



Hello. I hope the last week you have been able to engage in the practice and try to see how you experience suffering—and how your mind creates your own suffering. Those are very important experiences for our practice, because they help remind us what the Buddha taught. He’s right. And so we will be able to find this commitment to engage in the practice. Otherwise you would believe that, “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe other people suffer. I don’t suffer. I don’t. I don’t know what he’s talking about.” Or, “I only suffer, like, once in a great while.” Then we might not find it necessary to engage in the practice. And we will stop practicing and fall out of it altogether. And that would be a shame.

So I hope this has been a productive week for you in the practice. And today what I’d like to talk about is I would say, in a way, warnings given to us by Master Hui-Neng in the *Platform Sutra*. Warnings about what? Warnings about how we can go wrong in the practice. It is very easy for us to hear the instruction and just kind of go off and kind of do our own thing without knowing that we actually have strayed far from the path. So last time I talked about suffering, and this is one thing that’s really important for us to remember. After we hear these fancy words like buddhanature or emptiness or enlightenment, it’s easy for us to lose track of what the practice is about.

It’s always useful for us to come back to the understanding that we practice in order to be free from suffering. We’re free from suffering by knowing how we create our suffering. And so by losing sight of that, we might fall into some of these problems that Master Hui-Neng tried to warn us against. So the first thing that he was trying to warn us against was implicit in the poem that he composed. If you have heard of Master Hui-Neng’s story, you will, you might have heard, of this poem. But I’d like to retell it a little bit. That the story goes that when Hui-Neng was in this monastery, the patriarch, the fifth patriarch, was about to pass on the dharma to the next generation, to find a dharma successor. And he asked everyone to write a poem to demonstrate the understanding. And the only person who did was the head monk that everyone



thought, just assumed, that he had the realizations and he was going to lead everyone in the practice after the old master passes on.

He wrote this poem. “Our body is the bodhi-tree, and our mind a mirror bright. Carefully we wipe them hour by hour, and let no dust alight.” So it’s alluding to the idea that in our practice it’s really important for us to keep defilements out of our mind. That’s our practice. To make our mind, to keep our mind, pure. And upon hearing this being recited by a younger monk in the monastery, Hui-Neng, who was practicing in the kitchen because he was actually fully enlightened. The master was worried that it would cause others to be envious of him.

He asked to have this poem written up on the wall. What he wrote was, “There is no Bodhi-tree, nor stand of a mirror bright. Since all is void, where can the dust alight?” You might be able to notice a difference. Basically he’s saying, “What mirror? No mirror, what’s the need of trying to wipe those dusts away?” And, of course, this is quite a profound teaching. But I’d like to bring our attention to the contrast of these two poems, because it points to a very common misunderstanding about how to go about a practice. And the misunderstanding is the tendency to make thoughts our enemies—the belief that thoughts are defilement and my job here is to keep my mind pure, clean, with nothing.

So what do I do when thoughts arise? I try to get rid of them—try get rid of them. And this is a very common issue. Very often in retreats after a couple meditation sessions, the main complaint I hear from participants is that, “The thoughts just won’t stop.” Like, their thoughts. And as if they have a problem. And it is quite funny we think having thoughts is a problem. Having thoughts just means that our brain works. Yet we somehow have come to think that it’s a problem to have thoughts. Thoughts are not problems. And yet we think that they’re problems, making them our enemy. Very likely what we try to do is to fight against it, try to chase them away.



And have you thought about that in our attempt to chase them away we are making the mind more agitated? “Thoughts. Oh, no. No. I need to get rid of it.” We just created a bunch more thoughts. How about, “Huh, yeah, okay.” This arises. “Hm. Huh.” Come back to my method. “Hm.” A memory of something that happened in the office. “Hm. Okay.” Still on my method. So you might like to look at if this is what you do in your meditation, this kind of strong aversion against thoughts arising. Related to this is this tendency to cultivate a blank mind. This is apparently quite a big problem in Hui-Neng’s time, because he actually talked about it a number of times.

