

CHAPTER TWELVE

RIGHT THOUGHT

The eight steps of the Eightfold Path are like the spokes in a wheel, and are divided into three natural groups: *panna*, *sila* and *samadhi* (see Chapter 6, page 7). The first two steps comprise *panna*, which means wisdom in the Pali scriptural language. With the advent of Mahayana Buddhism, whose scriptures are in Sanskrit, *panna* becomes *prajna*. We now turn our attention to the second aspect of wisdom, which in the Pali scriptural language is called *samma-sankappa*, or Right Thought. Many contemporary teachers refer to *samma-sankappa* as “right intention,” which is also a reasonable translation. Obviously, one can not possibly practice the rigorous discipline of right thought without right intention. I prefer the simplicity of Right Thought; it matches the plainness and straightforwardness of the Buddha’s words. He describes this second step as:

The thought free from lust.
The thought free from ill-will.
The thought free from cruelty.

Actually, one might well lobby for another translation: Right Thinking. This emphasizes the *activity* of thought, which seems more in keeping with what the Buddha taught; we must learn to take responsibility for the thoughts that pass through the mind.

An old Southern adage says that you cannot stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can stop them from nesting in your hair. The birds flying above our heads are all the unruly thoughts flying through our minds helter-skelter. Sometimes they are mere chattering magpies, a pin ball machine bouncing from “What time is it?” to J. Alfred Prufrock’s famous “Shall I eat a peach?” One well known Buddhist simile is about a monkey swinging from limb to limb in a forest. Our thoughts fly through the

mind exactly like that monkey swinging through the forest. One random thought comes up, and it links to another by association, often making the most absurd connections. We think “peach” and swing to the next limb which may be pondering T.S Eliot’s dark poem, or we decide to have a fruit salad tonight, or we are reminiscing about a long ago summer walk down Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia. Or perhaps we think about going to the beach which, after all, does rhyme with peach. This entire sequence feels completely sane to us.

At other times the thought-birds are more biting, criticizing this; making fun of that; judging others or ourselves. Sometimes our thoughts become a darker bird brooding with lust, ill -will and cruelty, as specifically mentioned by the Buddha. When thoughts nest in our hair they become obsessions, vultures feeding on our very soul. These are the conditions that send us to psychotherapists and meditation teachers.

The idea that we cannot keep the birds from flying overhead is a core belief in our powerlessness over the mind. It has produced a kind of passivity in most humans, a feeling of helplessness as we watch ourselves “caught” in the nest of thought. It is no exaggeration to say that the tail has gained control over the tiger. The Buddha suggested something that to this day is totally radical. Describing one who has gained control over his mind, the Buddha said:

Whatever thought he desires, that thought will he think,
whatever thought he does not desire, that thought will
he not think. He has extinguished thirst, he has shaken
off the bonds.

This is an extraordinary assertion. When tamed, the very mind that keeps us constantly in a nest of trouble, with thoughts constantly running helter-skelter, can lead us home:

I do not know anything which, when unbridled,
uncontrolled, unwatched, untamed, brings such ruin as
thought – and I do not know anything which, when

bridled, controlled, watched, tamed, brings such benefits as thought.

In the absence of lust, ill-will and cruelty, in other words unwholesome thoughts and mind states, the mind will naturally become as clear as a forest pond. There is no magic to it. A mind that is clear can see its own essence, pure and simple. A mind that is contaminated by unwholesome thoughts of greed, ill-will or cruelty is a mind that is lost in the content and completely separated from its natural state of clarity.

Right Thought is where the rubber hits the road. It is the true content of our character, the truth of who we are. The hard work of right thinking begins when we look at the forest pond and recognize the absolute beauty that lies underneath the surface muck. Right Understanding is that which sees the truth of our nature. Right Thought is that which pulls up its sleeves and starts cleaning. If Right Understanding is the awakening, Right Thought is the cultivation that must follow.

Over many thousands of years a strange condition has evolved in human consciousness, a habit of compartmentalization that has become second nature to us. We have become comfortable with believing one thing and thinking quite another; it is a kind of inner conflict that feels perfectly normal. We chant lovingkindness with utmost sincerity, yet we can tolerate the cruelest thoughts about our partner, political opponent or another religion. We want world peace, yet we tolerate inner chaos and rebellion. Relentlessly we push for our world view in complete opposition to the Buddha's teaching that what we are really pushing is our self-delusion. We have become stupid by force of habit. In fact, we have disconnected Right Understanding from Right Thinking. We live in a state of internal contradiction. Nisargadatta says:

To remember what needs to be remembered is the secret of success. What is supremely important is to be free of contradictions: the goal and the way must not be on different levels; life and light must not quarrel; behavior must not betray belief. Call it honesty, integrity,

wholeness; you must not go back, undo, uproot,
abandon the conquered ground.

