed with metaphysical questions about so-called ultimate reality, Buddha famously remained silent. When asked by the interrogator why he was silent, the Buddha responded: "I have answered you." This response is in line with the kind of Ayer thinking, according to Jayatilleka. When a question is meaningless what answer can one give but remain silent?

In the famous Parable of the Bow and Arrow, one observes a similar Buddha focus on practical issues. A man hit by a poisonous arrow should first treat his wound before the poison takes over, said the Buddha. It is silly to rush and

try to ascertain the source and other details of the arrow. Living right in this world we are in trouble (dukkha) and let's fix that, the Buddha seemed to have urged. I am not inclined to regard this as a negative view of existence, although many expressions of popular Buddhism does seem to believe it that way. Rather, I take it that one has to fix problems in order to live our life well. Extreme greed, for instance, is central to our concerns. The Buddha tried to show a path of enlightened living.

Power of Mind

In pursuing such a human-centric path what is most central is for us to focus on our mind. We are what we are because of what goes on in our minds and we can take control of ourselves by taking control of our minds. One has to develop self-awareness so that one can grasp the

structures of one's thoughts and thinking processes. The Buddha urged that we should attend to our minds as of prime necessity. Examine our minds and be watchful how we live. This is very much what Socrates, many years after the Buddha, said when he urged, "the unexamined mind is not worth living."

The very first stanza in the Dhammapada is about the foremost power of the mind in our practical lives. "(The mental) natures are the result of what we have thought, are chieftained by our thoughts, are made of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, sorrow follows him even as the wheel follows the foot of the drawer."

If I were to put this in very simply in three steps, it would be as follows:

Step One: The quality of our actions and behaviour will determine the quality of our lives.

Step Two: Our actions and behaviour are a result of the thoughts in our minds. Put in another way, our beliefs shape our perceptions, and our perceptions shape our actions.

Step Three: Left to itself, our minds are full of shoddy thinking processes. Our thoughts are biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or down-right prejudiced.

Step Four: In order to improve our thinking and our mind's capacity and therefore our quality of life, we must train our minds to be aware of our thought structures. This is self-awareness.

Thus self-awareness and mind training go together. Our minds are habitually laden with a raft of assumptions. Typically, we are not fully conscious of such assumptions.

Many of these in-built thoughts have come to us from our childhood 'brainwashing,' and they tend to get stuck and to position our minds for the future. With the development of mental training and self-awareness we can ferret out the accumulated raft of false assumptions that are behind our beliefs. Once trained, such a mind will have an autopilot for the future. "The control of thought, which is difficult to restrain, fickle, which wanders at will, is good. A trained mind is the bearer of happiness," (Cttavaggo, Dhammapada). Again, in the same textual section it is said: "Whatever an enemy may do to an enemy, whatever a

hater may do to a hater, a wrongly directed mind will do us greater harm."

Meditation Practice

The idea is that a trained mind can acquire power and control of its thoughts. This brings us to the role of meditation in Buddhist life. Meditational practices are meant to do that training. The power of the mind is employed by us to go on the paths we require. I am the jockey of the horse that is the mind and I hold the reins. We can try this out ourselves in simple instances when we virtually order our thoughts to drift away and bring in optional thoughts. Mind training is meant to regulate thinking along wholesome lines. Neuroscience has revealed that the brain once thought to be a static quantity is actually adaptable and that new neuro pathways can be built. The new concept is neuroplasticity of the brain. Many claims have been suggested linking meditation practices to improved brain changes. With emerging developments in brain im-

agery this kind of research may lead to surprising results.

Even unmindful of such technologies and developments, the Buddhist practice of meditation has for centuries been believed in mind and consciousness improvement through meditation practices. There are two main types of meditation in Buddhism: Samatha Bhavana and Vipassana Bhavana. The first is a training in quietening the mind and keeping it focused through various breathing techniques. The second follows after that state of quiet is achieved. Vipassana is a training in insight. Strangely every religion seems to lay emphasis on some kind of meditation. However, Christianity, for instance, develops meditation aimed at the contemplation of the life of Jesus and the glorification of God. In the Buddhist practice, on the other hand, the goal is to enhance the individual to think better and so improve his life.

Contemplation of Dissolution of Body For instance, much of Vipassana dwells on the three characteristics of existence: Impermanence (Anicca), tragic potential of Life (Dukkha) and soullessness (Anatta). The third is a follow-up on the first, where the prevailing Upanishadic claim to a permanent substance or soul was repudiated by the Buddha.

The reality of our impermanence and the inbuilt quality of change in nature

To Page 8