Let me share a quote from the Sutra. “There is also a class of foolish people who sit quietly and try to keep their minds blank. They refrain from thinking of anything and call themselves great.” In other lines in the same chapter on *prajna*: “But to refrain from thinking of anything so that all thoughts are suppressed is to be dharma-ridden, and this is an erroneous view.” And these are just two of the many, many lines throughout the Sutra that Master Hui-Neng admonished our people for doing this. But this is actually quite common: we somehow along the way of the practice get the impression that, “Oh, to practice well is to have the mind with nothing.” A mind that’s calm that has nothing arising. And so what we do is suppress our thoughts.

There may be something happening in our life; it is actually quite normal. Quite normal for thoughts about this to arise. There’s someone, a loved one, had an accident. Something very important happened at work. It’s normal that the thought of that arise. Unless we’re dead. So here Master Hui-Neng’s pointing out, “What’s the problem? There are thoughts.” And but very often practitioners look at that as a problem. And they find a way to not let thoughts arise. Some may find, have found, a way to not let thoughts arise by actually convincing themselves that that’s not a problem. Meaning whatever they were thinking about is not a problem. Really it’s a process of disengaging from their life, becoming numb. Not caring about what’s going on. And really it’s a way of running away, escaping, from their life. And if we do that successfully, nothing is the matter anymore. But it is not a life. We are running away from it. And it’s very sad when we do that. And related to that really is this tendency to go into quietism. We find a way to



create a mind state that lead us to believe that no thought is arising. But really what we're doing is to create a mind that is foggy without clarity. And we find a way to create this fabricated calm that we bring. We become very skilled at it and bring into our mind when we sit down on a cushion. And then we're there. And we feel quite comfortable because we're not disturbed.

Here Master Hui-Neng said, "And they refrain from thinking of anything and call themselves great." They thought themselves a very good practitioner. Meanwhile, all they're doing is to turn a blind eye on what's arising in their mind. This thought that one is creating in the mind really means that instead of cultivating clarity, one is cultivating a dull mind. This dull mind that is not clearly aware of what's going on. One is not aware of what's arising in the mind and one is not aware of what's arising, what's happening, around oneself. Really we are cultivating being a mind that is oblivious. We're oblivious to our surroundings, oblivious to what's going on in our mind.

Even when we might have been feeling strong emotion about something that happened, we haven't allowed ourselves to experience it. We might become so oblivious that we have become completely disconnected from our body. I have met practitioners like that, and it is not a comfortable life. So I urge you to look into your own practice to see if that's what you have been doing. So another thing that Master Hui-Neng warned against is this tendency to get lost in words while listening to the teachings. Here in this passage he talked about that. "Those who recite the word *prajna* the whole day long do not seem to know what *prajna* is inherent in their own nature. We might talk about *sunyata* for myriads of *kalpas*, but talking alone will not enable us to realize the essence of mind, and it serves no purpose in the end. What we have to do is to put it into practice with our mind. Whether we recite it or not does not matter."

Here he was referring to this phenomenon of people talking about these concepts: *prajna*, emptiness, and enlightenment. Whatever it is that one is totally fascinated with, obsessed about it. You might have met people like that. I have met people like that. They love, love to talk about emptiness. And they become very fascinated with it. Yet all they're doing is to talk and



think about this concept. Somehow believing that talking about it, reading more about it, will turn it into a reality for themselves. In other words, they are secretly hoping that reading and thinking about these concepts can be a substitute for actually practicing. And only actually practicing will allow one to realize emptiness, to realize prajna. There's no substitute for that.

But we are endowed with this thinking faculty, and we are in love with our thoughts and ideas. And we quite like to believe that it is possible to think our way into it. And it is often related to a phenomenon where individuals love to read these teachings that has to do with these concepts. Some people love to read these, the scores, this story, in Chan tradition where there are short exchanges of very unusual words being spoken between the master and the disciple. And in the end it's, "Oh," like someone's realized something and it's fascinating. And it's easy for one to almost kind of put one in place of one of the characters in the story. And that helps us to imagine, "Oh, I'm as enlightened as that person." Getting lost in it. Instead of putting our mind to the practice.