“Behavior must not betray belief.” Bull’s Eye. Right Thought must never betray Right Understanding.

What does it mean to take responsibility for thoughts of ill-will, greed or cruelty? Should we self-flagellate? Attack our own mind? Obviously not. Taking responsibility means to *own* our thoughts; acknowledge they are coming from mind; not from Satan; not from the ether; and not from that convenient excuse for unwholesome thoughts, the unconscious. Taking responsibility means that we no longer skip over our unskillful thoughts, pretending that they are harmless. Taking responsibility means that we accept the truth that our unwholesome thoughts are a true measure of Right Understanding and no different from the muck and debris covering a beautiful forest pond.

The seminal Buddhist story about an active approach to right thinking comes from Ch’an literature. Ta Hui (1088 – 1163) tells the story:

In the old days Kuei Shan asked Lazy An, ‘What work do you do during the twenty-four hours of the day?’

Lazy An said, ‘I tend the ox.’

Kuei Shan said, ‘How do you tend it?’

Lazy An replied, ‘Whenever it gets into the grass, I pull it back by the nose.’

Kuei Shan said, ‘You’re really tending the ox!’

The ox represents the untamed mind. In another translation, the disciple says, “I ruthlessly pull it back by its nostrils.”

Some of us might recoil at the idea of *ruthlessly* pulling our mind out of the mire and muck of mental defilements. It certainly does not sound very healthy, psychologically speaking. But what if one is drowning in the mire and muck of his mental defilements? What if he has lost complete access to mindfulness? It is one thing to notice

unskillful thoughts when we are sitting in meditation with some clarity in the mind; it's quite another matter to notice unskillful thoughts when we are completely lost in their content. Sometimes, as a last resort, we must "crush the mind with the mind" according to the Buddha.

A woman came to do psychological work with me as her marriage of 32 years was ending. Weeks turned into months and still she would come to her session and within a few moments find herself in a maelstrom of fury. She could not eat; she could not sleep. We worked with her rage from many angles, in particular, looking for its roots in the unconscious. And she did begin to have insight into her anger: how it was actually connected to a cold and distant father who in fact abandoned the family when she was a little girl. Unfortunately, those insights connecting her childhood to her present-day fury with a husband who had fallen in love with his secretary did not mitigate her obsession one iota. Still she raged and could not sleep nor eat. The dark bird of hatred was nesting in her hair.

At one point, after quite a number of months, I said, half-jokingly and half in desperation, "there are behavioral techniques such as the famous rubber band approach that we could try." "What is that?" she asked with some curiosity. "You wear a rubber band around your wrist, and when you realize you are thinking about David, just give the rubber band a sharp snap." We both laughed as I suggested a few other less aggressive behavioral techniques. A week later she came to her session and displayed bright red marks on her wrist. "It's working!" she said. Slowly over the next few months she trained her mind to stop the obsessive thoughts about her ex husband. Literally, she crushed her mind with her mind.

Actually, her story is quite Buddhist in another sense. She did not pull the ox ruthlessly out of the grass because she wanted to be a better person and go to heaven. Indeed, her fantasies of hiring a hit man to dispose of her unfaithful husband did not concern her at all! Fortunately for her, and to my relief, she had enough self control to see that her homicidal fantasies were not practical, and, after all, it was not a good legacy to leave her children. She wanted

to stop her thoughts of ill-will and cruelty for one reason only: They were causing her immense *suffering*. Ta Hui says:

Since you're studying this Path, then at all times in your encounters with people and responses to circumstances, you must not let wrong thoughts continue. If you cannot see through them, the moment a wrong thought comes up you should quickly concentrate your mental energy to pull yourself away. If you always follow those thoughts and let them continue without a break, not only does this obstruct the Path, but it makes you out to be a man without wisdom.

Upaya is a Sanskrit word that is mostly associated with Mahayana Buddhism. It translates as "skillful means," suggesting that the Dharma must be uniquely taught to each individual, based on his or her present capacity to understand. I think of *upaya* as "different strokes for different folks." We want to remember skillful means, as we look at different ways of working with our thoughts. Ta Hui suggests two distinctly different ways of working with our thoughts when he offered a caveat to pulling the ox out of trouble by the nose. He first said of our thoughts, "... if you cannot see through them." This is a crucial distinction. Many humans cannot see their thoughts as thoughts. Perhaps this is true for most of us. It is exactly analogous to seeing a play, watching a dance, listening to music, and getting completely lost in the performance; we humans have a profound need to be entertained. Our thoughts, good and bad, are our favorite form of entertainment. So Ta Hui's caveat refers to those who have sufficient mindfulness to see through the thought.

