

The Mirror of Meditation

Rev. Leon

Somebody once said that we almost never see a reflection of ourselves in which we are not posing – trying to become some image of what we would like to be. It is telling that we are largely unaware of this process and that we do it implies that we are generally unsatisfied, in some way, with the way that we appear.

In terms of training, there is a way of talking about meditation as if it were a mirror or as if it were like a mirror. Meditation is the mirror in which we have the potential to see ourselves clearly, and as distortion-free as it is possible to see oneself. This is one of the themes in the morning service scripture which we recite often, “*The Most Excellent Mirror Samadhi*”.

Like looking at a reflection of ourselves in a physical mirror, when we look at our own minds in meditation, there can be a sense of dissatisfaction or even appall, and this can result in or be the result of distortion in how we see ourselves.

We sit down to look at ourselves in meditation and we see just what is there with all its distortion and truth, murkiness and clarity, darkness and light: right from the beginning we see what is there, but we may not know how to make sense of what we see, or what we see may be frightening or disturbing. This is actually OK. It may not be a comfortable state to be in, but it is the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of clarity. As we return to our meditation seats persistently over time, we can learn to overcome the fear and let go of our distorting habits.

It is important to remember that part of what we may be seeing in the functioning of our own minds is distortion and that sometimes this distortion is caused by “posing” – trying to be some way that we think we or others will be able to accept. This “posing” is often hard to recognize but through regular sitting practice it, like all the other types of distortion that we have in our minds will, in time, reveal itself.

There is no particular way that we should be as Buddhist trainees, there is no ideal form or model that we are trying to be like; our lives, just as they are today, contain the Buddha Nature, and we can see it if we look carefully and do not judge ourselves. There is nothing to pose for. Sometimes a lesser truth we might encounter in our life of meditation, is the truth that some of our behavior, habits of speech and mind, cause us and others suffering and we might wish to relinquish these habits. In the process of relinquishing habits that cause suffering, we may change or mask our habitual impulses, but this is a deliberate act to train ourselves and not an attempt to hide from the unpleasantness within ourselves, and make ourselves look good in the eyes of others. As an example, we might recognize that we have a tendency to snap at people when we are angry: as an act of training, we might try to say something pleasant in a nice tone of voice, even though we may feel angry, just as a way to train our speech while angry.

Some times our mental distortion is caused by past painful experience, sometimes it is caused by the repetition of non-preceptual activity. Whatever the cause of mental distortion, it is through the deepening stillness and awareness of meditation that we become aware of it.

The stillness of meditation allows us to just look and see what is going on in our own hearts and minds. Sometimes this can take great effort and determination because, for some reason, there is often great resistance in us to facing what may be arising in our minds. This resistance usually has fear as a component, but also there is often a mistaken perception about what we are beginning to see. This mistaken perception can be the lynch-pin that keeps the distortion from being fully seen and released. Again, though, this is not fundamentally an obstacle, if we continue to try to sit with as much stillness and openness as we can when we meditate. That is, the openness to see things as they are.

One clue that we can use to let ourselves know when we might be distorted about something is having an attitude of bitterness or disappointment. If you find yourself saying things like “this is just hard, cold reality and I have just got to accept it”, or having a lingering feeling of hurt or disappointment, then it could be good to sit a little stiller with the situation and ask within yourself – “is there something I am misperceiving or misunderstanding about this situation?” and then just carry on being willing to see things differently. Frequently some insight will arise if we continue to try our best to be still.

There is a saying that having a little bit of understanding is more dangerous than having no understanding at all. In our practice this is especially true, not in the sense that we should not be grateful for our insights or belittle them, but in the sense that there is always more for us to learn and, if we hold on, even a little bit, to what we know about ourselves, life or practice, we can obscure the next thing that we might learn. As Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett often put it, the attitude of “I could be wrong” is essential when coming to know our own minds and its distortions.

Another helpful attitude to have is the simple willingness to be different than how we think we are, or even how we actually are. I think part of the posing that I talked about earlier is the attempt to keep ourselves the same as we once were, just for the sake of keeping things easier to keep track of. We are constantly changing whether we would like to or not, and to cultivate the attitude that we are willing to be and do differently can make a significant difference in how much we suffer. This attitude doesn't even have to be accompanied by any particular effort in any particular direction to be any particular way. It is more an attitude of being willing and ready to follow the heart as we might find it good to do.

Earlier I mentioned “*The Most Excellent Mirror Samadhi*”; the first idea it introduces, after the idea that we can use meditation as a mirror for our mind's activity, is the idea that we have all that we need and that we should be careful of it: “now you have, so guard well”. As we continue to sit, we will come to see that this is true. When we are bitter about accepting hard reality, we can remind ourselves of this Dharma: there is more about life than I am seeing at present. One of the best ways of guarding our ability to find this “More” is the willingness to see things differently; the willingness to be different can help us to clarify our distortions.