This reminds me of a story a dear friend of mine told. And I love it, the story. He was talking, telling the story of how he was reading one of these Chan records of a person who was so not attached to anything, including his own life. And so in the story it's a bodhisattva. He was not attached. So he was asked to offer his head. He said, "Sure, no problem. Give you my head." And that's what he was reading about and he was fantasizing, "Yeah, sure. No problem. I too can just offer my head if I'm asked. I'm not attached." And after, he put his book down, he took a break from reading, and he went to get a candy bar from kitchen and his son saw that and asked to share half of it. He's like, "That's my candy bar. No way, I'm not sharing this with you." So it was quite, quite a shocking realization, that like, "A moment ago I was fantasizing about 'No problem I will offer my head. I'm not attached,'" yet "I'm so attached to my candy bar, I'm not sharing half of it with my son."



So this is a story I love because it's such a good description of how we can fantasize about our level of realization by getting lost in these words. Being so fascinated by the words in these writings.

So do take a look to see if that's something that happens to you sometimes. And the last has to do with our tendency to become attached to good experiences. The last verse has to do with our tendency to be attached to attainments in our practice. Let me share these lines with you: "In the essence of mind, there is intrinsically nothing to be attained. To say that there is attainment and to talk thoughtlessly on merit and demerit, are erroneous views and defilements." So here Master Hui-Neng remind us that there's nothing to be attained, because we already have the buddhanature. We don't need to attain anything. All we need to do is to realize our buddhanature.

But it's quite difficult for many to remember this. After all, we live in a culture that's about doing something to gain something. Why do I practice? I practice to gain enlightenment, to gain realization. So this is a mindset that Master Hui-Neng calls an erroneous view. And it takes quite a bit of unlearning to do it, because we have been conditioned to think that way. We do this to gain something. And this is also rather quite common in many practitioners' experience. Especially practitioners who have been practicing for some time. Perhaps they have a good experience in a retreat with maybe being able to sit for many sessions with a very settled mind and blissful stay, a lot of joy. Whatever that might be that one has experienced. Now, the mind locks onto that. That's what I have attained. This is my achievement. I got it. In this retreat, it stays an attainment in one's mind, whether or not he or she goes around, talk about it to others. But at least in the mind of that person, that's what I have attained.

The story doesn't stop there, because it is just too difficult for anyone who believes that one has got it—one has attained something—to not want to replicate it. I got it. That's such a wonderful meditation. So peaceful, so blissful. I have no thought. Whatever it is. And I want to be there again. And so these practitioners might spend the following months, years, or even decades of

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their practice trying to recreate that same experience in the practice, all the while getting very frustrated because now every time they sit down in the meditation, they have a reference point. The reference point is their memory of that experience and whatever happens in the present moment is not good enough. It's not matching that. Why is that? Because that moment has passed. This moment is brand new. If we want to compare this moment to some moment that's been passed, we'll always find this moment wanting. And that is suffering.

So instead of practicing, cultivating our mind to be free from suffering, these practitioners may be spending lots of time, years, just cultivating more suffering. And that's why Master Hui-Neng wants to warn us against it. So today I had talk about a few very common mistakes or obstacles that we encounter in the course of our practice.

In the following week, what I'd like you to do is to pay attention to what arises in our mind when we engage in the practice. And see if our mind does some of these things that we talk about. Seeing thought as our enemies, wanting to fight with it, get rid of it. Feeling that they defile our mind, one. Or this desire to cultivate a blank mind, believing that that is what we're supposed to do. Cultivating a dull mind rather than one that is clear. Allowing ourselves to be clearly aware of everything that arises in the mind. And the third is whether we have this tendency to get lost and be completely fascinated with words, and using that as a substitute for our practice. And fourth is whether we have this tendency to dwell on certain experience in our practice and always trying to replicate that. So have fun in your practice in the next week and see if you find any of these tendency. I'll see you next week.