For those of us who are studying the Path, Ta Hui says that we simply cannot afford to tolerate wrong (unwholesome) thoughts. There is not a hint of ambiguity in his message, no wiggle room for the ego. *Unwholesome thoughts block the Path*. But he ups the ante exponentially by saying that we have to do this work of Right Thinking *at all times* in our encounters with people and responses to circumstances. "What about a break for tea?" The number one game of the ego is to slow things down, to gain a little control over circumstances. The ancient ego knows by sheer instinct that "at all

times” would mean its demise. It relentlessly negotiates for “a little more time,” for a little break here and a little break there. “I’ll sit after I read this interesting novel,” it says. While we sip our tea, the ox quietly munches away. “At all times” wears the poor ego out like an old shoe, as Chogyam Trungpa once suggested.

One can imagine Ta Hui’s sharp retort to the question: “At all times?” He would say, “If your hair were on fire would you need a break while you were trying desperately to quench it?” Ch’an Master Tao Lin said, “Fuel and fire are joined, consciousness and identity do not stay: how can you not be in danger?” This is the message of Buddhism, whether Theravada or Mahayana: Time is flying swifter than an arrow. Don’t wait till you hear the voice of death to begin to practice the Dharma. By then it will be too late.

Ta Hui then says, “If you cannot see through (your thoughts), the moment a wrong thought comes up you should quickly concentrate your mental energy to pull yourself away.” For the moment, we will skip over his reference to seeing through the thought. He tells us that the moment a wrong thought comes into our awareness we need to quickly concentrate our energy. Why quickly? Because the longer a sequence of thoughts runs, the stronger it becomes. Like a forest fire it feeds on itself. And let’s be honest with ourselves, thoughts of revenge, envy and greed can feel really good! The best time to put out a fire is when it first ignites. But if the shrub is unnoticed, it spreads to some small trees; then it spreads to larger trees, until it is entirely out of control. When the entire forest is ablaze we have an ecological disaster. When the mind is ablaze with greed, hatred and delusion, we have the human condition.

We must concentrate our energy to “pull the mind away.” This is pulling the ox out of trouble by grabbing hold of its nose. This is not to be confused with repressing an unwholesome thought, by the way. In *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, Thich Nhat Hanh describes the effort to repress unwholesome thoughts this way:

Continued practice means trying our best not to allow the negative seeds in our store consciousness to be touched in our daily life, not to give them a chance to

manifest themselves. The seeds of anger, discrimination, despair, jealousy and craving are all there. We do what we can to prevent them from coming up.

The store consciousness is a Mahayana term roughly corresponding to the Western concept of the unconscious. Pulling the ox by the nose is what we do when an unwholesome thought has been activated in the store consciousness and broken into the conscious mind. The most obvious technique for pulling the ox out of trouble is to force it back to its meditation object. For instance, as we sit in meditation, feeling the sensations of the stomach rising and falling, noting each sensation moment as microscopically as possible, we suddenly discover thoughts of ill-will or greed or anger in the mind. Pulling the ox by the nose is summoning up sufficient mental energy to pull the mind back to the sensations in the stomach, or the breath or whatever our meditation object happens to be. The Buddha suggested other ways of pulling the ox back, for instance using the technique of substitution. If we discover ill-will in our mind, we try to substitute a skillful thought in its place, for instance thoughts of lovingkindness, or contemplating aspects of the Dharma. This is still pulling the ox by the nose.

We must have sufficient mental energy to quickly catch hold of the unskillful thought and pull the mind away, but we have one great hurdle to leap over: Success depends on our mental energy, or as Ta Hui often said, our power. We gain mental power by resting the mind. Resting the mind is another way of describing meditation. When the mind does not waste energy, it gains energy. And as Ta Hui says, when it gains energy, it gains power. Too often, we simply do not have sufficient mental power to pull the mind away from the nest of defilement, so mesmerized have we become by our thoughts.

Ta Hui ends by telling us the straight truth: If we allow our unwholesome thoughts to continue, we have blocked the Way. Pure and simple. Fate has not blocked the way; circumstances have not blocked the way. Our obduracy; our insistence in having our way; our fear of letting go; the force of habit and our ignorance have blocked the way.

Ta Hui's second and far more powerful approach to Right Thinking is contained in the words "if you cannot see through" your thoughts. It is vital that we have enough humility to admit that this is our human condition. Most of us *believe* what we think. We cover each thought with the five skandhas of form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. Thought feels so real! We have lived within the nest of our thinking mind for decades, and we have become subdued. One might say that we have been conquered by our thoughts. The crazy monkey flying from limb to limb has become quite normal to us, and, sad to say, the older we have become, the more our tired old monkey tends to stick to the same patterns as it swings through the forest. If I embrace liberal ideology, I totally believe that conservatives are stupid, selfish and dangerous. If I embrace conservative ideology, I totally believe that liberals are stupid, selfish and dangerous. We are made pathetic by our inability to see through our thoughts.

So, seeing through a thought is a very big deal indeed. As students of the Path begin to watch their thoughts, they begin to develop an observing witness. As the observing witness gains strength, it can literally note the presence of a thought without merging into that thought. This is an accomplishment of enormous consequence. When we no longer merge or fuse with a thought, we can begin to investigate the thought. This is the point at which one no longer needs to pull the ox away from trouble. One sees unskillful thoughts and knows that they are defilements that will block the journey to Liberation.

As one gains mental power and clarity, she begins to see through the thoughts and discovers that the thought is actually empty of self. As William James famously said, the thought is itself the thinker. We see the thought for what it is: nothing at all. It was not conjured up by a person; it is impermanent and unsatisfactory. At this level of insight, one no longer needs to distinguish between "good" thoughts and "bad" thoughts. When one can see through a thought, one knows that all thoughts are empty, whether they are good or bad. One knows that she must never build a house based on such flimsy material again. At this level, thoughts vanish of their own accord because the flame of awareness melts them like

snowflakes. This is Ta Hui's reference to this more subtle stage of mental development.

From this perspective, one can understand Krishnamurti's teaching that we must become students of our thoughts, and understand why his teaching was limited to a small audience. He urges us to "read every word, every phrase, every paragraph of the mind, as it operates through thought." But those of us who are at the earlier stage of pulling the ox back by the nose, let alone the even earlier stage of crushing the mind with the mind, are not ready for Krishnamurti's upaya or skillful means. A person who is caught in the nest of his thoughts does not need to be reading each word, every phrase and every paragraph. He needs to be developing enough mental control to pull himself out of trouble.

Krishnamurti's voice was almost exclusively directed toward those who could "see through" their thoughts; this was Ta Hui's audience as well. For those who are able to follow his teaching, there is no need to try to repress thoughts, or pull the ox away from trouble. Those who are able to witness their thoughts leave them completely alone, refrain from judging or suppressing them. If one can become an active observer, all thoughts come to a natural completion, a kind of flowering that ends with a gap of silence. An impartial witness simply watches thoughts come and go. When thoughts no longer stain the mind, no longer "stick," their content is irrelevant. Krishnamurti said, "There is freedom only in ending." The end of thought is the gap or wedge where truth has the space to enter consciousness.

Chogyam Trungpa described it this way,

Insights come only when there are gaps in our struggle, only when we stop trying to *rid ourselves of thought*, when we cease siding with pure, good thoughts against bad, impure thoughts, only when we allow ourselves simply to see the nature of thought.

Both Krishnamurti and Chogyam Trungpa's teaching are based on a meditator's ability to remain in the silent witness, without getting lost in the content of thought. The myriad ways of working with

thought, of Right Thinking, are based on the myriad of difference in us. The technique of watching a thought without judging it as good or bad is only for humans who have gained complete mastery over the ox. When we fool ourselves into thinking that we are “advanced” after all these years of meditation, and do not need such basic work as learning to control our mind, we have been seduced by the very ox we need to control.

We have not mentioned one crucial ingredient that must be present for us to work with Right Thinking. In addition to Right Understanding – the ability to distinguish between skillful and unskillful thoughts, there must be *sati*, or mindfulness, present. Without mindfulness, we are lost in subjectivity; we are left with the rubber band technique. A meditator must have the capacity to watch a thought from the observing standpoint. And we must understand and be capable of applying the appropriate Right Effort. Right Understanding distinguishes between the wholesome and unwholesome thoughts, but only *sati*, the silent witness, can notice the presence of these thoughts, and only Right Effort can direct the mental energy appropriately. Right Effort and Right Sati are the sixth and seventh spokes in the great Dharma Wheel. We will revisit them later.

Right Thought completes Right Understanding, and from the two comes wisdom, *panna* or *prajna*, the Dharma Eye that simply knows, the Gate that will lead us to freedom. Right Thought is the mirror of what is inexpressible, a reflection of the *meaning* of Right Understanding. But this is not the end of our journey, more work must be done. From here the Wheel of eight spokes turns outward, in the direction of our relationship with the world: with our speech, our actions and our livelihood. This is the second grouping of the Eightfold Path called *Sila*, or virtue. We will discuss *sila* in the following pages.